
3
Coldhearted Princess Carved of Ice
Story
Isle Osaki
Art
Tam-U
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers


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Prologue: Makoto Takatsuki's Dream

"Oh hero, I bestow upon you 50 gald and a wooden stick. Defeat the demon lord and restore peace to the world."

I always thought that setup was crazy. If someone wants you to complete a quest like that, they should at least hand over a hundred million...

Still, the hero defeats monsters and grows stronger. They get legendary artifacts, save the princess, and eventually, they destroy the demon lord. A hero saves the world. They don't shirk away from any difficulty, and they stand up against injustice, overcoming all obstacles in their path. They're the ideal person.

That's why, in the future, I want to become a hero.

— Makoto Takatsuki

"Takatsuki, what's this?" Sasa asked.

"Sasa! Don't just read things without permission!"

It was summer during our third year of junior high. The two of us were studying for our exams, but Sasa had decided she was bored of that and had gone snooping around my room. I didn't think much of it—that was fairly common after all. I figured she was just looking for some manga to read, but look at what she'd found!

"You wrote this, right? When?"

"Give that here, right now!"

The thing she'd just read aloud was something I'd written at school, titled "Dreams for the Future." It should have been buried deep in my closet, so where'd she find it?! It was definitely something that I wanted to pretend didn't exist.

"Give it!" I yelled again.

I managed to grab hold of her and retrieve the incriminating evidence. "Ahhh,

you pervert, Takatsuki. What do you think you're touchiiing," Sasa trilled.

"I'm not touching anything!" I protested, sweating. Because of all the excitement, we didn't get much studying done.

Also...her chest was soft.

◇

"What's up, Takatsuki? You're staring," Sasa commented, tilting her head and looking back at me.

We were on Fujiyan's airship, having dinner on the way home from Labyrinthos. I was looking at her face, lost in thoughts of the past.

Well, we *were* in the world of swords and magic that I'd always dreamed of as a kid, I guess. Sorry though, younger me—you didn't get to become a hero.

Sasa had smiled at me while I was reminiscing, and we held each other's gaze for a while.

"Hey, Makoto," Lucy called, grabbing onto me from behind. "Do you want to do some training after we've eaten?"

Whether I liked it or not, I always started warming up as she held on to me due to her high body temperature. She'd been more touchy-feely lately, like she was showing off to Sasa.

"Sure, the normal five hours of mana-control training?"

"Geh, I can't concentrate for that long..." she protested.

"Well, we can take breaks."

"Okay then."

Even after hearing my answer, she didn't let go of me. It was honestly kinda difficult to keep eating with her on my back like this.

"Lu, off you get," Sasa told her, pulling her off me. "Takatsuki's still eating."

"Ugh, I can't win against your strength!" Lucy complained.

"Hey, Takatsuki, I'll head over to your room tonight," Sasa said. She was the one grabbing onto me now, so the situation hadn't improved at all.

“You did the same last night, though...”

“I’ll do the same every night! I’m going to sleep in your bed tonight!”

“Eh, I don’t mind.” After all, I usually spent the whole night training. Sasa would end up chatting with me for a while and then falling asleep...in my bed.

“Ayaaa, you’d better tell me more about that.”

“Wah, you got a lot stronger! Are you using mana?”

Lucy pinned Sasa’s arms behind her back, prompting her to laugh and squirm. It was a cute and playful gesture. I guess the two of them had gotten along much better since our stop in the (love?) hotel.

“Takatsuki, I’m coming to train with you today,” declared Sasa.

Lucy cut in right after. “And I’m coming to your room tonight.”

It was a rare occurrence for Sasa to want to join our training, and I suppose Lucy had decided she’d stay around after our session.

“Sure,” I answered.

“Aya, you can’t use magic, can you? Won’t you be bored?” asked Lucy.

“I can practice my skills, right? What about you? What are you planning in his room?”

“Training, obviously. What were *you* imagining?”

“It just seemed a bit shady,” Sasa explained, “that you were more motivated when you thought about going to his room, rather than training outside.”

The two of them giggled, maintaining a tight grip on each other’s shoulders. We’d be able to have a nice and friendly meeting then, peaceful as ever.

Anyway, past me, let’s cut to the chase: you couldn’t become a hero, but you *did* get a party of cute girls.

“My esteemed Tackie...”

“Mr. Takatsuki’h...”

Fujiyan and Nina had odd looks on their faces.

“What’s up with you two?” I asked.

“Nothing...”

“Nothing at all’h...”

I looked curiously at them. I thought I heard one of them mutter something like, “Do your best to avoid being stabbed,” but maybe not...?

Chapter 1: Makoto Takatsuki Returns to Macallan

We'd returned to the city of water, Macallan.

"So this is where you live! It's so pretty!" Sasa cheered, looking around curiously.

"I'll give you the tour later," I told her. "Let's head to the guild for now."

"Wow! So many canals! This is great," she cried out, running off.

"Ayaaa, you'll hit someone if you take off like that," Lucy warned, and within seconds, it seemed like that was about to happen. Just before it did, though, Sasa dodged to the side and avoided it. And again. And again. And then again. She had pretty impressive reflexes.

"She's like a kid," Lucy commented.

"Well, she spent all that time in Labyrinthos," I replied.

She was really going all-out with her excitement. Lucy and I watched her with smiles on our faces.

"Wha?!"

She must have noticed our grins.

"I got a bit carried away." She giggled and scratched her head as she walked back to us. *Cute.* She'd calmed down now, though, so we headed for the guild.

◇ Aya Sasaki's Perspective ◇

"Makoto?!" The shout came from a blonde bombshell who immediately grabbed onto Takatsuki.

Whaaaaat?!

"Are you okay?" asked the woman. "You didn't get hurt, did you?"

"I'm fine, Mary," he answered.

Wh-Who's this? His girlfriend? There's someone other than Lu?

“Lu...” I started, “who’s that?”

“That’s Mary, a receptionist for the guild. She’s always putting the moves on Makoto,” she told me with a pout.

“R-Right, I see.”

Hmmm... Takatsuki’s pretty popular here...

“Oh? And who’s this cutie?” the receptionist asked, glancing over toward me.

“I’m Aya Sasaki! Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Mary Gold—nice to meet you too. Are you going to be registering as an adventurer here?” She moved away from Takatsuki and switched to a businesslike persona, the very image of composed beauty.

“Mary, Sasa already registered in Labyrinth Town. She’s in our party, so we came to report that.”

“You did? Then I’ll make a note of it. Could you show me your adventurer card?”

“Here,” I said, handing over the card that Fujiwara had made for me.

“Aya Sasaki. Oh my, you’re from the same world as Makoto. No achievements yet as an adventurer, so that makes you stone rank. There seems to be nothing else that’s an issu—wait, what?”

Her eyes widened.

Crap! Did she figure out that I’m a lamia? I was worried, but apparently for nothing. She was just staring at the stats on my card.

Makoto caught sight of what was going on and sidled up to Mary with a smile, cool as a cucumber.

“Sasa’s got some crazy stats, doesn’t she?”

“They’re easily higher than those of gold rank adventurers,” Mary answered with a whisper. “If she didn’t already have a party, there’d be at least twenty of them trying to recruit her.” She and Takatsuki were standing a bit *too* close to each other, murmuring into each other’s ears.

“More im-por-tant-ly!” she enunciated, grabbing onto his shoulder and

pulling him in. “You *did* bring a girl back from Labyrinthos, you liar!”

“It just happened...”

“And I was so worried! You’re not getting any sleep tonight! You’re coming here, got it?!” she demanded, gripping him in a headlock. His face was smooshed right into her chest... *Hmph, what a womanizer!*

“Lucy! You’re back!” I heard from across the room.

“Emily! It’s been too long!” she called back.

I turned around and saw a girl with brown hair and loose clothes running over to Lu.

“You should’ve told me you were back,” the girl protested. “I was worried!”

“We only just got here, so I was planning to get in touch. You’re not out today?”

“I’m helping at the church right now. There have been so many injuries from monsters lately...” said the girl. “But anyway, if you’ve got the time, tell me about Labyrinthos!”

“Sure, I’ll fill you in on what I got up to!”

“I bet you just caused hassle for Makoto, right?”

“I didn’t!” argued Lu. “Just wait ’til you hear about my new Meteo Rain spell!”

The pair of them got more and more excited. Once I’d been introduced, I learned that Emily was some kind of cleric and also that she’d had adventuring experience with Lu and Takatsuki.

Lu ended up racing off with her somewhere.

Once Takatsuki had finished registering us with the guild, he came over to me and said, “Okay then, Sasa, I’ll show you ’round town.”

“S-Sure!”

I’m alone with Takatsuki! On our first proper date in Macallan!

I grabbed onto his arm in excitement as he started describing different locations around town.

“This is the main road—it’s the busiest bit of Macallan.”

“They have great desserts this way, so let’s drop by later.”

“The next street over’s where all the food and drink places are. It’s pretty quiet now but gets busy at night.”

“Maybe we should drop by Fujiyan’s place later.”

“Down there... Well, let’s just say they’re nighttime shops.”

Those were Takatsuki’s comments as he showed me around. There were a lot of fancy-looking brick buildings. Macallan was crisscrossed with canals, and boats were floating atop the water, so it was really atmospheric.

“Can we ride those?” I asked, pointing at one of the boats.

“If we pay, sure. It’s quicker to use my magic, though.”

Oh, right, he’s got some kind of spell for moving over the water.

“What’s that big building, then?” I asked, pointing at a stone-built structure.

“Oh, that’s the hot spring. There’s a source for it nearby.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “This town’s so pretty, and it even has a hot spring! This is great.”

“Hot spring inns are apparently one of Macallan’s main industries. Not that I’ve ever gone though.”

He added something about not indulging himself, followed by a sarcastic laugh. Takatsuki was as easygoing as ever. And he seemed completely the same, but...

Is he a bit sad, maybe?

It was like that time he’d preordered the sequel to an RPG he really liked...but the sequel had ended up being a cheap racing game instead. Though, he’d actually enjoyed the game a fair amount once he gave it a chance.

Did something happen? He’d been my friend since junior high, and I owed him my life. Also, he was the person I had the strongest feelings for, so if he had worries, I wanted to hear them.

I mustered my courage and asked, “Hey, should we check out those hot springs, seeing as we’re here?”

Takatsuki gave a hum and then smiled lightly. “Sure, if you want to.”

“It says there’s a mixed bath!” After all, he’d already seen me naked, so that was fine, right?

“Wha?” Despite that, he now looked like a chihuahua that’d had the rug pulled from underneath it.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

Uh? What? How’d this happen?

“Ah, this is so nice,” Sasa said, soaking next to me. Her expression soon evened out.

There also wasn’t a stitch of cloth on her body.

Actually, that wasn’t entirely true—she had a towel wrapped around her. Just nothing on her lower half.

It was a sight I’d seen a fair few times lately. However! That didn’t mean I was used to it...

Calm down. Come on, Calm Mind*, help me out here!*

I glanced around the area again. Though the sign had said there was a mixed bath, this was sort of a family thing. We’d reserved a small open-air bath. It’d cost a pretty penny, but the funds from defeating the minotaur and the harpy queen meant I now had a little slack in my budget.

Plus, I wanted to grant Sasa’s requests to the best of my ability.

“It’s so refreeeshing.”

“Ah, yeah... You’re right.”

Sasa stretched with a sigh, and the movement made it look like her towel was going to come undone... That was fine, but I had to keep calm so that my thoughts weren’t obvious.



“Towns with hot springs are the best. I like Macallan.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear it. I don’t remember you being so into them, though?”

“There weren’t any baths in Labyrinthos, so I had to use the lake. You could get attacked at any time in the water, so you couldn’t relax.”

“I can see how.”

We kept chatting idly for a while.

“Oh yeah, are you using your *Transformation* skill right now?”

“Yeah! My skin used to be more bluish, but it looks more human now, right?” she asked, showing me her upper arm. It was soft-looking. There was a dangerous amount of skin on display from her underarm down, which gave me a shock.

I looked away and at the same time, made a request. “Teach me that skill at some point? I’ll teach you *Dodge* or *Flee*.”

“Sure, what are you going to use it for, though?”

“I mean, isn’t it cool?” *It’s like the stuff in assassin and ninja games, right?*

“Still game-obsessed, even here.”

“Rude,” I retorted to her laugh. Not that I could deny it.

“Oh yeah, what level are you?” she asked.

“21,” I responded. “You’re over level 30, right?”

“Hm, I thought you would’ve power-leveled as much as possible. That number seems a bit low.”

She still remembers my preferred playstyle.

“I did at first, but my stats were too low to begin with. Even after leveling, they didn’t rise very much.”

“And so you’re feeling down in the dumps?” she asked.

“Huh? Nah, that doesn’t bother me anymore. I’m having fun raising my water magic mastery. Plus, mastering elemental magic is a secondary goal.”

“That ‘mastering’ always was a phrase you liked,” she mused nostalgically.

Was it?

“Sasa, you should get your level up,” I advised. “Especially since you’ve got good base stats, you’ll gain a lot from it. Also, that skill of yours gives three times the benefit.”

I was as jealous as anything.

“I’ve never been great at that, though,” she admitted.

Well, that’s why she liked action games.

“Hey, Takatsuki?”

“What’s up?”

“If you’re worried about something, let me know, all right?”

“Uh...what?”

“You just look like there’s something bothering you.”

“Oh...okay.” Guess there was no getting something past an old friend. I’d have to explain the wicked deity thing at some point.

“Thanks,” I told her.

“You’re welcome,” she answered with a smile.

Spending time with her like this was great; she was easy to get along with and it made me feel a lot more comfortable.

When we got out of the springs, we headed back to the guild.

As the party began, Lucas called out to all the adventurers, “All riiight! Let’s welcome back Makoto and Lucy with a toast!” He was greeted with a massive cheer, as always.

“Makoto! Out with it!” Jean demanded, leaning over me drunkenly.

“Jean was worried about you the whole time,” Emily added with a smirk.

Jean groaned. “C-Come on, Emily, what are you on about?!”

“It was nothing big,” I deflected, tired of the same conversation over and over.

“Makoto... That’s a bit *too* modest,” Lucy retorted.

This is what things had been like ever since we’d gotten back to Macallan.

I glanced over at Sasa, hoping that she was enjoying herself, and saw her gulping down a drink like it was water. She had an iron liver! I guess a monster’s body wasn’t just for show...

“Hey, Makoto, what’d the two of you get up to today?” Lucy asked with ruddy cheeks, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“Well, he showed me around the town. We dropped in to see Fujiwara, then we had lunch. Oh, and then we went to the hot springs together,” Sasa answered.

A few voices yelled in unison.

“Uh, A-Aya...what do you mean, ‘together’?” Lucy asked.

“Well, we shared this thing called a family bath. Didn’t we, Takatsuki?”

“Yeah, we did.”

I mean, that was normal for this world, right? There were other pairs of men and women in the bath, after all.

“M-Makoto...you...” Jean managed, looking at me in shock for some reason.

“All afternoon? How bold,” Emily commented, her gaze cold.

Lucy was rigid in her seat. *What was going on?*

“Awww, and I was going to be Makoto’s first,” Mary said drunkenly, walking over to us.

“Mary?” I asked. “Where’d that come from?!”

“Ah well, I’ll be second then,” she insisted, winding her arms around mine. “Let’s go together next time.”

“I have no idea where this is going...” I muttered. Something I said had gotten misconstrued, I guess.

“Heyyy, Makoto’s a man now! A toast!”

Lucas?! What’s that supposed to mean?!

“Damn it!”

“Go explode!”

“You two-timer!”

“What’s his party, a harem?!”

It was my first time back at the guild in ages, and I was getting this kind of well-meaning abuse?

But Mary soon gave me the reason: a family bath. Men and women who used them were always in *that* kind of relationship. It was popular with couples. Considering our experience back at the bazaar, there seemed to be a fair few establishments like that in this world.

Makoto, whatever world you go to, there’s one thing young men and women do, Noah said in my mind, and her comment was not entirely welcome. I guessed she was probably right though.

Regardless, we ended up spending the whole night drinking.

◇ Lucy’s Perspective ◇

“Hey, how’re things between you and Jean?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” my friend, Emily, answered over lunch. “Well, we’re going out... Anyway, you’re the one that advised me to tell him how I felt.”

“W-Well, yeah.”

Things seemed like they were going well between her and her boyfriend. I’d been a member of their party before, but, in retrospect, leaving had been the right choice. Third-wheeling was never fun...

“What about you, then?” she asked.

I stared at her silently. I couldn’t say that I wasn’t expecting the question though.

“That Aya girl seemed pretty chummy with him yesterday, so are things

okay?”

“W-Well Makoto said nothing happened...” I said, trailing off.

“They went to the springs together though.”

“Urk...”

Makoto had said he’d show her around, so I’d held off. Was it normal to go to the hot springs with someone though?

“They know each other from their old world too—is that an issue for you?”

I groaned. Our party had been just Makoto and me until now, but we now had a third member.

“They might end up getting closer,” Emily prompted.

I started to imagine what our next expedition might turn out like...

The two of them would chatter the whole time about things from their old world. We’d get back, then Makoto would say, “We’re going to go take a dip in the hot springs.”

“Lu, you wait at the guild,” Aya would add.

All I’d be able to offer would be vague protestations, and I’d end up waiting for them on my own at the guild. They’d turn up, arm in arm, with damp hair and...

“N-No!”

There’s no way I could bear that!

“Hurry up and tell him, then,” Emily said bluntly.

Ugh, acting all high and mighty just ’cause you’ve got a boyfriend.

“Emily...how do I do that?” I asked with my head down.

“Well, when I did it...” Emily began her story, explaining how she’d told Jean.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“Eh? You want to come goblin hunting?” I asked Lucy.

I hadn’t expected that.

Goblin hunting was part of my routine while we were in Macallan. I'd even ended up with the...somewhat crappy...nickname of Goblin Cleaner because of it.

Lucy didn't mind much either way. Usually, she was the kind to blast them all away with one huge spell, rather than build her earnings slowly. We had a fair bit of monetary leeway because of our earnings in Labyrinthos, so what had changed?

"Well, the basics are important, right?" Lucy added.

A good point.

"All right then!" I declared. "You come along too, Sasa." It'd been a while since I'd hunted goblins, and a party of three was perfect! It would be safe, after all.

"Goblins?" Sasa asked. "I'll pass. Nina's been teaching me martial arts, so I'll go do that."

"Aww..."

"Don't make that face. I've seen enough goblins for a lifetime in Labyrinthos."

It'd be our first trip out as a trio... But fine, then. I'll just go with Lucy.

For some reason, out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glance of Lucy giving a quick fist bump.

We headed along the river through the Great Forest using my water magic. Lucy was holding on tight. I guess it'd been a while since we were like this.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Lucy said.

"What's up?"

"The *Walk on Water* spell you're using... It doesn't require physical contact, does it?"

"Yeah, I can use it at range. Touch just makes transferring the effect more mana-efficient."

And because I had so little mana, maintaining that extra efficiency had

become a habit of mine. Honestly, I was maybe a bit *too* miserly.

"So you don't just let me cling on to you because you like it?"

"Nah. To be honest, you just need to put your hand on my shoulder rather than hold on like that."

Lucy's chest was pressed against my back right now, and the softness and warmth were obvious.

"No way!" she protested. "I might fall off when you hit a bend."

"Guess so."

I couldn't help it—racing around the turns felt great. While our conversation continued, we arrived at our destination.

The trees stood tall, cloaked in thick mist and making everything gloomy. There was a chill to the air, even in the middle of the day, and it hung heavily across the landscape.

Currently, we were on the border between Roses and Springrogue. If we went further into the woods, we'd find ourselves at Springrogue's big dungeon, the Forest of Fiends.

My *Scout* skill was picking up lots of monsters. I'd come here every day since arriving in Macallan, but because of our trip to Labyrinthos, it had been a long time since I'd been here.

"Yup, this is the place. I'm back."

"You know...I've thought this for a while, but you really love goblin hunting, don't you, Makoto?"

"I like it well enough." After all, it was the quest I was most confident completing in this world.

And so, we spent a while picking the goblins off.

"Have you gotten better with your spell control?" I asked after a while. Lucy's *Stone Shot* had been right on the mark today.

Her face brightened into a smile. "Right?! It's thanks to the bracelet from the Grandsage. Apparently, it raises your magic mastery."

“Hm, mind if I borrow it later?”

“The manual says it doesn’t do anything once you’re above level 50 mastery.”

It came with a manual?! Even her aftercare was perfect...

Anyway, the bracelet wouldn’t be of any help to me. After all, my water magic mastery was above level 100.

“Hey, Makoto,” Lucy asked, tapping me on the shoulder and looking up through her lashes. “Do you have plans later?”

She would’ve normally been way more energetic about that.

“Not really. Apart from eating at the guild tonight.” And after that, I’d offer my prayers to Noah, the same as ever.

“Well, there’s somewhere I want to go for a bit,” she said.

“Sure, I’ll tag along.”

Lucy’s increase in mastery meant that we’d be fine with the monsters. As long as we didn’t go deeper into the forest, that is.

Lucy and I were atop the stream using *Walk on Water*, and she was clinging tightly to me. I activated my magic, and we set off.

“All right, Lucy, which way?” I asked.

“Um, take a right.”

“Isn’t that the direction of the Wayward Woods?”

It wasn’t as dangerous as the Forest of Fiends, but it was still famous—the whole area was actually a dungeon. It was a place best avoided if you didn’t have the *Mapping* skill. The recommended adventurer level for taking it on was iron rank.

We did meet those conditions, but I hadn’t thought we’d be entering a dungeon today.

“It’ll be fine. The Wayward Woods is a playground for elf kids,” she said with a smile. “I went there loads when I was young, so I know all the safe routes.”

Well, that should be fine then.

“Okay, but you’re in charge of navigating.”

“Leave it to me!” she exclaimed as we headed into the Wayward Woods.

Once about thirty minutes had passed, I just had to comment. “Lucy, are we lost?”

“W-We’re not! It’s just been a while. Ummm, it should be this way...”

“I’ll keep *Mapping* going so we can get home,” I decided after a pause.

It’d probably be fine, and I looked around the Wayward Woods since I’d never been here before.

The trees seemed about the same age as those in the Great Forest, and just as big. The mist here was just as thick as in the Forest of Fiends. There weren’t that many monsters, but instead, there was more vegetation, which made it difficult to walk.

The biggest thing, though, was that the environment looked the same in every direction.

So this is what the Wayward Woods is like... I thought to myself. Today could be a bit of scouting, and the real adventure could come later.

However, the way everything looked the same... This was definitely a strange dungeon. It’d been naturally formed from a piece of the Great Forest, and there were rumors of treasure inside.

I wanted to full clear this dungeon at some point, but my adventure here was probably far off.

“Which way now?” I asked.

“Um... Ummm, uhhh...”

“The next time we get lost, we’re heading back,” I warned her. *I’m glad I used* Mapping *to make sure we have a route home.*

Even with the unease in my mind, we carried on...and eventually arrived safely at our destination.

“Huh, so this is where you wanted to go?” I asked in wonder as I peered at the place where she’d guided me.

“What do you think? Pretty, right? It’s a secret place for elves.”

It was a field absolutely covered in blooming flowers; a meadow of otherworldly blooms, the likes of which I’d never seen in Japan.

It was pretty and wondrous enough to be worth her pride. I stepped forward, careful not to trample anything, and tried to take it all in. There was a sweet smell in the air.

“Hey, sit down here,” she said after a moment.

“Got it.”

Flower field or not, there was a rock just large enough for the two of us to sit on, and so I did. She followed and sat by my side.

For a while, she didn’t say anything.

“Lucy?” I prompted.

Actually, what *had* she wanted to come here for?

“Makoto, how have you been?” she asked eventually.

“I don’t exactly know what to tell you...” I mean, we’d seen each other every day, hadn’t we?

“Is the goddess well?”

“Yeah, she is,” I said after a pause. That was well-timed. Maybe she’d realized that I was worried about Noah.

“Has anything happened?”

“No... Things are fine.”

“If there’s anything bothering you, tell me about it,” Lucy prompted. “We’re comrades, right?” Her big eyes peered into my face.

Did she want to talk to me about this?

She’d been my first friend and ally from this world, and I didn’t really want to hide things from her. But I couldn’t get stuff straight about this, even in my own head. I needed just a bit more time... Actually, now that I thought about it, I’d known Lucy for quite a long time.

Back when I'd been training at the temple I'd gone a little silly, saying that I'd solo everything. And I'd actually done just that for a few months in Macallan.

But...I don't want to think about how things would've turned out if Lucy wasn't there for the griffin or in Labyrinthos.

If I had to go solo now, would I be able to? I'd gotten stronger since a year ago, but I didn't want to be alone anymore.

Lucy kicked her legs against the rock and frowned. She looked as pretty as ever. I needed to thank her, both for everything that'd happened and for sticking with me into the future.

"Hey, Lucy?" I said. At the same time, she'd turned and called my name.

We just looked at each other in silence. I wanted to thank her, but just staring at each other like this was kinda embarrassing.

She suddenly shifted closer, enough that I could feel her breath.

"S-Say... Makoto?" Her misty eyes stared right at me.

"Lucy?" *What was with this atmosphere? It almost felt like she was about to ask me out...*

Was that what this was? As the thought passed through my mind, my heart started to race with nerves.

"Um... I—"

Just as she was about to speak, I felt someone's gaze on us.

"Wait, Lucy, someone's watching."

"What?!"

We were surrounded. I'd taken too long to notice.

Sliding off the rock, I drew my dagger.

This is bad.

There was no water nearby, and Lucy was clinging onto my sleeve.

Elementals, elementals, I called in my mind. It was the first time I'd been here, though, so I had no relationship with these elementals, and their response to

me wasn't great. I only had maybe a third of the mana I could usually borrow.

Lucy and I waited nervously for someone to approach.

No one did, though.

"They're not attacking?"

"Hm...maybe..." Lucy began, an odd look on her face. As she spoke, some branches began to rustle, and then several figures dropped down.

They were in the trees?!

"Oh, my, you noticed us," said one of them.

"Big sis Lucy, is this your boyfriend?"

"Wow, you're Rosalie's daughter all right, bringing a non-elf back home."

"Hey, hey! Lucy's guy, introduce yourself!"

The gathered people were chatting cheerfully, and they all had the same long ears as Lucy. So they were elves.

I looked over at Lucy.

"What?! No way!" she exclaimed. "What are you all doing here?!"

"Friends of yours?" I asked.

"Th-They're neighbors from back home..." Lucy admitted with a reluctant look on her face.

"We were all having a picnic," one of them explained.

"Then you came along with a guy."

"So we all hid and watched."

Wow, I hadn't even noticed. Though I suppose that's about right since they all grew up in the trees. Maybe they had *Stealth* as well?

"H-H-How long were you watching?!" Lucy demanded.

"From the start," they chorused.

"No!!!"

Ah, she ran off.

The elves chased after her, laughing.

“Hey, what kind of relationship do the two of you have?” asked a beautiful elf, smiling. She must have been one of Lucy’s friends.

I answered in a straightforward manner. “Well, we went to Labyrinthos the other day.”

“That’s not what I meant!” the elf girl exclaimed. “Have you kissed?”

Oh, so she was talking romance...

“Uh, not yet.”

“My, my. For a member of the Walker clan, she’s pretty slow with things.”

I let out a stuttering sigh.

Most of Lucy’s family must be pretty assertive as far as romance went. So was this elf like her, even if she looked pretty different?

“I married into the family, so I’m Lucy’s sister-in-law. You can ask me whatever you like about her, back to when she was getting her diapers changed. By the way, she has a mole on her thigh that—”

“Florna! Don’t tell him that!” Lucy insisted, dragging the elf away.

They were all pretty friendly, nothing like the closed-off image I’d had in my mind.

I also ended up getting a huge pile of fruits from an older elf, though hauling them back to Macallan was a real pain.

Chapter 2: Makoto Takatsuki Has a Meeting with His Goddess

“Makoto, let’s begin today’s meeting.”

When I came to, I was in front of Noah. I’d been training until about two in the morning, but I must’ve nodded off at some point.

For some reason, Noah wasn’t in her usual dress. Instead, she was wearing a black pencil skirt and a white shirt, along with a pair of glasses.

A teacher outfit?

“Good day, Lady Noah. What’s with those clothes?” I asked.

“Well, we’re planning how to overturn the world together! Don’t I look capable?” She flicked her glasses up her nose.

As for my opinion of the outfit...

It just looks like cosplay.

“Rude. Well, whatever. You know the outline, right?”

“Dealing with the threat of the Great Demon Lord, and, at the same time, lowering faith in the Sacred Deities.”

Noah wrote that on a whiteboard that was floating in the air. Then she slapped the board and turned to me.

“Now! How do we do that? Yes, Makoto?”

She was really getting into it.

“Find strong allies?” I doubted I could do anything about the World System on my own, so we’d need allies.

“A good answer. So, who, exactly?”

“Hmm, well, strong people would be the best, so Sakurai...? Though he’s probably out of the running ’cause he’s a hero.” He had the Sacred Deities’

divine protection, after all, so he was well and truly part of their system.

Noah's reaction wasn't what I'd expected, though. "Heroes? Not a bad idea. Although, while they're strong fighters, they're limited in their overall influence on the world."

"But converting people one at a time so that they have faith in you... That won't work either, will it?"

"Right! So our goal is these!" she exclaimed, writing a word on the board.

"Priestesses," I read. "Huh?"

"You're already acquainted with two of them." Noah added Princess Noelle and Princess Sophia to the board.

"*Nonono*, that's not happening."

After all, Princess Noelle was Sakurai's fiancée, and Sophia didn't like me. To be fair, I likewise didn't think much of Sophia.

"It's all good! The opposite of love is actually apathy, y'know? Hate can become love!"

"Real life isn't as easy as dating sims," I replied.

Fujiyan's waifu games had heroines that went from hating the protagonist to adoring him, but those were just games—my experience told me that if a girl didn't like you, she'd keep not liking you.

"What about taking Noelle for yourself, then?"

"Give me a break."

She was *Sakurai's* fiancée on top of everything else, so there's no way I could do that.

"Besides, if I go for the priestesses, won't the Sacred Deities interfere?"

"True. But the priestesses have the most influence on the continent. Consider how you can align yourselves. You can't keep carrying on with them like you have been," she scolded.

After a moment, I nodded reluctantly. "All right." My country's own priestess not liking me...wasn't the best situation. "Can I bring up something now?"

“Sure. Go ahead, Makoto.”

You don’t need to keep adjusting your glasses.

“I want to tell Fujiyan, Lucy, and Sasa about your goal.”

I wanted them on my side.

“Hmm, there’s no guarantee that they’ll help, though. You know that, right?”

“I’ll give in, then, and I won’t force them.”

“Even if they try to report our plan to the church?”

“They won’t do that,” I responded with a slight sharpness in my tone.

“I’m kidding. But you *do* need to pick your confidants carefully.”

Getting found out as a wicked deity’s believer wouldn’t be great.

“Okay, then I’ll be careful and look for people I can trust.”

“That’s right! Start with the people around you,” Noah instructed. “I think that’ll be fine.”

Now that I had Noah’s approval, my decision was made—I’d talk with the three of them about our plan.

“By the way, when should we go for the Seafloor Temple?” Saving the goddess from that dungeon was one of my other goals. But as I said that, she scratched at her cheek in concern.

“The Seafloor Temple is protected by the sea god Neptus’s divine beast, Leviathan.”

“I’ve heard about that.”

It was a famous legend: the pinnacle of all sea creatures, Leviathan, protected the entrance to the seafloor temple.

“Have you also heard that...Leviathan is stronger than the Great Demon Lord?”

I was silent.

“What?” I managed eventually.

“Well, one of them ruled over the land as the king of demons a millennium ago; the other has reigned over the sea for eons. There’s no comparison.”

That...made sense. I hadn’t known. I suppose due to the Seafloor Temple’s position as an unpopular “last dungeon,” there wasn’t much information on it. If the Great Demon Lord was the last boss, then I suppose the hidden boss would be stronger. Leviathan would definitely fit the bill...

“Let’s deal with the Great Demon Lord first,” I decided.

“That’d be for the best,” she agreed, nodding and folding her arms.

“Well, then I guess that’s about it for today.”

“See you around,” she said, then added, “By the way, offering to aid me earns you a lot of points!” She was waving and then gave me a wink. At least she was enjoying herself.

Right, then. I’ve got things to do.

◇

“H-Hmmm...”

We were in a parlor in the Catgirl Cantina. It was a private room, so we didn’t need to worry about being overheard.

I’d told Fujiyan that I had something important to talk with him about, so we’d come here and I’d explained the situation regarding Noah. Well, his mind reading meant that our plan was now all out in the open, so if he rejected me here, then it was all over...

He let out a big sigh.

“You have selected an arduous path...” he said eventually.

“Y-Yeah.”

“You always were one to select the hardest difficulty in games.”

“Well, isn’t it more fun to beat it that way?” I asked.

“I do not entirely agree that it is necessary to adopt the same policy in this world—”

He's right about that, but I picked this path anyway...

"—however, I shall aid you as much as I reasonably am able."

Phew! Thank goodness.

"Thanks, Fujiyan, that's great!"

I heaved out a massive sigh and slumped back into my chair. I'd been so worried, but suddenly, Fujiyan laughed.

"Do the two of us not have a friendship?" he asked.

"Well, we're pretty close, yeah."

What I was asking was a pretty huge deal, though. And yet, he'd heard me out. My friend was a lifesaver.

We chatted idly for a while before I remembered a promise I'd made.

"Oh, quick change of subject," I said, thinking back on what Nina had asked. "About Nina..."

A sour look crossed his face when he heard that. *Uh, are things not going well?*

"No...it is not something I would conceal from you..."

Fujiyan then explained the situation awkwardly. As to what he explained...

Apparently, Chris had proposed to him!

She was the daughter of the lord of Macallan, so marrying her would effectively make her a reverse gold digger.

"That's amazing. I guess that would finally make you a noble."

Despite how impressed I sounded...what would that mean for Nina...?

"I have yet to tell Lady Nina..." he said, trailing off. "In fact, I am unsure whether to accept or not."

"It's weighing on you, then?"

"Well, Lady Chris and Lady Nina are on bad terms."

"Yeah, they're love rivals after all."

“That is not the only issue,” he admitted.

Allegedly, the nobles on the continent looked down on beastmen and elves as subhuman. The tendency was strongest in Highland, but all nobles seemed to carry that view, not just the ones in Roses. Nina’s prior master had been a noble and had treated beastmen poorly, so ever since, Nina had possessed a hatred of nobility.

So that’s why they can’t get along... I thought. “You’ve got feelings for Nina though, right?”

“Of course. She was the first employee I ever hired, and she’s done her utmost ever since.”

“Plus, her bunny ears are cute.”

“Well...yes.”

Come on, you don’t need to be shy about it after this *long.*

“And what about Chris?” I asked. I had the abrupt thought that now was the first time I’d spoken to Fujiyan about romance like this. It’d been unimaginable in our old world. Back then, neither of us had anything to do with girls. This was kind of fun, actually.

“Lady Chris...was concerned about her future and her fiancé when we first met. I discussed it with her.”

She must have had doubts about marrying someone her parents, as nobles, had chosen. Fujiyan had probably used his mind reading to build up her trust. Back then, he’d wanted to ingratiate himself with some nobles to succeed as a merchant.

We otherworlders had no relatives here, so making connections like that was an unavoidable part of life.

“And then, before you knew it, she’d fallen for you?”

“She even annulled her engagement for my sake...”

“W-Wow... That’s gotta feel pretty heavy...”

An annulment... That wasn’t something she would’ve done out of superficial

feelings.

“Well, this is my own concern, so I shall manage something,” he said, hoisting his ale and draining it dry.

H-Hmm... He’s grown up. That was the end of that conversation.

“May I make a request of my own?” he asked.

“S-Sure. Of course you can.”

He was aiding a wicked deity’s disciple, so in return, I’d help him out as much as I could. But would I be able to?

“You acquired the right for me to trade freely throughout Roses, no? I would like to prepare something new for that venture, so I am looking for ideas.”

“Ohhh, I get it.”

Should he be asking me, an amateur, for something like that?

“Asking as many people as possible is best for this.”

“Hmm,” I pondered. “How about something with those animal ears?”

“I feel like I have exhausted that avenue. After all, I am the owner of this establishment.”

“Wha?” *Whaaaat?! Fujiyan owned the Catgirl Cantina?* My friend had bought his favorite establishment before I even knew it.

“Th-Then how about doing something with ramen since you like that too?”

“I have already secured a contract with a piggery for ramen. The taste should be ideal before long.”

“Whoa...”

It was no good—he’d already started doing anything that I could think of. He’d asked me though, so I wanted to give him at least one good idea.

Right, let’s change focus and think about my specialties, like water magic.

“What about this, then?”

“Hmm...hmm, hmm, what?!” he exclaimed. “Such a thing is possible?! That would work!”

Apparently, my idea was a good one.

Several days later, I was helping out at Fujiyan's launch.

"Welcome! Would you like to try it out!"

"Ten percent off for the first thirty customers!"

Well actually, I was mostly just watching. I'd considered trying to draw in customers, but the cute cat-eared and fox-eared girls were taking care of sales. Yup, no men needed here.

Nina was running the place and giving brisk instructions.

"How're they selling?" I asked Fujiyan.

"Fairly well, I would say," he answered. "What of the component manufacture?"

"I'm still fine."

"Promising indeed!"

That was good. Everything seemed to be going well.

Just then, Lucy walked into view. "Makoto, what are you doing?"

Sasa was next to her. "Are you part-timing at Fujiwara's?"

"This is a joint venture between the two of us!" Fujiyan exclaimed with a chuckle.

"I started up something new with Fujiyan," I clarified.

"What is it?" Sasa inquired, peering into the display model.

Lucy touched the inside, then jolted as her fingers registered the temperature. "Wah! That's cold. Is it ice?"

"My esteemed Tackie here used elemental magic to forge some ice which will remain unmelting for a year. We then packed the ice into a cool box and are selling the device as a refrigerator!"

"Oh, so those don't exist in this world?" asked Sasa.

"What's a refrigerator?" Lucy wondered.

“Everyone had one back in our world. They cool down food and drinks.”

“Hmm, that sounds handy,” Lucy said. “But, Makoto, you can make ice that doesn’t melt?”

“If I use my water and elemental magic together, I can make ice that won’t melt for at least a year. That is, if you keep the fridge within Macallan.”

The whole process was pretty much completely delegated to the elementals—I’d asked the Macallan elementals to keep the water in a frozen state. However, this power obviously did not extend outside the borders of Macallan, nor was it something I could do without an existing relationship with the elementals.

“Woooow! People’ll definitely buy that!” Sasa exclaimed. “Are you raking in cash?”

“They have only just gone on the market, so not quite that rapidly,” Fujiyan answered with a smile.

“With my current mastery level, I can only maintain the ice for a year at most,” I explained. “If I train it higher, though, I could get it to last two or three years.”

“I heard that the unmelting ice he created for training was going to waste, and I thought it could serve a purpose,” Fujiyan said.

Plus, melting it all down again was a real bother.

“Ohhh, I remember that Mary was confused about why the waterway behind the guild was frozen,” Lucy commented. “So that was you.”

“She found out and got mad, so I’ve been melting it properly,” I said. After all, the guild wouldn’t be happy with me if I just left unmelting ice lying around.

“You do love your training, Takatsuki. Just like leveling up,” Sasa said, laughing.

“And what of you two?” Fujiyan asked.

“I’m getting Lu to show me around the town. Then, shopping, I guess.”

“You should’ve invited me along,” I said. We were a party of three, after all.

Lucy spoke with a wide smirk. “You want to help Aya pick her underwear?”

“That’s fine by me,” Sasa commented. “I’d like to hear your opinion on them, Takatsuki. These are the ones I bought today.”

As she spoke, she pulled out a set of underwear.

I panicked and grabbed her wrist, stopping her from getting them fully out. “I-I’m fine! Really!” *This girl!*

Nina had just finished giving instructions to the staff, and she came over to us. “We’ll be finished up soon, so why don’t we all go for a meal’h?”

“Seconded,” Lucy said.

“Yay, let’s!” cheered Sasa.

Well, after everything, we all ended up getting dinner together.

“To new ventures!”

We were in the Catgirl Cantina, and we all chorused “Cheers!” as we drank together.

“Truly, my esteemed Tackie, your elemental magic is indispensable.”

“It’s so impressive’h!”

Fujiyan and Nina both piled on the praise. They were good at it too, so it didn’t feel awkward at all.

“I can’t use it outside of Macallan or Labyrinthos, though,” I added in between bites of an olive oil and garlic pasta dish. It tasted great, and I thought maybe I could make it myself. On the table, there was also anchovy pizza and fried chicken.

“They have really good food here!” Sasa exclaimed, dunking a chunk of fried fish into tartar sauce.

“Fujiyan owns it, by the way,” I told her.

“What?!” the girls chorused.

Hang on, why is Nina shocked too?

Nina glared lightly at Fujiyan. “Boss, you bought another place without saying anything’h?”

“Th-There is no issue, is there?! I said long ago that I was aiming for this location!”

“You don’t have enough patience to wait for the things you want’h,” she scolded.

“That’s right,” Sasa chimed in, “I remember him buying an entire game series he liked all at once, along with every manga volume.”

“Didn’t he use to put all his part-time wages into his hobbies?” I asked, reminiscing back on the past with her.

Nina sighed. “That account girl’s going to be angry again’h.”

“If you could accompany me...”

“I suppose I must’h.”

Those two were a good team.

“Fujiyan and Nina get on well,” commented Lucy.

“Well, she was his first friend in this world,” I explained.

“Hmmm? So then, I’m yours.”

“Eh, well, yes.”

What’d brought this on?

“Adventurers really should stick with the first people they meet, don’t you think?” she asked.

“I-I guess...?” *Why was she wondering about that so suddenly?*

“Hey, Takatsuki, haven’t we been together since junior high?” Sasa interjected, her tone competitive.

“I guess we have.”

“It hasn’t been two years since you two met, right, Lu? I’ve known him for at least double that time. There’s nothing I don’t know about him.”

“You don’t know everything!” I protested. Although, she *had* come into my

room and rifled around. She'd seen my journal too, so she probably knew a fair bit...

But then Lucy grabbed onto my arm and added more to the mix. "Makoto had a female orc fall for him at first sight! She looked like she was going to go on a rampage..."

"That happened'h?! What next'h?!" Nina demanded, her ears flicking.

Nina? Are you into that?

Sasa interrupted before she could continue, though.

"When we were back in junior high, our English teacher was single and liked Takatsuki, so he had to stay behind every day. Then, after school one day..."

It was Fujiyan who interjected this time. "I have heard nothing of this!"

"Guys!" I protested. *Stop yelling out people's secrets! Also, why was I the only one getting picked on here?*

We chatted and enjoyed our drinks for a while, but then Mary rushed in.

"Makoto! There you are. I was looking for you."

"Mary? What's wrong?" I asked.

I was planning on heading back to the guild tonight, but this seemed more urgent.

Oh, she must have been looking for me because I've been staying at Fujiyan's lately.

"We received a message from the Highland adventurer's guild!"

Highland...the biggest country on the continent and the one Sakurai served with the Soleil Knights. The only encounter I'd had with them was the stuff with Labyrinthos...

"And who do you think it was from?!" Mary exclaimed before answering her own question. "The heir to the throne, Princess Noelle! Why would she be sending you a message?!"

So...it was the princess that Sakurai was engaged to.

Mary handed over the paper, and on it, a few short sentences were written. I read through it.

“Uhhh, so they want to reward me for saving Labyrinthos, and they’ve summoned me to Highland Castle...”

“You didn’t mention that!” Mary yelled huffily. *Oh yeah, I only reported on the harpy queen, didn’t I?*

“I forgot.”

“Come on, Makotooo.” She started mussing my hair. “The invite is for a month from now, got it?”

“Yeah, got it.”

Well, my goddess *had* told me to make inroads with the priestesses and princesses. I guess you could call this invitation a timely event.

“You got another summons too,” Mary added.

“What?”

She whipped out a second piece of paper. “Princess Sophia sends an order that you’re to present yourself at the capital, one week from now.”

So this one’s an *order*? That was a tight deadline too. The image of the cold-eyed princess floated through my mind.

H-Hmmm, I really don’t wanna go.

“It says order, but it’s more likely that she wants you there to thank you. It’s pretty much the same as Princess Noelle’s invitation,” Mary added.

“Do I have to go?” I asked.

“Well, if you get a summons from the king, you’re better off going.”

“Figures.” *Oh well.*

“There’s a lot for you at the guild, so make sure to come by tomorrow,” Mary told me before sitting down with us. “That’s work done for today! Let’s have a drink! I’ll take an ale.”

She’s not heading back?

“You’re sure making yourself at home,” Lucy said with a bemused look.

“I mean, Makoto’s just gotten back and now he’s leaving again!”

Oh, right, I’d be away from Macallan for a bit, even though I just arrived home...

Those feelings must’ve shown on my face because Mary immediately grabbed hold of me. “Oh, did you miss me? Did you?”

“I did,” I answered, looking straight at her. Seeing her really made me feel like I’d made it back home. After all, she was the receptionist that’d been working when I’d first registered as an adventurer.

She suddenly jolted away, red-faced and gaping, her mouth opening and closing.

Did I say something weird?

“Want to come back to my place tonight?” she whispered into my ear.

“Not really,” I replied. Last time, I’d ended up blackout drunk, and my head had killed me the next day.

“You womanizer...” Sasa muttered.

“That’s what I wanted to say...” said Lucy.

What do you guys mean? We see each other every day.

All of us became engrossed by Mary’s desire to drink, and we stayed there until the cantina closed.

“Makoto Takatsuki, due to your aid in eliminating the blight dragons of Labyrinthos, your rank is hereby raised to silver,” Mary announced. She was completely composed and without any sign of a hangover, despite how much she’d drunk the night before. I was impressed. *My* head was banging. *I want water.*

“Wait, I’m silver rank? I only just hit iron rank.”

“Dammit, you got that record too?!” Jean complained from behind me.

“Good job, Makoto!” Lucy said, giving me a thumbs-up and a smile.

Sasa was smiling too, but it didn't seem like she quite understood. Out of all of us, I was the one most taken aback.

"I don't exactly feel strong enough to call myself a silver rank. I'd be fine stopping at iron for a while." I could remember Nina going one-on-one with a chimera, and she'd only been silver rank back then.

I *definitely* wasn't that strong.

"You can't refuse it," Mary rebuked. "You've been summoned to the capitals of both Highland and Roses, and we can't send you off as an iron rank. No being selfish."

So, I hit silver rank. Lucas and the skewer chef treated me to a fair few drinks. Mary also joined in, and I got a warning from Jean that he'd catch up to my level soon.

After that, we, once again, left Macallan.

◇

We were now heading for Roses's capital, Horn.

Fujiyan was taking us aboard his airship. He'd planned on getting permission from the princess, and I thought we'd have another relaxed trip. However...

"I will be accompanying you all to the capital. I hope we get along," said the lord's second daughter, Christina, with a refined smile.

There was an attendant (I guess?) maid standing behind her, along with a soldier she'd brought as a guard or something.

"Why's Chris here?" I asked Fujiyan in a whisper.

"She insisted," he muttered back.

"Lady Christina, what of your work'h?" Nina asked coldly, but with a blank face.

"My subordinates will deal with it," Chris answered, still with that faint smile. "Giving our greetings to royalty is, after all, another important duty of nobles."

"Your poor subordinates'h."

"Will have no issue. Incidentally, where is my room?"

“Who can say’h? Maybe there are no free rooms’h.”

“Oh?” Chris responded. “Then I would be willing to share with Sir Fujiwara.”

The two of them wordlessly held each other’s gaze.

Things were slightly unsettled between them, apparently... I glanced to the side and saw Fujiyan looking my way.

Sorry, can’t help here, I thought toward him. I did feel sorry for my friend and his predicament, though.

After dinner, I found myself sitting on the deck, training under the moonlight. I’d wanted to share a nightcap with Fujiyan again, but he was caught up with Chris or Nina, or maybe both.

“Popular guys have it tough,” I mused as I made the little water bird I’d conjured flap its wings through the wind.

The water elementals felt less responsive as we got closer to the capital.

Makoto, the Sacred Deities have more control in the capital, so elemental magic is proportionally weaker, I heard in my mind.

Huh?! Noah? Is that true?

That was just *great*—the elementals were my main form of attack, so not being able to use them made me feel really uneasy. I doubted there’d be any monsters in the city, though. *There won’t be, right?*

Sasa walked up to me as I trained and watched the moon. “Takatsuki? That meal was pretty bad...”

“Yeah, you’re right...”

Chris had pressed Fujiyan for an answer to her proposal and Nina had snapped. Things had just gotten worse from there—the two of them stopped hiding their dislike and the sniping had carried on.

“He just needs to say that Nina’s his partner!”

Sasa was on Nina’s side, apparently. Well, she’d been learning martial arts from her, so that was kinda expected. Still, though...

“Did you know that Chris apparently annulled her last engagement for him?”

“Whoa... Fujiwara’s popular,” she said in surprise. Neither of us had been all that popular in high school, after all.

“Does that really matter? Just because she broke up with her fiancé doesn’t mean that Fujiwara has to take her, does it?”

“H-Hmm.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong.

Fujiyan had that overpowered mind reading ability from his *Waifu Game Player* skill, so I could hardly blame Chris for falling for him, considering he could fully understand her worries and advise her. Plus, the dispute over succession had to be exhausting.

That was the harshness of *Waifu Game Player*. I was glad my skill was pretty peaceful on that front. It just changed my perspective and gave me options! I wouldn’t have minded something a bit stronger, though...

I had a conflicted look on my face, which prompted a smirk from Sasa. “Hey, Takatsuki. Does it bother you that he’s so popular, but you don’t have a girlfriend?”

Huh? That’s what my expression looked like?

“No, no, no, not at all.”

Really. I’m a manly man, after all.

“Reeeaaally?” Sasa asked. She had a meaningful look on her face as she wound her arms around me.

Was this a habit of lamiae? She’d been a lot more touchy-feely lately.

“I think you could get a girlfriend right away if you wanted oneee.”

“Y-You think?”

She gradually moved her face closer as she looked at me.

“Aya, what are you doing?” Lucy asked, suddenly appearing. Sasa tightened her grip even further.

“Takatsuki said he wants a girlfriend.”

“What?!” Lucy shouted in shock.

“Sasa, I didn’t actually say that.”

“H-Hmm, Makoto wants a girlfriend,” Sasa repeated. “He should just say so already.”

“Seriously, I didn’t say that.”

Neither of them listened to what I had to say—they just grabbed on to me from opposite sides.

“Uh...guys?”

“So, which of us do you want?”

“Do you like me or Lu more?”

“Makoto...”

“Takatsuki...”

The two of them were looking ardently up at me. *How did this even happen?*

“Wait, hold on. Just, uh, wait...”

I was sandwiched between the slight chill from Sasa and the extra heat from Lucy. If it weren’t for *Calm Mind*, I’d have been long gone. After all, it was late at night, and I had a cute girl on either side. In this situation, I was glad to have been born a guy. But honestly, I had something more important I needed to talk to them about. It’d definitely be better to get this out of the way before we arrived at the capital.

It wasn’t at all because I wanted to change the subject...

So pathetic... murmured a voice in my head.

Well, I couldn’t fool Noah at least.

“Lucy, Sasa, there’s something important I need to tell you both.”

They looked quizzically back at me.

“Oh?”

“What’s up?”

“It’s about the goddess I follow...”

The serious expression on my face made them both listen properly. I explained to them about Noah and how being her believer made me an enemy of the world.

The two of them wore serious expressions as they listened.

“I won’t say you have to help me. But if we’re together from now on, it could potentially get more dangerous, and—”

“You’re an idiot, Makoto,” said Lucy, cutting me off and putting her hands on her hips with a *hmph*. “We’re a party. But I understand now what you were worried about. You should’ve told us sooner.”

“Lucy...”

It was weird. I felt different than when Fujiyan had agreed to help.

“You didn’t even need to ask. I’m always on your side,” Sasa assured me. She patted me gently on my head, even though she was shorter.

“Sasa...”

The whole time we’d known each other, she’d sometimes treated me a bit like a younger brother. And right now, it was kind of nice.

“Thanks...both of you.”

And now, the wicked deity’s disciple had three allies.

My, my, popular with the ladies, Makoto.

Noah, we have three allies!

“By the way,” Lucy said, “we’re the first people that you told, right?”

“We’ve got to be, Lu.”

“Nope... I, uh, already told Fujiyan.”

The two of them spoke in unison. “What?”

“Wouldn’t you normally tell your party about this kind of thing first?” Lucy asked.

“Why did you take so long to tell me? We’ve known each other since junior high.”

Neither of them was happy. I could hardly tell them the truth though, that I’d come clean to Fujiyan first because he had a mind reading skill.

“Emily did say you liked men more than women,” Lucy commented.

Come on, that’s just slander!

“Well...” Sasa pondered. “Fujiwara *was* the only person you ever spoke to at lunch break.”

Yes, about the latest games!

I’d been a little worried about bringing it up, but both of them were the same as ever, so I decided not to worry next time. In the future, I’d tell them something like that right away.

It was our third day on the airship.

“Huh, so that’s Horn,” I said. “And that huge building in the middle must be Roses Castle.”

The palace was growing clearer as we neared the city.

“Yes. It has over a thousand fountains and all sorts of different flowers,” Chris informed us. “It’s known as the most beautiful castle on the continent.”

“Those walls they’re building don’t look so great, though,” Sasa said.

She was right. Tall walls were being built around the whole city, and they ruined the entire view of the scenery. The walls were plain and unaffected.

“Horn is one of the most famous tourist spots on the continent, so it possesses the bare minimum of defenses, in order to maintain the scenery,” Fujiyan explained.

“The prophecy about the Great Demon Lord’s return made them hurry to strengthen their walls’h.”

That made sense. The guild had said that monsters have been more active and aggressive recently, so strengthening Horn’s defenses had probably

become the top priority.

“Where shall we go?” Lucy asked excitedly.

“We need to greet the king first,” I said.

“But don’t we have some time before the deadline?”

“The note said to arrive within seven days, so I just want to get there quicker, I guess.” In truth, I wanted to get the bothersome stuff out of the way. We could take our time exploring the town later.

“Let us disembark, then,” Fujiyan suggested, earning nods from everyone.

The main road between the gate and the castle was called the Avenue of a Hundred Flowers.

As the name implied, it was lined with all sorts of flowers. It felt like the image of a European road, with brick-built buildings on either side of the bustling street.

There were all kinds of races walking along the street: humans, beastmen, elves, dwarves. Adults, children, and elderly folks of each race were among the crowd.

Macallan was similar, but there was a slight difference in the kind of impression you got. These people were more refined, in both clothing and speech.

“It’s almost like I’ve come back to a city from the countryside,” I said.

“I felt similarly when I first arrived,” Fujiyan agreed with a laugh.

“Come on,” Lucy urged, tugging at my sleeve.

I belatedly noticed the lord of Macallan’s daughter and was worried I’d insulted her. “Ah... Sorry, Lady Christina.”

“It is fine,” she answered with a rueful smile. “Macallan is rather more rural compared to the capital.”

Well, that was a kind response.

“What’s that?” Sasa asked.

Nice one! I thought as she managed to switch the topic. When I looked where Sasa was pointing, I saw a huge tent. *What's that?* In our old world, that kind of tent was...

"That's the Monster Tamer Troupe'h," Nina answered. "They travel around the continent and perform'h."

"I have actually seen them on one occasion," Fujiyan added. "It was rather impressive."

Yup, it was a circus. I suppose this world had them too. I'd imagined them to be similar to the ones I knew, but apparently, they didn't showcase human skill; instead, they trained monsters to perform. That much, at least, was different between the worlds.

"They have giants and dragons!" Lucy shouted. She was pointing at two cages that contained a roughly ten-meter tall giant and a small dragon, respectively.

"You can train dragons?!" I exclaimed.

Tamers were amazing.

"No, that's just a wyvern," Chris informed me. "A tamer that could control a huge dragon would be working for the country, not the circus."

Well, that made sense, if only a few tamers could do it. My eyes fell on Sasa, who had a harsh look on her face.

"Sasa? What's up?"

"Those monsters...are suffering."

"You can tell?" I asked.

"Yeah, somehow..."

Something like sympathy between monsters?

"The monsters in the circus were ones that had attacked humans, so they would've been killed if the circus hadn't bought them'h. The treatment, though...is pretty awful'h."

So they took monsters that would've been disposed of and used them for entertainment. We could file a complaint if there was some kind of monster

conservation group in this world, but there wasn't.

"There are so many flowers in the town," Lucy gushed.

She was more interested in those than the circus, which made sense since she was an elf. There were flower beds and potted plants everywhere you looked.

"It's a pretty town," I agreed. I really thought so. The City of Flowers.

"We will arrive soon," Fujiyan said. "I will go and speak with the gatekeepers."

I always let Fujiyan deal with this kind of thing—he was great at it. We went through an ornate gate and entered Roses Castle.

"Raise your heads," the king ordered.

We'd immediately been shown to an audience hall. Other people were waiting to see the king, but we'd been rushed ahead and given preferential treatment. It gave me a bit of a superiority complex.

"You have our gratitude for your aid in the elimination of the blight dragons in Labyrinthos."

"That town is one of Roses's greatest resources, and we offer our thanks to you, otherworld hero," the queen calmly added.

They asked whether I'd rather have a peerage or money as my thanks, and, after some hesitation, I answered money. Noble politics and royal court stuff wasn't my thing.

That should be fine though, right, Noah?

Do what you like.

Yup, it's fine. The king finished speaking and finally, Princess Sophia opened her mouth.

"Makoto Takatsuki, Michio Fujiwara. Here is your permit to do business within Roses, signed in my name."

"Thank you," Fujiyan answered politely.

Nobility and the clergy were both really influential in Roses. Sophia was a princess *and* the priestess of the water goddess's church, so she was in the

upper echelons of both circles. Her name must carry a fair bit of weight.

Well, this'll probably be the last time we meet.

I glanced her way and she was peering at me with eyes of ice.

Whoa...that's a cold look.

Yeah, she hated me. The princess carried on speaking to Fujiyan.

"Merchant Fujiwara, if you would desire it, I can grant you a rank as nobility."

"What?" Chris let out in quiet surprise.

Fujiyan declined. "I thank you for the offer, Your Highness, but this permit is more than enough."

That ended the audience.

"Fujiyan, why'd you turn her down?" I asked after we'd left.

"If I had accepted, I would have been required to live here. Besides, that move was more aimed at you."

"What do you mean?"

"She is probably aware that you and I formed a party in Macallan and now work together. Cementing our ties to Roses seems to be her aim." His voice was much quieter for the latter half of his explanation, so he must've read her mind.

So that was her plan... I looked up suddenly to see Chris, harboring a strange expression on her face. *What was up with her?*

"Makoto, let's explore the city!" Lucy cheered.

That didn't sound like a bad plan, but there was something more important!

"We should look around the castle first."

That was basic strategy for any RPG. Plus, this was the first castle I'd been inside since getting to this world. I'd search every nook and cranny!

"My esteemed Tackie, hold!"

"Wait, Takatsuki," Sasa called. She grabbed onto my arm at the same time as Fujiyan.

“What?”

“You are aware that you cannot go breaking pots and looking through drawers in a real castle, are you not?”

“That’s a crime, all right,” Sasa stated. “You can’t go looking for hidden rooms or secret passages either.”

“Wait...I can’t?”

I-Impossible... Though I guess that made sense. Yeah. Obviously, that was true. I knew that.

Lucy, Nina, and Chris were all looking at me blankly.

“Makoto?” Lucy asked.

“Ah, well... I wasn’t...going to do...that.”

Whew, gamer brain sure is something. I would have definitely tried to break that pot and look through the drawers.

There’s no helping you, I heard from my goddess. Why was everyone treating me like a weirdo?

Luckily, Fujiyan stopped my eccentricity. After that, he told us that he was going to give his greetings to the traders in the capital. Nina accompanied him, and Chris was apparently doing something similar with the nobles in the city. She’d gone away with her attendants.

The rest of us had decided to head out when we were interrupted by a loud voice.

“You! Makoto Takatsuki! Why are you here?!”

I turned around to see the (former) bodyguard of the water priestess.

Huh? Weren’t you fired? I thought.

Chapter 3: Makoto Takatsuki Wanders around Horn

“Why’re you here?!” the former bodyguard demanded as he strode over.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I countered. “Weren’t you fired?”

Had Princess Sophia lied?

“Precisely! Because of *you*, I was removed from my honored post as the princess’s guard, and I now head the palace knights!”

So he hadn’t actually been fired, just forced into a post-change.

Well, Sophia had specified she was having him quit as one of her *guards*. Honestly, wouldn’t patrolling the palace be much nicer than having to deal with the princess’s personality?

“Oh, I see. I’d heard that His Majesty would be meeting with adventurers from Macallan. So that’s your group... I suppose that means you have been given the honor of working in the royal palace.”

“Ah, no, I didn’t take the peera—”

“Therefore, you are henceforth one of our comrades. Come! I shall instill the ways of knighthood within you!”

There was no reasoning with this guy, and before I knew it, I found myself in what must’ve been the training grounds.

I glanced around and met Lucy’s and Sasa’s eyes. *So they followed along.*

“Now! Choose your weapon! We even have mage staves!”

Before me was an array of beat-up wooden weapons. What to do?

Hmm, I thought, using *RPG Player* to look around.

Th-There are no elementals here at all...

Roses was a theocratic country, so Roses Castle, in addition to being the royal palace, was also the largest church establishment. The royal family had years of religious experience here, so the influence of the Sacred Deities had seeped into

every nook and cranny of the palace, making it a difficult place for elementals to live.

Well, I didn't accept the peerage anyway, so I'm not his comrade or whatever. I can just explain that and refuse this exercise...though that kinda grates.

While I was thinking it over, I heard a voice from behind me. "If you want to fight Takatsuki, you'll have to go through me first!" Sasa called as she stepped in front of me.

"Who're you? One of his friends?"

"My name's Aya Sasaki. Nice to meet you. Takatsuki is our party leader, so I'll face you first!" she declared. Her outfit was just an average cute one though; she looked like any standard girl you'd see around town, and the man gave her an exasperated glance.

"You might be an adventurer, but it goes against my code to fight little girls." He gestured to another knight. "You, take her on."

"Sir!"

He sounded pretty cool going on about his "code." At his behest, a female knight stepped forward.

"I will use this weapon," she stated, selecting a wooden sword.

Sasa stepped up to meet her and said, "I'm fine unarmed."

The knight woman looked unhappily at her. "You might get hurt... Don't you know that each rank in swordsmanship is worth three ranks unarmed?"

Honestly, that was a saying from Earth, so I wondered how *she* knew it, but maybe it was just a common conception in any world—someone with a weapon will be stronger than someone without.

Normally, at least.

"You say you're an adventurer? What rank are you?" the knight inquired, readying her sword.

"A stone rank? That's right, isn't it?" Sasa asked me.

"Yup." *Come on, at least remember your rank!*

Sasa held her body in a loose stance. The knights in the training ground gathered around to observe. Several of them shared sympathetic glances when they heard the word “stone.”

They were probably already imagining that Sasa would lose.

“Begin!” the former bodyguard yelled.

“Challenging us as a stone rank is foolish...so I’ll hold back!” the knight called as she darted toward Sasa. She was moving fairly fast, and Sasa didn’t really budge. The knight swung her sword...and then went flying about five meters back, accompanied by the slightly limp sound of Sasa’s slap making contact.

“Whoops. Did I overdo it?” Sasa asked, scratching her head.

The bodyguard and other knights all gasped in confusion and their eyes went wide.

“Nice one, Aya!” Lucy cheered, hopping from happiness.

Well, yeah, like it’d have gone any other way, I thought as I watched on calmly.

Sasa looked around the training grounds. “So, who’s next? She was a bit weak.” The knights must have taken the provocation, as the air suddenly grew sharp.

“You’re next, go.”

“Sir!”

This time it was a burly man. *What happened to your “code” then?*

Regardless, within fifteen seconds, he’d gone flying as well.

“N-Next!”

The man called out each one of his subordinate knights in turn. And, also in turn, each of them was knocked back down.

“Sh-She’s so strong.”

“She’s supposed to be...stone rank?”

“Macallan’s adventurers are monsters...”

Not quite... Macallan was a peaceful town, with normal adventurers. Sasa was just a lamia born and raised in the middle layer of Labyrinthos. While lamiae were only medium-danger monsters, they were far more physically capable than humans. On top of that, Sasa was a reincarnated otherworlder and had stats that were about ten times higher than the stats of an average lamia. Even more than *that*, she had skills that multiplied her (already high) base speed and attack power by three.

Noah had said, “In terms of physical abilities at least, Aya’s easily on the same level as a hero.”

Well, Sasa had won. I was glad that she’d recognized me back in the dungeon. If she hadn’t, I’d have ended up defeated in the same way as these knights...scary.

I looked around. All the knights in the training grounds had been taken down by her...except for the former bodyguard.

“You’re last then,” Sasa commented, not even breathing hard.

Man...she really is scarily strong.

“Y-You coward!” the former bodyguard sputtered. “So you’re going to make a woman fight your battles while you watch on?! Makoto Takatsuki, fight me like a man!”

Oh, so he’s shifting things to me? That’s not a bad plan since Sasa’s definitely our strongest fighter. Lucy and I are mages, after all.

“Hey...what did you just say?” Sasa’s voice had lowered in anger, and the entire mood of the area changed.

“A-Aya...” Lucy said, her voice shaking.

“Sasa? What’s up?” I asked, trying to get her to calm down, but even I could feel the shift in atmosphere. It was the same kind of pressure that the earth dragon had been surrounded by. It was...the *Menace* skill.

This skill manipulated the user’s aura to make their opponent hesitate. It was a skill only the strongest could use. I’d heard it was a specialty among beastmen, so maybe Nina had taught it to her.

The fallen knights all paled and started to shake, and the first woman's knees knocked as she fell back onto the ground. She must've realized just how strong an opponent she'd picked a fight with.

"You said something awful to Takatsuki, didn't you?"

"Sasa, that's a bit exaggerated." Once, when I'd been sharing drinks with Sasa and Lucy, I'd complained a lot about Princess Sophia's bodyguard mocking me at the Water Temple. That was probably what Sasa was talking about. The force coming from her aura was growing stronger and stronger.

"I-I, well—" the former guard couldn't even string a sentence together.

A *thud* echoed around the area.

Sasa had stomped down and put her foot through the stone floor, causing cracks to spiderweb around her in circular arcs.

The knights started murmuring fearfully.

"No way...she broke the floor."

"Those stones are strengthened with magic..."

"Crap, if she kicked us like that...we'd be dead."

Whoops, that was apparently a special floor. They weren't going to come after us to pay for it, were they?

"I'll show you just how strong I am," Sasa warned, getting into an actual fighting posture for the first time. It was the stance she used for her *Dash* and *Charge* skills. The same combo she'd used to blow a hole through the harpy queen.

Yeah, that's no good... He's gonna die.

I was happy to see her getting so angry for me, but I didn't want anyone to *die* over it. Just as I was stepping forward to stop her, a cold voice echoed around the area.

"What is going on here?"

It must have surprised her because the feeling from Sasa's *Menace* faded.

Phew, she stopped.

“What is the meaning of this commotion?” Princess Sophia demanded as she looked between us and the fallen Roses knights. A sour look appeared on her face.

“Otherworld heroes, while I appreciate you training with our knights, they are relatively weak, so please keep it within moderation.”

We all nodded slightly.

The pathetic look on the former guard’s face sure was a picture. Things were now a bit awkward, so it was probably a good idea for us to leave soon.

“We should be taking our—” I tried to say, but then I was interrupted.

“Um! Are you the adventurer that saved Labyrinthos?” asked a young boy from behind the princess. He looked to be about ten years old.

While he did have a sword at his waist, the clothes he was wearing were of a distinctly different quality than the other knights. His shirt had a complicated pattern stitched into it, and his pants were embroidered in gold.

I assumed that the boy was probably in a fairly high position.

“It’s good to meet you. I’m Makoto Takatsuki, and these are my comrades Lucy J. Walker and Aya Sasaki.”

Lucy and Sasa both gave bows.

“It’s nice to meet you,” greeted the boy. “I’m Leonardo Eir Roses.” He placed a hand on his chest as any noble would.



Eir was the water goddess's name. That coupled with the surname of Roses's royal family meant that this boy must be...

"Prince Leonardo?!" Lucy exclaimed.

So the boy was a prince of Roses.

Leonardo Eir Roses. It was a name that everyone in the country knew, even if it was my first time meeting him. He was the first prince of Roses, similar in looks to his older sister Sophia. He was enough of a pretty boy that, if he'd been wearing a different outfit, he might've looked like a girl.

"Being a hero, I would ordinarily have fought against the blight dragons in Labyrinthos...but my inexperience meant that I could not get permission to do so... You have my thanks for saving the adventurer's town from danger." He said this with a bow of his head.

Oh yeah, Prince Leonardo was known by another title—the Hero of Ice and Snow.

I could imagine how much hardship was piled on him; he was a hero and supposed to save the world, but was still so young.

"It's fine, Leo," Princess Sophia stated. "They have already been well-rewarded. You needn't concern yourself with them."

I mean, you're correct, but you don't need to say that right to our faces, you know?

"You're still only nine years old, so you can leave Labyrinthos to the adventurers."

Nine?! That made him a...third year in elementary school?

My surprise at his age even made me forget about Princess Sophia's rudeness. I'd never want to tell a kid like him that he had to fight a blight dragon. He seemed to feel differently though since he had an unhappy expression on his face.

"Sister! You always treat me like a child, but I can at least do this much," Prince Leonardo said. Suddenly, he started speaking an incantation, which turned out to be for...

“*Water Magic: Water Dragon!*”

Nice! That was ultra rank water magic. The spell was a bit undefined, but it’d created a huge dragon of water. Prince Leonardo was apparently a water mage as well.

“What do you think, sister?! I can fight too.”

“Very well... The next time a blight dragon appears, I will consider allowing you to participate. Cease your spellwork now.”

“R-Right.”

His control of the water dragon ended up being...slightly lacking. The creature roared as it slithered toward the former guard. Though he managed to dive out of the way, a hit from Prince Leonardo’s dragon probably wouldn’t have done all that much damage. One of Sasa’s serious punches would have definitely hurt a hundred times more.

“H-Hey, is it going to be all right?” Lucy asked, poking me in the back.

“Hmmm... It’ll probably be fine.”

Water Dragon was an impressive-looking spell, but the worst it could do was send you flying and get you soaked, so there shouldn’t be a real issue.

“Guh, I can’t...”

Prince Leonardo was struggling to command it. I thought he’d have just tossed it into Lake Chimay, but he didn’t have the control for that. Princess Sophia was looking my way. Was she telling me to help?

Well...

Maybe this was one of Fujiyan’s prized “Affection Point Up” events? I didn’t play waifu games much so I didn’t know for sure, but I decided that I might as well give it a go.

“’Scuse me,” I said, placing my hand on the prince’s shoulder.

Synchro...

He jolted with a yelp, but that was it. I hadn’t used this skill since I’d gotten burned by synchronizing with Lucy, so I was a little scared, but even then, it’d

worked fine. I took control of Prince Leonardo's water magic and the jittery movements of the dragon smoothed out. It now swam gracefully through the sky.

"W-Wow..." I heard him whisper, impressed. It really wasn't that big of a deal though. He was just a third-year in elementary school, effectively, so whatever.

Eventually, I decided what to do with the huge amount of water he'd created.

"*Water Magic: Water Bird.*"

The dragon morphed into a giant bird and then split apart, sending smaller birds made of magical water flying away from the beautiful palace. *Guess that works.*

"Whoa..." Prince Leonardo said, gaping and sounding a bit like Lucy. Then, he turned to me with shining eyes. "Th-That was amazing! What was that spell?!"

"Well, I just kinda winged it, so it's not really a spell..."

"Makoto Takatsuki. Thank you for helping Leo... How long are you going to hold his shoulder?" Princess Sophia asked quietly.

"R-Right, sorry," I said, letting go immediately.

Her eyes were still cold. Wasn't she supposed to have more affection for me now? It certainly didn't seem that way.

I was honestly ready to leave the town itself, so I tried to secure an exit. "So, we'll be heading out and—"

"W-Wait! Would you, um, be willing to talk for a while, Makoto?!" the prince asked, grabbing hold of my hand and looking up at me like a puppy. I couldn't just ignore him, so I glanced up at his keeper, Sophia.

She answered his question for me. "Leo. Show them around the castle. You're not to leave."

"Okay!"

And so, we were to be shown around the castle by the prince. Naturally, there was a group of guards accompanying us, but it seemed like the princess had a soft spot for her younger brother.

He walked us to various places in the palace: the hanging gardens, the cathedral, the dining hall, and so on. I could see why it was called the most beautiful on the continent... The decorations, the rose gardens, and so on were all spectacular.

Also, as we toured around, people called out to him. Prince Leonardo seemed to be somewhat of an idol to the people serving in the palace, and everyone had smiles as they greeted him. Well, he was cute, after all, so I understood where they were coming from.

What I *didn't* get was their opinion of Princess Sophia.

She was also popular, hugely so.

Cool as ice and beautiful as a statue... That's how she was seen by others. Her lack of friendliness was well-known, but she was also considered to be earnest.

If a disaster befell a village, she would head there. If there was a quarrel in a town, she would mediate. She made donations to the needy and gave jobs to the unemployed. She slept little, working long hours for the good of her people.

That was how the castle servants saw her. There was probably some degree of flattery going on because the prince was with us, but everyone still spoke of Sophia with a lot of affection and respect. None of it felt like falsehood either.

"Unfortunately," Prince Leonardo told me, "sister has a tendency of judging people at a glance since she's always so busy. Then she gets too serious with things, so she can't retain anyone."

I guess that leads to overlooking a lot of capable people. After all, she said I was useless at a glance.

"Your friends Okada and Kitayama got too involved with the maids, so she chased them off..." said Prince Leonardo.

What were those two playing at? Didn't Okada have a girlfriend? Kitayama at least...was a bit of a lady-killer.

"They've always been like that," Sasa remarked with a sigh.

"You knew them, Aya?" Lucy asked.

“They’re our former classmates. Back in school, those boys used to have one girl after another.”

“One after... That’s filthy!” Lucy exclaimed.

Despite her appearance, Lucy was fairly serious about relationships. The Okada-Kitayama combo aside, I was sure that Sophia had scouted more of our classmates, but none of them were left working for her.

“It’s because our military strength is the weakest on the continent...” Prince Leonardo explained with a wan smile. Roses had the fewest soldiers out of any country and a history of seeking aid from adventurers, the Soleil Knights, and Great Keith’s Scarlet Knights when stampedes or other disasters happened. Though, with the Great Demon Lord’s resurrection, everyone was more focused on fortifying their own countries.

Princess Sophia had therefore grasped for competent people, but apparently, none of it had gone well.

“Though, it makes me less worried to know that we have capable mages like you,” Prince Leonardo’s eyes were upturned, and he looked even more like a puppy. Well, that was an invitation if I’d ever heard one.

“I’m just a mage apprentice,” I explained, “so I’d be no help.”

“An...apprentice? But you controlled that ultra rank magic earlier.”

“Anyone can do that with high enough mastery.”

“Can they...?” he mused, slumping a bit.

“I’m pretty sure they can’t,” I heard Lucy retort quietly, but I ignored her.

“Well then, thanks for showing us around,” I told him.

“You’re welcome, Makoto, Lucy, and Aya.” Prince Leonardo smiled. “Come back at any time.” Seriously, he looked just like a girl.

Our thanks given, we left the castle.

◇

That evening, I was with Fujiyan.

“I didn’t realize there was an entertainment district on the outskirts,” I

commented to him.

Considering the demeanor of the uptight princess, I hadn't expected anything like this in Roses's capital, but I spied bars and brothels side-by-side. It almost reminded me of Kabukicho in Shinjuku, just smaller.

"Relaxation is a necessary part of life," Fujiyan replied.

He'd told me that there was something we needed to talk about, so we were hanging out tonight, just the two of us. He must've known the area because we were going further and further into the district.

We arrived at a bar that had a real "hole in the wall" vibe. The interior was pretty dim, and smoke hung in the air.

Cigarettes? Wait, maybe cigars?

I was pretty familiar with the smell of cigarettes from Macallan, but this was a sweeter scent, like the rolled leaves in cigars. Maybe those were more popular here.

"My esteemed Tackie, let us partake in a different place," Fujiyan said, his face twisting uncomfortably.

"Cigar smoke's not that much of an issue, is it?" I asked.

"We would be better served elsewhere," he insisted, not giving any further reasoning before we left.

The next place had a similar vibe and was fairly quiet, so I really didn't see what was wrong with the last place. Once served, we toasted and then drained our glasses. After enjoying our food and just chatting for a bit, Fujiyan suddenly spoke up.

"The bar before was rather full of smoke."

"Yeah, a lot of people had cigars."

"Did you not think the smell was somewhat peculiar?"

"Hmm," I pondered. "It was a bit sweet, maybe." It might not have been the best scent to eat around, but it hadn't been *unpleasant*.

Fujiyan shifted and then whispered into my ear, "The substance in those

cigars is commonly called weed... Technically, it's a narcotic."

"What?" I asked, my buzz vanishing.

"Unease around the rumored return of the Great Demon Lord...seems to have popularized it of late."

"O-Oh, it has?" *I'd had no idea.*

"Well, if you are ever offered any, I implore you to turn it down. While the influence on the body can be dealt with through detoxification magic, the mental dependence still remains."

"I think I'll be fine."

Honestly, I'm not even tempted... It's scary. I'll keep away if I can.

"Oh yeah," I said. "You mentioned we had something to talk about?"

"We do..."

"Well, I can pretty much guess. It's about Nina and Chris, right?"

Nina had feelings for Fujiyan, and Chris had already proposed to him, so now the two were in a cold war.

"You should just marry the pair of them," I suggested. Polygamy was allowed in this world, and economics-wise, Fujiyan should be fine.

"With the difference in their standings, that is not as doable as you might think."

So his main issue was the difference in status—marrying a noble and a beastwoman at the same time wouldn't be acceptable. Which meant that he had given it real consideration...

"Of course I have thought about it! It is any man's dream, is it not?"

"Manly indeed," I commented in amusement. I didn't have much hope for that kind of thing happening to me, so I wasn't sure exactly what he meant.

"What on earth do you mean?!" Fujiyan exclaimed, reading my mind. "You have significant popularity yourself."

I paused. "Just checking, but you're talking about Lucy and Sasa, right?"

Things *had* been pretty close in that love hotel place the other day...

He chuckled. “And we shall be discussing it deeply today.”

“What? We’re not talking about you?” I didn’t mind listening to stuff like that about others, but I wasn’t fond of talking about my own romantic issues.

“We’ll talk it all out over the drinks!”

“It would come out whether I talked or not,” I said, giving up on hiding it from my friend.

Well, time to pay the piper, I decided, settling in for a long night.

◇ Nina’s Perspective ◇

I let out a long sigh.

The boss had gone out with Mister Takatsuki. Apparently, there was a conversation they needed to have man-to-man, and they were enjoying themselves a fair amount.

That was good. Boss had been much happier when he got to meet Mister Takatsuki again. The problem was...

“Will he be able to become a noble’h...?”

The boss was being welcomed as a member of the Macallan family, and success in Roses as a merchant required a certain level of status. He’d probably refused the peerage in the palace so that he could go through it with Christina, but then, what would happen to me?

“Maybe I’ll go back to mercenary work in Great Keith’h...”

The Fujiwara Trading Company treated beastmen unbelievably well. Other stores would pay around seventy percent of what they’d pay a human, while the worse ones would pay less than half. Therefore, many of us gathered there and worked with smiles on our faces.

There was a time in the past when he’d said, “Lady Nina, beastmen have animal ears, so we should pay them ten percent more.”

“Boss, I have no idea what you mean’h,” I’d answered.

We hadn’t actually gone through with that. After all, if the employees were

overpaid, the store might go under. If the boss became a part of the Macallan family, though, things wouldn't remain as they currently were. Christina hated me, so I'd have nowhere to go... I sighed again.

Then, there was a knock at the door.

"Hello, who is it'h?" I called.

Maybe it was Miss Sasaki here to practice martial arts. Right, perhaps some exercise would cheer me up.

"It's Christina. Nina, may I have a moment?"

There was a long pause before I answered. "Fine'h."

I should have pretended to be out in the first place. Trying it *now* wouldn't work though, so I opened the door. Christina was standing there wearing none of the smiles she usually showed to the boss.

"What is it'h?"

"We need to talk. I'm coming inside." She entered without waiting for an answer and sat on my bed.

She had no guard; she was here alone.

"Please, sit."

Silently, I did so in the chair, facing her.

The woman started bluntly. "You hate me, don't you?"

"What of it'h?" Maybe I should have denied it, but it was a little late.

"I hate you as well."

Well, the cow was being pretty frank.

"I'm aware'h. Are you trying to tell me to leave'h?"

The woman in front of me didn't say anything, just heaved a sigh, and then got right up in my face. I didn't like it, but I had to admit she was beautiful. Boss would definitely be better off with a human rather than— "Nina, will you marry Sir Fujiwara?"

"Whaaa?" I managed after a long pause. *What on earth was the woman*

saying?

"However, I will be the first wife and you the second. That much I will not surrender," she said.

I'd never heard of a noble marrying one of us. "Would it be such a problem for me to be the mistress'h?"

"He would not accept that. You and I must be of equal standing."

"That's laughable coming from a noble." Even I knew that. Nobility like Christina would never see herself as equal to a beastman. However, her expression turned frantic.

"At this rate, he will get a peerage on his own merit! This is all I have to offer him!"

"That can't be true'h..."

Not only did she have her position as the second daughter of the lord of Macallan, but she was also beautiful. She was refined, with plentiful assets both materially and in connections. None of which I had. Regardless, she gave a pallid laugh.

"Sir Fujiwara is constantly starting new businesses in Macallan, and even has a good relationship with the biggest company on the continent, the Franz Trading Company. My meager assets and connections are no help here..."

I was shocked. I'd always thought of her as a constantly smiling woman brimming with confidence. Yet now, she was acting so weak.

"But marrying at the same time would'h..."

"It isn't a bad deal, and there should be no real disadvantage for you."

She was right. Boss would get his noble position, and I could be with the person I had feelings for. There was no issue there. But...

"You just want boss's wealth and abilities'h..."

She'd be marrying a man that she didn't even feel romantic about...all for her family's benefit. While that was normal for nobles, it was difficult for me to accept.

“That’s what I hate!” she suddenly yelled.

“What’h?”

“Why and for how long must you refute my feelings for him?!”

“You truly care for him?” I asked after a moment.

“I’ve always said so.”

I was a beastwoman, and we were attracted to strong men. Boss wasn’t strong in combat, but he was the most successful man in Macallan. While he seemed affable at a glance, all the scheming merchants that’d come for him had been sent packing, utterly broke. The tricks that the con men and scoundrels used were clever, but they never seemed to prevail; contrary to his appearance, the boss was a shrewd manager that had found success in Macallan. And as he’d done so, he’d stolen my heart.

Well, to be honest, his personality had charmed me even more...

What had Christina been attracted to, though?

“So, what prompted it’h?” I asked. She hadn’t ever seen him closely at work.

“My sisters are always competing. The title in our family is inherited by the child that has brought the most prosperity to the town. Therefore, we constantly need to show ourselves well, gain favor from all kinds of people, and get all the allies we can. Yet at the same time, many people approach me to make use of my status... The one that I disliked the most was the man my mother prepared for me to marry.”

I’d heard about this. He was a noble from Great Keith with an awful personality. Well, a lot of the nobles from that country were similar...

“Sir Fujiwara saved me from that. He purged the people trying to sue me, revitalized my struggling business, and then offered a hand when my fiancé looked down on me. He’s my prince!” she declared passionately.

“Y-Your prince’h?” I couldn’t help but gape. It seemed like going too far to describe him like that.

“Is there a problem with that?”

“No’h,” I answered eventually. Everyone had their own views, I suppose, and I must have been mistaken.

She wasn’t a gold digger after his riches, just an honest rival in love. She’d even suggested putting us in equal standing by marriage. That was absurd, though, since I had no issues. But...there was one thing I needed to know.

“What if he turns us both down’h?”

“Urk...” Her expression tightened.

Honestly, I wasn’t sure of the boss’s feelings myself because he never took me up on any of my temptations.

“I-If he turns us both down...then I’ll drink the night away! And you can join me!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Sure thing, Miss Christina’h.”

She was a strange noble, and not one I’d have ever imagined.

“Call me Chris! We shall wait until he returns! Then, we will propose together!”

“T-Today’h?!”

“With this kind of thing, the sooner the better!”

She was actually an interesting person. Maybe things would go well with her.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

The bar was starting to empty. Soon, it would probably be closing time. Fujiyan suddenly shivered next to me.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Got a cold?”

“I felt some sort of chill.”

“Maybe we should head back.” It was almost midnight after all. We’d talked and enjoyed ourselves plenty.

It would be tomorrow before I found out what became of that conversation...

“My esteemed Tackie, Lady Sasaki, Lady Lucy, I have something to talk to you

all about," Fujiyan told us with a serious expression. It was the next morning, and we were all eating breakfast in the inn's dining area. "I have become engaged...to Lady Chris and Lady Nina."

"What?!" the three of us chorused in shock.

Hang on, what's he on about?

Something was wrong here. Nina was settling in close on his right, and Christina had done the same on his other side. There wasn't the usual stiff atmosphere between them either. If anything, things were peaceful. All of it seemed a bit *too* different from yesterday, but I'd rather they be friendly than not, so I didn't say anything.

"U-Umm, Fujiwara, you're marrying two people?" Sasa asked timidly.

"I am... Polygamy *is* allowed in this country," Fujiyan answered awkwardly. It's not like he was really doing anything wrong, though.

"Hmm..." Sasa didn't say anything after that.

"Umm, congratulations, Fujiyan, Nina..." Lucy stumbled, despite usually being loud and clear.

"Thank you!" Nina said, a wide smile on her face. Well, I was glad she was happy at least.

As for me...

Didn't he say a harem was a hopeless dream? He said it would be nice if it came true one day, but the next *day? Had he betrayed me?*

I was confused. It wasn't betrayal exactly, but I could see Fujiyan's face scrunch up as he read my thoughts. *Just a joke.*

"I hope the three of you are happy," was all I could tell them.

After that announcement, Fujiyan and the other two went off to report the engagement to the relevant people. The remaining three of us wandered around town since we hadn't managed to do so yesterday.

"That was a surprise!" Lucy said, swinging her arms. "I never thought he'd

marry two people!”

Considering that she’d grown up here and seemed surprised by it, I had to wonder... Was it that rare?

“Elven marriages normally have one husband and one wife...” she added.

Apparently not then. Elves had the same kind of attitude toward marriage as the Japanese.

“I can’t imagine a house having two wives...” Sasa added. She was brought up in Japan, so that made sense.

“Yeah. Although, apparently, Sakurai’s got a whole bunch of people lined up to be his wives.” I’d heard from Fujiyan that the country was treating it like a project and trying to get him to have as many children as possible. Hopefully, one of his offspring would be born with the *Hero of Light* skill, just like him and Abel the Savior. That’s why he’d ended up with so many fiancées.

When I added the news about Yokoyama being one of them, Sasa had an unhappy look on her face.

“Do you want lots of wives too?” Lucy asked idly.

“N-No, I don’t really want anything like that.”

“Reeeaaally?” Sasa asked, peering at my face as I set *Calm Mind* to 99%.

“I’m focusing on granting my goddess’s wish for now,” I decided. I deployed a tactic that guys use sometimes: saying I wanted to focus on work to change the topic and avoid offending either of them.

Their expressions both turned sour. *U-Uh?*

Why would you bring up another woman? I heard Noah say in my mind.

So I shouldn’t have said that?

Learn how a woman’s heart works, she scolded.

That was never in any of my game guides...

“Hey, Aya, don’t those clothes look cute?”

“They do! Let’s take a look!”

And off the girls headed... *Guess I'm carrying the bags.*

"Hey, ladies! Fancy seeing the circus?" a man in gaudy clothes called out.

We'd been shopping for a while, mostly just wandering around. After finishing lunch, we'd sat down on a bench by the plaza near a massive tent.

Judging by his looks, the man who'd called out to us was a clown. *They had clowns in this world too!*

"Hmmm, what do you think, Makoto?" Lucy asked.

"Wanna go, Takatsuki?" Sasa added.

Wait? It's my choice? I usually just go with the flow for this kinda thing.

"Hey, mister!" exclaimed the clown. "First time in Horn? The Monster Tamer Troupe is the biggest circus company on the continent. Our show is a great tale to take back home. It's usually about fifteen hundred gald a head, but how about four thousand for the three of you?"

Apparently, he thought we were yokels or something. His tone was kind of wheedling about us having never seen anything like their show before.

Sure, Macallan's out in the sticks, but I lived in a city in Japan! Regardless, I wasn't entirely sure why I was bothering to mentally protest—the three of us ended up going inside anyway.

The interior of the tent was fairly dim, with a round stage in the center under spotlights. There were tables spread around the area, and the guests were sitting at them, just drinking and watching. It was pretty different from a circus in Japan. We found a nearby table and ordered ourselves some drinks.

"Hey, is that a griffin?" Lucy wondered. She pointed at a griffin that was smaller than the one we'd fought, and it jumped through a ring of fire. *I guess that* is *fairly exciting.*

"The monsters are all beat up," Sasa said.

She was right—the griffin was dressed up in a garish costume, but its feathers and fur were ragged. The other monsters looked to be in the same condition as well. The handlers had obviously been mistreating them.

Suddenly, a beautiful girl with pointed ears stepped on stage. She was wearing an outfit that didn't exactly cover much, along with a collar.

"Is that...an elf?" I asked.

"She has black hair, so she's probably a half-elf...like me," Lucy told me. "That collar's one that slaves wear."

Wasn't Lucy concerned about the elf girl? Wait, she definitely was. Her face had taken on a distinct sharpness.

We continued watching the circus for a while, and the exhibition of monsters transformed into an exhibition of scantily clad elves and demi-human girls dancing around. The monsters, on the other hand, performed and fought each other. Essentially, it was a world of violence, blood, and sex.

I wasn't exactly enjoying it, but it sounded like the rest of the crowd was. Maybe the townspeople wanted something stimulating like this? But then, I smelled that sweet scent from the bar yesterday.

Weed, right? Those narcotic leaves... Let's not stay any longer. And so, after less than an hour, we were exiting the tent.

"Oh, you're leaving already?" asked the clown from earlier.

"We've had enough fun," I said.

The clown kept on with his sales pitch. "That's good. But we've got an even bigger event tomorrow, so make sure you come along!" I just replied that we'd do so if we had time.

A little while after we'd left the circus, Lucy spoke up. "I'll pass on going tomorrow. The girls were all demi-humans and beastwomen."

"Yeah. I felt sorry for the monsters too," Sasa said.

It seems that the girls hadn't been fans of the show, though their main complaints were different.

As for me? Maybe if the circus had been just the dancing women, I would've enjoyed it.

Nighttime was for training. However, there were essentially no water elementals in the capital, so I couldn't practice my elemental magic.

"*Transformation*...ain't easy..."

Sasa had taught me that skill at the inn, but my training wasn't going well at all. Unlike Sasa, who had *Transformation* as a unique skill, I had to train it up from scratch, which was more difficult.

I found that it was easiest to change into things close to you, though changing one's sex was pretty difficult. For my first attempt, I'd tried to turn into Fujiyan.

"Hmm, something's just off'h," Nina had noted at a glance. I couldn't even attempt to change into Lucy or Sasa.

"Wait, what? You mean you'd become *me*? With your whole body?" Lucy had asked, hugging herself. *Why'd she look at me like some kind of pervert?*

Sasa piped up next. "Turning into a girl you're friends with is a bit lacking in sensitivity, you know?"

She gave me the same look as Lucy! I guess they're right then...

Since the girls had been particularly harsh today, I'd ended up wandering the city alone. The capital was pretty peaceful, even at night. The knights patrolled around, and I'd even passed by that former bodyguard. Not that he'd acknowledge me or meet my eyes.

Eventually, I got to the area around the circus tent. The lights were all extinguished and there were no people around. I could hear the faint growls of the monsters from inside, and there was no one outside the tent trying to entice spectators in.

I know! I could try morphing into a clown.

Transformation allowed you to copy the general outline of a figure, but there were always differences. Those familiar with the original person would definitely spot the discrepancies in the disguise.

With clowns, though, as long as the main features were there, it was all good. I used the skill while standing under the trees, then moved into the moonlight to check out how it'd gone.

“Ah, I forgot a mirror,” I realized.

I couldn’t even look at myself to check. What was I playing at? *Oh well... Back to the inn, I guess.*

“Hey! Rare to see you out so late,” a man said to me. “I thought you’d already headed back.”

Damn! It’s one of the clown’s friends!

“Ah, well, y’know how it is,” I commented vaguely.

“We’ve got the final performance tomorrow. Everything’s ready?”

What was he talking about? Well, the other clown *had* said something about a big show tomorrow, I guess.

“Yeah, no worries,” I assured him, even though I had no idea what they’d be worried *about*...

“Great. We can’t have any slipups. I’m dying to see their faces.” The man gave a snicker and a grin before leaving.

That was actually a pretty dodgy-looking laugh...

Sorry, mister clown, I thought. If the man had been giving the clown an important message, I’d have felt bad, but he’d just been checking in.

It’d be fine...surely.

“Time to head back,” I muttered to myself, letting the skill’s effect fade away and heading back to the inn. As I walked, I decided that I shouldn’t turn into people I don’t know without first taking some more care.

Intermission: Lucy and Aya Have a Discussion

"I'm going off goblin hunting," I told my friends at breakfast the next morning.

I couldn't practice my elemental magic, and the *Transformation* practice wasn't going well, so earning some money was about the only thing I had left to do.

Obviously, Horn had an adventurer's guild. Goblin and orc exterminations were standing requests, so I didn't have to take time to accept the quests or report to the clerks beforehand; I could just head to the guild after my hunt and collect the (small) bounty.

"Lucy, Sasa, you coming with?" I asked. I was fairly sure they'd want to, but they didn't seem all that interested.

"Hmmm, I think I'll pass," Lucy decided, running a comb through her long red hair.

"I'm shopping in town today," Sasa said as she munched on some fruit that'd come with breakfast. I was also positive that she was eating from my plate...but I was full anyway, so whatever.

Hang on! Why's everyone being so unsociable?! Well...fine. I'll go on my own. I always was a solo player anyway!

I might've been bluffing a bit mentally when I left the inn without any real objective in mind. There were some forested areas around the city, so maybe there'd be some goblins in there.

I kept up the optimism as I left the city.

◇ Lucy's Perspective ◇

"Fine, then! I'll just head off solo!" Makoto proclaimed as he headed out.

Did we do something wrong?

"Hey, Lu, where are we going?" Aya asked me. We had made plans to go out together.

“I don’t care,” I replied. “Did you have somewhere you wanted to go?”

“Let’s get some cake.”

“Sure. You *do* love your sweet stuff. Well, I do too.” The two of us laughed, but our smiles were both a bit clumsy. We needed to have a discussion, one that we couldn’t have around Makoto.

We scoped out some clothes shops and general stores, then had lunch at a pasta place. There was also a small park in the area, so we bought a couple of drinks and took a break there.

I glanced over and watched Aya gulping down a huge cup of fruit juice. She was like some little woodland creature enjoying her drink, and even *I* thought she looked cute.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Hmm, just thinking you’re cute.”

She giggled. “Really? I think you’re cuter, though.”

“That’s not true,” I protested.

“It *is*,” she insisted. “Your hair’s so long, and it’s such a pretty shade of red.” She stroked the hair at the nape of my neck, and I shivered at the tickling sensation.

“Well, you’re a fighter, so your hips are way better.”

I grabbed onto her hips as payback. *She’s so slender! I-I’m jealous...* I was a mage, so I didn’t get as much exercise as she did. I’d never have such slim hips...

“Hey, Lu! Watch where you’re touching!” she exclaimed, her face blushing red. But then, she shifted her focus to another area. “This bit just isn’t faiiir.”

I yelped as she suddenly grabbed my chest. “Hyah?!”

“It’s just not fair,” she repeated. “You’ve been using your breasts to lure in Takatsuki.”

“I have not!” I floundered a bit, grabbing her hands and removing them from my chest. “Besides, you’ve been wearing shorter skirts lately.”

“Kyah!”

I’d rested my hand on her thigh. *Whoa, her skin’s so smooth.* The slight chilliness I felt beneath my fingers must have been because she’s a lamia.

Aya’s hand then reached out to me.

“What is it Aya?” I returned stubbornly. The two of us ended up messing around for a while before we remembered that we were in a park and calmed down. Fortunately, no one had been around to see us.

“Lulu, that was too much,” Aya complained.

“You were doing just the same,” I answered.

We turned our flushed faces toward each other and offered reluctant smiles. As long as we kept to these topics, we got along well. There was nothing wrong with that, but...

“That reminds me...” Aya said casually, almost idly. “Fujiwara’s wedding was a surprise.”

So that’s the topic?

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Two wives is a shock.”

In truth, it wasn’t that rare for nobles to have multiple wives. This was just the start of our conversation though, merely leisurely chitchat.

“I wonder what Takatsuki thinks about it.”

“He said it was a relief,” I remarked. “Especially since Nina and Chris are now getting along.”

“I feel the same here, honestly,” Aya agreed with a laugh. The atmosphere on the trip to the capital had been so tense, but things between those two had relaxed. At least, I thought so.

“Falling in love with someone near you at the same time as another person...must be tough.”

“You’re right...” Aya agreed.

Time for the meat of our conversation, then.

“In other words, it’s us,” I declared.

“Well, that’s putting it bluntly.”

I held Aya’s gaze, and she held mine. Our smiles remained, so from the outside, we must have looked like good friends. However, things weren’t so peaceful on the inside. After all, we were rivals in love. We had basically the same relationship as Nina and Chris, just slightly different.

Chris and Nina disliked each other to begin with—they were noble and beastwoman. They couldn’t ever reach an agreement, so they fought. Eventually, though, they’d reconciled.

So what about us?

There was no real difference in social standing between Aya and me. And we were in the same party. Aya had known Makoto longer, but I’d spent the entirety of last year with him. As he was now, I probably understood him the best...but I couldn’t always tell what he was thinking.

I’d therefore chosen to hold on. Although we were fighting for the same guy, we’d decided to remain on good terms in the party. Infighting would’ve probably caused Makoto to worry as well, and I was sure that Aya felt that way too.

I *was* sure, but...

“You were all alone practicing magic with him last night. You’re always doing that... It’s not fair,” Aya had said.

But she didn’t know that the “training” was him telling me to focus on controlling my magic for five hours each day. There was nothing alluring about that at all. On top of that, when I’d lose my focus, I’d end up passing out and sleeping. Makoto apparently kept at his training for ten hours though. *Sometimes I worry about how much focus he has...*

“But you’re always hanging around his room in the morning,” I argued back. “And...you sometimes sleep with him.”

Aya usually got breakfast ready for us, but she’d always make a pass at Makoto when she did, like crawling into his bed while he was sleeping. As far as

those two had mentioned, nothing had ever happened, but...

“Takatsuki and I haven’t done anything,” Aya stated. “Yet.”

“We haven’t either. Yet.”

The two of us stared in silence, sounding each other out.

◇ Aya Sasaki’s Perspective ◇

I looked at the beautiful red-headed elf in front of me. *Lu...*

We’d spent the whole day together. The last time I’d had so much one-on-one time with her was when we’d gone shopping around Labyrinth Town. At that point, we had barely known each other, so we’d been fairly reserved. But now, we’d both spent more time together and had grown to understand one another. So...

I guess things are getting tenser between us.

We were in a party of three, and both of us liked the one guy in it. Neither of us hid our feelings toward Takatsuki either. We’d kept competing, and had gotten more and more extreme.

Lu would sometimes glare daggers at me, and sometimes I’d do the same to her. We hadn’t actually fought yet, but this whole situation wasn’t a good one.

At least we both agreed on that much, so we’d decided to talk it out while going around town today. And...we’d both enjoyed the time spent together.

I like her a fair bit...

Her personality matched her sweet appearance. She was straightforward. Maybe slightly simple, if I was being harsh. She didn’t hide things or scheme. That was why we could be such good friends.

The problem is, what do I want to do?

I’d been reincarnated into this world as a monster, and Takatsuki was the only one I could rely on. Obviously, I could count on Fujiwara, as well as Saki and Sakurai in Highland... But, if anyone asked who I wanted to be with, I didn’t even need to think about my answer.

Takatsuki. Since junior high, he’s been the only one I’ve had feelings for.

So asking me to hand him over...doesn't quite work.

Besides, from what Lucy had mentioned, she was in a similar situation.

She couldn't use magic well and hadn't been able to find any real friends in Macallan's guild. When she'd finally found a party, they'd been attacked by a dangerous monster. They had then abandoned her, but Takatsuki had saved her life.

Even after that, he'd never gotten angry at her, no matter how much she'd failed. They'd often spent whole evenings practicing magic together. Then, when the griffin had gone for her, Takatsuki had risked his life, using fire magic to defeat it. He'd almost died in the process.

Of course she'd fall for him...

I looked at the beautiful elf again.

Mrgh, she's so good-looking...

I didn't know why, but I felt annoyed, so I pinched her cheek. *It's so soft.*

"Hey...Aya?"

I ignored her doubtful look and kept fiddling with her cheek before she suddenly did the same to me.

"Lu?"

She didn't respond either, and we half glared at each other for a while, both of us pinching the other's cheek.

"So, what'd you want?" she asked eventually.

"Never mind."

Things wouldn't go anywhere if we kept this distance between us. As the pair of us frowned, someone approached us.

"Oh, Miss Lucy, Miss Sasaki'h. Are the two of you out together'h?"

It was Nina.

Right... She and Chris made it work with the same guy.

Maybe we should ask her for her thoughts on the matter since she'd been in

the same situation? Lu must've been thinking the same thing because she glanced at me and nodded.

"Nina, do you still fight with Chris?" The two of them acted like close friends now.

"No, thankfully'h. Chris and I get along quite well'h," Nina answered with a smile.

"Um, what about at night? You don't argue over the order?" Aya asked bluntly.

Where'd that *come from?! Couldn't you have led into it a bit more softly?! I mean, I want to know too...!*

Nina's cheeks flushed. "Well, at night'h...all three of us are together'h."

"Whaaaat?!" the two of us exclaimed in response to her shocking statement.

Just then, Nina's pocket started to beep. "Yes, husband'h?! Understood, I'll be right there'h!" Apparently, Fujiwara had gotten in touch through some magic tool (it seemed close enough to a phone).

"Sorry'h!" she apologized. "Apparently, there's an urgent negotiation, so I need to head back'h. See you later'h!"

Without any delay, Nina hopped up over a wall and onto a roof. Well, she *was* part bunny, I guess...

Lu and I exchanged looks.

"The three of them...together," Lucy started with slightly red cheeks.

"Is that really okay...?" I mused. From a Japanese perspective, it felt completely wrong...

No! It's fine. Fighting like this isn't good either!

"All right, Lu! That's what we'll do!" I declared.

"Eh, what?! Really?" she asked, her eyes going wide.

"Really! We'll work on it with him, all together!"

"A-All?"

“I’d wanted my first time at least to be—” Lu began, fidgeting.

“No!”

“Th-That’s tyranny!” she exclaimed. “But...fighting won’t help, I guess.”

And with that settled, the two of us headed back to the inn, hand in hand.

“There were no goblins...” Takatsuki complained when we got back, before dinner. It was kinda cute.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

I’d left bright and early, but now I was at a loss.

“Where are all the monsters?” It wasn’t just a lack of goblins—I hadn’t even seen any giant rats or horned rabbits.

I was in a small forest just beyond the main gate of Horn, close to Lake Chimay. It was fairly similar to the woods around Macallan, so I’d expected to find *something*, but...

“Guess Lucy and Sasa were right...”

They’d made the correct choice to not come along; it would’ve been a waste of time...

Geographically, Horn was situated right between Macallan and the lake. There were a lot of water elementals this far outside the capital, so I was at least able to keep up with my training.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from behind me. “Makoto Takatsuki?”

I turned around and saw the former bodyguard that Sasa had beaten up the other day. Wait, no... Technically, she had beaten his *subordinates*.

“That is a strange training technique,” he commented.

I was standing on the surface of the lake, playing around and creating flocks of birds out of the water. I needed a decent amount of concentration to pull off the spell, so this was a good exercise for training up my mastery.

“I’m just practicing water magic,” I commented absently. “I’d wanted to hunt some goblins, though.”

The former bodyguard looked shocked but then guffawed. “There is a barrier against monsters that surrounds our capital,” he explained. “Low-level beasts like goblins could never approach.”

“What...?” my voice cracked from the surprise. *I can’t hunt goblins around here?!* “What’s the point in patrolling, then?” If there were no monsters, surely there was no need.

“Fool! That kind of negligence could be fatal. Besides, there are bandits and other ne’er-do-wells. Our daily patrols are a deterrent for the sake of peace.”

I murmured a slight affirmation. Guess I could admire his dedication. His personality, though, not so much.

“We’ve recently received some reports of strange monsters around Lake Chimay...but it appears to be your magic. Do not frighten the townspeople.”

“Oops.” It must’ve been reported. I couldn’t use magic here like I did back in Macallan. Going forward, I’d have to be careful about anything excessive.

The former bodyguard glanced around, then turned away from me and spoke. “Much of the monster extermination in Roses is handled by adventurers. You have my thanks for coming out to exterminate goblins, even in the capital.”

I exhaled a breath. *Where was this coming from?*

“I’m sorry for everything,” he apologized, his voice low.

Hang on, he’s being all sweet now?

After witnessing the rare sight of that hard-ass going soft (not that I’d really wanted to see it), I headed back to the inn.

Apparently, Lucy and Sasa had spent the day shopping.

“Those two always enjoy their time together’h,” Nina commented with a smile.

Maybe I should’ve joined them...

Chapter 4: Makoto Takatsuki Fights Enemies Attacking Horn

“Let’s head for Highland, then,” I suggested to everyone. We had no real reason to stay in Horn long-term.

“Because there weren’t any goblins?” Lucy teased.

Yeah, problem?

“There aren’t many elementals here, so it makes training more difficult,” I said, trying to give an excuse that any *Elementaler* would. Still, the bigger reason for leaving was that barrier around the capital; since there were no monsters to hunt, I’d be in the financial red while we stayed in Horn.

Sasa agreed, fiddling with her hair. “That sounds fine.”

I guess she wasn’t fond of the area after she’d beat up all the knights. We often came across them in the town, but usually *they* were the ones avoiding *her* gaze.

“Very well. We should inform the castle before we leave,” Fujiyan told us.

We had to do that?

“I will go and bid our farewells,” Chris offered.

“Shall I come with you, Miss Chris’h?”

“Nina, I’ve told you not to bother with the ‘Miss.’ Let’s go together.”

“Okay, Chris’h. I’ll go get ready’h.”

The friendship between them obviously wasn’t just skin deep. You’d never guess that they’d been at each other’s throats until the other day.

We all got ready to depart Horn while we waited for them to return.

“When we informed the castle of our intent to leave, they stated that they

would like to hold a banquet and instructed that we should come to the castle tonight," Chris explained with a troubled expression.

"They wish to stop us...I suppose," Fujiyan murmured.

"And, if we don't go..." I began, looking over everyone.

"We have to, Makoto. Honestly, what are you thinking?" Lucy asked, folding her arms and sighing.

"It's best to give proper farewells to all those higher-ups, Takatsuki," Sasa added.

You too?! Both my party-mates were scolding me...

All right, I'd learn eventually. This was a forced event, then.

"Maybe there'll be a load of tasty food," Sasa pondered. *Was she just after the meal...?*

"Roses's court chefs are apparently of a very high caliber'h," Nina answered dutifully.

Guess that means I can get my hopes up too.

So, the whole group ended up going to the castle again.

"Wowowow! This is amazing, Takatsuki!" Sasa exclaimed.

"Mmm, this is great! Sasa, try this."

"Calm down, you two." Lucy's exasperation at the both of us was no surprise.

My imagination had underestimated the quality of the cooking—every dish was superb.

There was steak so tender that you could tease it apart with chopsticks, and a sashimi platter that featured fish similar to a huge tuna. (It was even served with something close to soy sauce!) There were also crab and shrimp dishes with tempura vegetables alongside vivid salads.

Was it a coincidence that so much of it was similar to Japanese food?

Well...no. They were probably doing it on purpose to appeal to our tastes.

“Takatsuki! There’s a dessert corner!”

“Right! Let’s go!”

The party was buffet-style, so Sasa was having plenty of fun eating her way around the room. Honestly, I was too. I was glad we’d come.

“Makoto, what do you think? Does Roses’s food measure up to your tastes?” It was Prince Leonardo. I didn’t want to be rude, so I straightened up in front of him. The fact that Sasa was gulping down wine behind me weighed on my mind. *I hope she doesn’t get too drunk and do anything improper...*

“It’s the first time I’ve had such delicious food,” I answered honestly. Really, I did think so.

“I suggested to my sister that we have this buffet,” Prince Leonardo admitted. “I wanted to talk to you again.” His youthful eyes were sparkling, and he looked just like an adorable girl. Honestly, that amount of cuteness was wasted on a guy.

“Makoto, would you show me some magic again?”

“Ummm...okay. Come this way.”

It’s not like I could half-ass a request from a prince. Luckily, I’d spotted a fountain in the castle gardens.

“Elementals, elementals...” I murmured, borrowing some mana from the few elementals in the area. “*Water Magic: Dance!*”

I used the fountain’s water to sculpt mermaids, birds, horses, and other animals before animating the figures and making them dance. It was like a performance of water, and the band that’d been playing music changed the tune to match the tempo of the water dancers.



There were only a few elementals, but there was a decent chunk of mana within the palace's fountain. I remembered the feel of the water from the Water Temple. That must've been the source of the water in the fountain, now that I thought about it.

"W-Wow! How much practice did it take to get that skilled with water magic?!"

"It's not that special. I can only use this type of magic, after all."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Prince Leonardo seemed happy with my exhibition.

"Hey, Makoto. What's your mastery level at now?" Lucy asked, poking me in the cheek while holding a champagne flute in her other hand. The red, off-shoulder dress looked good on her. I shouldn't have been surprised that she could blend into places like this.

"It's over 150, I think," I told her quietly. Modifying the Soul Book was illegal, after all, so I couldn't be too loud about it. Officially, it was recorded as 99.

She let out a small groan. "Mine's still only 30..." she said, slumping.

"Don't worry about it—when we met, it was only level 10."

She was growing, and besides, it was easier to improve your mastery when you had lesser skills to begin with. With weak magic, it was *necessary* to be able to cast more spells. For a king rank mage like Lucy, though, a single use of magic was difficult. Each time she cast a spell, she had to control an ocean of power. It was way easier for a low rank mage like me with barely any mana...though it made me sad to admit it.

While I was considering that, the prince tugged on my shirt.

"Makoto! Would you teach me magic?!" he requested with shining eyes. "I want you to be my teacher."

Will you grant Prince Leonardo's request?

Yes

No

It'd been a while since I'd had an *RPG Player* choice pop up.

Picking "yes" would mean that we'd need to stay in Horn for a while. "No" would... Well, could I even refuse the prince's request?

I didn't dislike him. He was friendly and he earnestly idolized me. His sister was scary though. As I hemmed and hawed, I heard a cool voice.

"Leo, what are you doing?"

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

We had organized this party at Leo's request. Still, though, I could not see why he was so taken with Makoto Takatsuki. That boy was simply a mage that could use his water magic somewhat skillfully, and there were countless such people in this country.

However, Leo had passionately protested against this assertion. "You're wrong, sister! Can't you see how precise his water magic is?! It's almost like it's alive!"

Regardless, such techniques would be of no use for defeating the Great Demon Lord; they were mere children's playthings after all.

Though that being said, all the otherworld heroes I'd wanted to conscript...had already left the country. That much was my fault. They had come from another world, so their faith in our goddess was minimal. Forcing this country's rules upon them was my mistake.

Princess Noelle from Highland was doing far better. She had provided riches, land, and even lovers to those who followed her goddess. I perhaps should have done the same, but it was too late now.

My mother was even going so far as to start bizarre rumors and was demanding that I use my looks to bring the Hero of Light to Roses. There would be no point, though... Compared to Princess Noelle of Amaterasu, the priestess of the sun goddess, I had no way of winning.

Oh? Leonardo's talking with Makoto Takatsuki. I hope that apprentice mage won't be a bad influence.

“Sister! I was just asking Makoto to teach me magic!”

“G-Good evening, Princess Sophia.”

Leo had a full grin spread across his face, while Makoto Takatsuki’s was more awkward.

“Leo, he is an adventurer. You shouldn’t ask too much.” A prince seeking instruction from an adventurer indicated our pathetic state of affairs...and beyond anything else, Makoto Takatsuki was a mage apprentice.

What was my brother thinking...?

“Prince Leonardo, if you wish to learn magic, then I’m sure there are many mages willing to instruct you who are more qualified than I am,” Makoto Takatsuki replied.

Well answered. That response keeps your standing in mind, I thought.

“Leo, I can arrange a water magic instructor from the palace later.” Our country’s lack of even any ultra rank mages was a pitiful position for us to be in.

“No, sister! Makoto’s magic is a work of art. It’s not like anyone else’s.”

The man in question responded with a rueful smile. “Well, that’s overselling me a bit.”

“Leo...works of art won’t defeat monsters or demons.”

This was strange... Somehow, Makoto Takatsuki and I were working together to persuade Leo.

Just as I was considering how we should withdraw from this situation, there came a cry that interrupted the party.

“A group of monsters has appeared in the town!”

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“How?” Princess Sophia asked, her calm voice cutting through the noise of the hall. “Has the barrier been broken?”

“W-Well, a group just suddenly appeared in the town! The cause is currently unclear and we are prioritizing the evacuation of the civilians.”

“Go at once to the guild and request their aid. Inform the adventurers that we will pay for saving civilians as well as defeating monsters. If they hesitate, offer them double.”

“At once, Your Highness!” the group of soldiers replied.

Sophia had calmly taken command of the situation. *That’s some quick decision-making!*

“As for the palace knights, they are all to aid with the subjugation of the monsters and protecting our citizens,” ordered Princess Sophia.

“Sister!” called Prince Leonardo. “I can help!”

Sophia paused for a moment. “Very well,” she answered. “Come with me.”

Maybe she didn’t want to expose him to so much danger...but hiding a hero away while his own country was in peril just wouldn’t work.

“Sasa, Lucy, we’re helping too,” I declared. We weren’t affiliated with the guild in this town, but we *were* still adventurers of Roses. We could aid in some way.

“Got it, Makoto,” said Lucy

Sasa also agreed. “Right, let’s go, Takatsuki.” The two of them gave firm nods.

Then, Fujiyan called out to me. “Tackie!”

“Fujiyan, you evacuate with Nina and Chris. Nina, look after them!” She was a gold rank adventurer after all, so I knew she could keep them safe.

“Leave it to me’h! Husband, Chris, let’s go’h!”

And so, everyone left for our own destinations.

Horn was burning.

Well, more accurately, there were plumes of smoke surrounding the city—it wasn’t completely ablaze yet.

The rampaging beasts seemed scattered. There weren’t that many, but people who’d never seen monsters before were fairly scared of them. Screams echoed from all around.

“Hyah!” Sasa yelled as she blasted a kobold-looking thing away with a single punch.

“*Earth Magic: Stone Shot!*” Lucy’s spell caught an orc in its head and brought it down.

“This way!” I called, guiding an older person by the hand toward the temple that had become an emergency shelter.

With no source of water—and no elementals—there was little I could do with my magic... Well, helping rescue citizens was an indispensable job as well.

Suddenly, the alert from *Sense Danger* started blaring in my head.

“Makoto, look!”

“Takatsuki, it’s a griffin!”

Lucy and Sasa’s calls prompted me to turn. I saw a lion-bodied monster with the head of an eagle, rushing through the sky on its wings...and headed straight for me. *There’s a griffin in the city?!*

“Guess this was never going to be easy!” I grumbled, pulling out my dagger.

“Get back!” The former bodyguard had leaped in front of me and was facing down the griffin head-on. Would he be okay?

Slam! Beast collided with man.

“Grrrgggh...” The former bodyguard’s face had gone red, but he’d brought the griffin to a halt!

Not bad!

Without holding back, I drew power from my tiny mana pool. “*Water Magic: Ice Cutter!*” The griffin screeched as magical blades of ice pierced its eyes.

“*Earth Magic: Stone Shot!*”

“Hyah!”

Lucy’s high-speed boulder hit at the same time as Sasa’s *Charged Attack*. The griffin was smashed into a house and there, it stopped moving.

Those two were really something...

While this griffin might've been on the smaller side, I was surprised at how much easier it had gone down compared to the larger one I'd fought with Jean's party.

"Captain!"

"Are you okay?!"

"Thank you, adventurers!"

The former bodyguard's subordinates had arrived.

"Hey, Takatsuki?" Sasa asked, looking at the griffin's corpse meaningfully.

I followed suit and stared at the monster. Then suddenly, it clicked. "Isn't this the one from the circus?"

"The other monsters look like the same ones too," Lucy confirmed.

I could even see scraps of costumes clinging to the beasts...the exact same ones that the circus monsters had been wearing. Had they escaped? But even if they had, would they all rampage at once like this?

"Makoto Takatsuki, do you recognize these monsters?" the former bodyguard asked as he came over to me.

"I think they're from the circus troupe that was set up in the middle of town," I told him.

"What?! So this is *their* fault?! What are those tamers playing at?!"

"Let's go check it out," I suggested. If people hadn't managed to escape the circus, then the tent would be the most dangerous location. All of us headed toward the central plaza.

"This is awful..." Sasa murmured.

I felt the same way. The plaza had definitely seen the most destruction. Houses had been destroyed, and the street lighting was all bent out of shape. The corpses of monsters...along with some partially eaten people...were scattered around.

"So it *was* them..." mumbled Lucy.

But then, a roar shook the air.

Before us was a giant, standing about ten meters tall, and rampaging.

“Forward!” the former bodyguard yelled, and his subordinates all chorused an affirmative.

I gave orders to our team too. “Lucy, aim for its head. Sasa, I’ll wreck its footing, so you finish it off.”

“Got it.”

“Leave it to me.”

I then examined the large water fountain in the plaza. *Great, I can use this.*

The former bodyguard was out front and leading the charge to attack the giant.

The beast’s movements were clumsy, so the soldiers could easily avoid any attacks. However, the creature’s sheer size meant that the knights also couldn’t land any meaningful blows of their own. Just as I was about to advance, some more people appeared.

“Hey, are you adventurers too?!”

“This thing’s the biggest threat!”

“Give us a hand!”

“We’ll split the reward!”

The adventurers from Horn’s guild had started to gather. *Great! We’ve already won!*

Makoto, stay on guard, Noah advised in my mind.

All right, goddess, I’ll be as careful as ever.

“*Fire Magic: Fireball!*”

“*Wood Magic: Wind Sword!*”

“Meteo!”

The guild mages blasted the giant with magic, and Lucy launched hers off alongside them.

She's gained way more control over her power, I mused.

As I approached, I surveyed the giant. It'd taken the spells head-on and was woozy but still moving. This thing was as tough as it was big.

"*Water Magic: Flow.*" I pulled the water from the fountain and dashed it against the giant, splashing the knights near it in the process.

"Hey!" Their leader didn't seem too happy at that, but I'd explain later.

"*Water Magic: Ice Floor.*" I cast the spell quickly, freezing the ground underneath the beast.

"Whuh?" huffed the giant. It struggled to maintain balance, but...ended up falling on its backside.

"Now!"

"Kill it!"

The knights swarmed it to attack.

There was a *fwish* of something shooting through the air, and then I saw a small figure lancing toward the giant's head.

Sasa!

She'd jumped several meters up and then had kicked hard, using the resistance from the air to rise even higher. She then fell toward the head, and there was a huge thud as she impacted. *Double Jump* was definitely a convenient skill.

Sasa's kick collided, and the giant's head slammed into the ground. Instantly, it ceased all movement.

"Hurray!"

"Is it dead?!"

The group of adventurers erupted into cheers. But, just in case, the archers and mages threw a few more attacks at it. There was no response—it must've been defeated.

"That kick was incredible," one of the adventurers said to Sasa. "Are you gold rank?"

“What was that ‘Meteo’ spell?”

“You really pulled us out of the fire. Where’s your party based out of?”

Lucy and Sasa seemed slightly embarrassed, but happy as well. I kept half an eye on them and used the rest of my attention to check around with my *Scout* skill.

There aren’t any strong monsters left alive, so we should all be fine. Well, to be fair, my skill detected that the giant *was* still actually alive, but it was gradually weakening. Some of the adventurers were keeping a careful watch on it, but it looked like their concern wouldn’t be needed since it’d be dead soon.

“You were a real help.”

I looked over to find the former bodyguard standing at my side.

“I’m proud to call them friends,” I said of Lucy and Sasa. They really were too good for me.

“No, I mean *you*. Your magic brought that thing down to our level, no? Without that quick-wittedness, we never would have won.”

“Really?”

I was pretty sure the girls could’ve taken it out together, even without me.

Just then, Princess Sophia approached us along with Prince Leonardo. “What happened here?” They might’ve been surrounded by an escort, but shouldn’t they have evacuated?

“Lady Sophia! The monsters in the plaza have all been eliminated!” the former bodyguard reported.

“I see. Well done, everyone.”

Those in the area nodded in satisfaction at her words. The adventurers and knights alike seemed happy to get a personal thanks from her. Seeing her like this... She really did give off the impression of a great princess. She wasn’t even afraid of exposing herself to danger.

“Lady Sophia!” a knight called, running swiftly over from the tent. He’d apparently been investigating the circus. “The tamers are all dead!”

That wasn't the best of reports. Had the monsters gotten them?

"The tamers were all killed by bladed weapons, so it was most likely not the work of the monsters."

"Search for survivors," Sophia commanded. "We need to hear the details."

"At once!"

Something treacherous must have happened. *I wonder if those clowns are safe. Wait a minute...I remember now. When I was pretending to be a clown, that man mentioned something about looking forward to the surprise today...*

Thinking back, that whole situation seemed at least a little suspicious.

Just as I was considering telling the group about my experience, a sharp pain raced through my head.

"Agh!" It felt like I'd been smashed in the skull with a hammer.

That...that was *Sense Danger*. I remembered this level of pain... It was the same sensation I'd felt when the earth dragon in Labyrinthos had leaped out at us.

Which meant...there was a calamity level monster here? That was impossible.

"Makoto, what's wrong?"

"Are you not feeling well?"

Lucy and Sasa both seemed concerned as my face contorted with pain.

"What is it, Makoto Takatsuki?" The older guy (the former bodyguard) was worried too.

"There's a calamity level monster...nearby," I managed to spit out.

"Huh?"

"Where?!"

"What?!"

The three of them glanced around in shock.

"But I cannot see anything like that...?" questioned the former bodyguard.

He was right. *Where is it? This is the capital city, not a dungeon.*

Suddenly, I heard a faint voice.

Y...ou...hate...ful...hu...mans...

The voice was overflowing with resentment. Was it the giant?

Yup, they're hateful. I get it, I really do, came another voice. This speaker was strange. Childish, girlish. Soft and quiet.

N...ee...ed...pow...er...

That definitely came from the dying giant, and the words were rough and labored. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Someone kill that giant!" I yelled, commanding the adventurers who were near it.

I'll give you power. That was the softer speaker again. ***What will you repay me with?***

"Lucy, Sasa, can you hear that kid's voice?" I asked.

"What?"

"A kid's voice?"

No one else can hear it?

But then, the almost-dead giant suddenly stood. "Graaaaaaahhhh!" Strangely, its body began to fall apart. Wait, no... Its skin *was* splitting, but something red was bubbling up from underneath its flesh. The thick scarlet goop hit the ground and hissed, scorching the pavement black.

Was that...lava? It was! Lava soon covered its body and the giant started to transform.

White things were floating in the lava too... Were they bones? They were. Lots of them. This change was so grotesque and just *wrong* that I couldn't even wonder who the bones belonged to or why they weren't melting.

Now, said the soft voice, ***let us fight against our fate of perdition! Take out as many as you can!***

What the hell did that mean?

At that, the child's voice faded away, and the giant's low roar morphed into a screech of grating glass. That sound was something I'd heard before...

"A blight...monster...it's a blight...giant..." I heard one of the other adventurers mutter dazedly.

That's right—in Labyrinthos, I'd seen something like this grotesque form and had heard a similar grating call. Back then, it had been the blight dragons. This was a completely different thing, but the wrongness and creepiness of it felt the same.

Regardless, none of that mattered now. It was clear that if we didn't defeat this thing, countless people would die and the city would be thrown into chaos.

"Lucy, Sasa! Wait...wha?" I turned to address my party members but instantly fell silent.

The chilling roar echoed around us again. The knights, the adventurers, and Lucy were all sitting on the ground with pale faces.

"Lucy?!" I felt a chill crawl through me as I rushed over to her.

"Makoto...I-I'm fine..."

"You're not even slightly fine!" I put my arm around her shaking shoulders. *What happened?*

"Blight monsters' voices instill fear..."

I turned around to see Princess Sophia still standing, but ashen-faced. She must have had some resistance against debuffs because she wasn't on the floor like the others. It did look like she was struggling though.

I turned to Sasa next. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I feel fine. But it's creepy..." Sasa was a monster as well, a lamia, so the debuff must've had less of an effect.

"Makoto, are you all right?" Prince Leonardo asked. He seemed fine as well,

but I guess that was because of his goddess's divine protection; the same seemed true of other heroes, like Sakurai. At least I could relax on that front since the heroes in this world were so unfairly overpowered.

"I have a skill called *Calm Mind*," I explained.

Princess Sophia seemed surprised by that. "Still, for the blight beast to have such little effect on you..."

But this was the second time I'd encountered blighted monsters, after all, so I was used to it.

"I'll defeat the blight giant!" the prince exclaimed, readying a sword that shone blue. I suppose it must have been a magic sword because mana began flowing from the blade. I'd bet it was an heirloom weapon of the royal family.

"Leo...take care." The princess usually seemed aloof, but her expression now was laced with worry.

"I will!" Prince Leonardo called. "*Blizzard Sword, Slice!*"

He swung the sword, and a huge blade of magic impacted the giant.

Nice! It hit like ten of Jean's sword strikes, and the magic cut deep into the body of the giant. But...

"It's...regenerating," Sasa murmured, exhaling.

The giant's wound was indeed healing, just as Sasa had said. Whether the attack had damaged the creature or not, it was impossible to tell.

Suddenly, the giant's arm rocketed toward the prince, who hurriedly tried to gain some distance. He was cutting it very close.

"Leo!" Princess Sophia screamed.

"Guh!" the prince grunted, swinging the sword once more...only for the same thing to happen again. Did he not have any special skills? I remember that Sakurai's sword of light had some.

I glanced at the princess and found her praying anxiously. Hmm, it didn't *look* like the prince was hiding some trump card...

Huh?

Honestly, I'd been pretty relaxed so far. After all, I'd seen Sakurai take down those blight dragons with a single blow. Heroes were overwhelmingly strong people in the pecking order of this world, so I'd thought that Prince Leonardo would be the same.

Makoto, Noah said to me, *the Hero of Light is special. Also, little Leonardo is fairly weak compared to the other heroes...*

Oh, he was?

I held on to Lucy and peered around again.

The knights and adventurers were all immobile from fear. Sasa could move, but a barehanded attack against the lava-covered giant was ridiculous; she'd end up burning her arm off if she tried. And our trump card, "the Hero of Ice and Snow," hadn't been able to do much.

We...might be in a bit of a state here.

A cold bead of sweat trickled down my cheek.

Once again, the giant's fist came for the prince. It was evident that he wouldn't be able to dodge it this time!

"Prince!" The former bodyguard dove and knocked the boy out of the way.

In the prince's stead, the former bodyguard took the giant's blow. It was like a truck had smashed into him—he bounced off the floor before slamming into a wall and plowing right through it.

"Old-timer!" I yelled. The former bodyguard gave no response. He...must have...died... The giant's attack had certainly been fatal.

Damn it!

I gritted my teeth, but I couldn't focus on that right now. I had to let it go and not lose my cool.

I set *Calm Mind* to 99%.

"Aahhhhh!" The prince, however, did lose it, reacting with anguish when he realized that his ally was dead. His movements started getting sloppy.

"Hey, Takatsuki," Sasa began. "I...can die up to four more times...so should I

give it a shot?”

I shook my head. “No. I doubt that an unarmed attack will do much good against a lava-covered giant.”

Regardless of anything else, I couldn’t accept her attacking with the assumption that she’d perish in the process.

At this point, the blight giant seemed to be getting used to the prince’s attacks. It was learning, and its counterattacks had started to change. Each time it moved, globs of lava shed from its body and set the ground alight. With fire raging beneath his footsteps, the prince was running out of places to move. He’d soon be caught.

“Sasa, help Prince Leonardo!” I commanded. “Throw a boulder or some rubble at the giant and grab its attention. Don’t move too close though—you can’t get hit!”

“G-Got it. I’ll do my best.”

I offered a mental apology for asking her to do something so dangerous but then noticed that Princess Sophia was watching me.

“Makoto Takatsuki...” she murmured. “Is there nothing you can do...?”

“Princess Sophia...”

As she asked for my aid, her face looked shattered, heartbroken.

`Will you accept Princess Sophia’s request?`

▸Yes

No

On an emotional level, I’d definitely pick yes...but how was I physically supposed to defeat this thing?

Come on, I thought. *There must be a way...there’s gotta be. Is there some hint? A revival item? A support character? If we were in Macallan or Labyrinthos, then I could at least use elemental magic...but here?*

I racked my mind, but I couldn't come up with anything.

What do I—

Just then, I was interrupted by Noah. *Makoto...use Princess Sophia.*

What? Noah? Use her? What did she mean?

Use... Wait, maybe?

"Princess Sophia!" I yelled. "Do you have any magic skills?"

"I do not have any training as a mage...but I do have *Ice Magic (King Rank)*. I can only use self-defense spells, though..."

That's it! I grabbed her hand immediately. That might've been rude, but I'd apologize later.

"What are you doing?!" she demanded, but I'd expected that response.

"Sorry, but I've gotta borrow your mana to save him."

"V-Very well," she conceded. It seemed like the words "save him" had been enough to make her calm down.

I held onto her hand and concentrated.

Synchro.

Instantly, it felt like I'd dropped into a waterfall—pleasantly chill mana flowed into me.

"Ngh!" I heard the princess gasp quietly.

"Sasa! Prince Leonardo! Get back!" The prince didn't hear me, but Sasa dragged him away from the giant.

"*Water Magic: Water Dragon!*"

A dragon of ice gushed forward from my hand toward the blighted beast.

Huh? Water Dragon *turned into an ice dragon?* It must've been because of the princess's ice affinity.

The ice dragon struck the giant, which bellowed a reverberating roar as its lava skin started to freeze. Its movement slowed slightly. *Maybe this would actually work well?*

The giant gave another roar, ripping the ice dragon off.

“Makoto Takatsuki...what on earth?” Princess Sophia asked.

“I used *Synchro* with you to tap into your magic... Are you okay?”

“I-I am, but let me re—”

As soon as I heard her say she was all right, I interrupted. “Then let’s keep going.”

“What?”

I upped the rate of mana transfer and even more of her power poured into me.

“Hau!” She shuddered, her back arching. Maybe I pulled too much at once?

“*Water Magic: Twin Ice Dragons.*” This time, I used two of the dragons to attack. They managed to slightly damage the blight giant, but it crushed them eventually.

“Hmm, ultra rank isn’t quite cutting it...”

The princess was breathing heavily. Keeping *Synchro* active for too long might not be good for her.

“U-Um... My body...is hot...”

“Can you manage?” I asked. “Does it hurt?”

“N-No...it doesn’t hurt.”

“Then we’ll finish it with the next one. Full power.”

“What, that wasn’t—”

Full Synchro.

It felt like I’d become utterly one with her. I sank deep, deep, and deeper still into the princess.

“Guh! Ahhhhgnnn...!”

She let out gasps each time that sounded almost pained... Was she really not suffering?

Still, I had vast quantities of her mana to work with, and it was far easier to use than elemental magic. This might just do it.

"*Water Magic: Yamata—*" I'd been planning on casting the same king rank spell I'd used in Labyrinthos, but I changed my mind midway through. Setting that one loose in the city would catch the adventurers and knights in the crossfire.

So let's change it up! "*Water Magic: Ice Phoenix.*"



Phoenix was usually a king rank fire spell, so I changed the composition to water magic instead.

Not bad, Makoto, I heard the goddess say.

Your praise is an honor. Also, thank you for the hint.

You're welllcooome.

In moments, the spell was complete. A huge phoenix made of ice appeared in front of us.

That's so cool!

"Go!" I ordered. "Defeat the blight giant."

The ice phoenix screeched shrilly as it attacked.

"W-Was that...king rank?" Princess Sophia stammered.

"Yup, thanks to you." I grinned.

That's what having a high skill rank could do for you.

"R-Right...I see."

"It should be over soon, look." I pointed to where the blight giant was starting to completely freeze over.

All right, let's finish it here. I still had some of the mana I'd borrowed.

"*Water Magic: Tundra Gaol!*" This spell would capture monsters and drag them toward the magical onslaught.

Caught in the raging spell, the almost pitiful whimpers of the giant gradually weakened. Eventually, it was frozen into a sculpture...and stuck in a slightly ridiculous pose. With the ice phoenix perched atop the giant's head, the whole thing made for quite the sight.

"Is it over?" I heard Princess Sophia whisper.

"It should stay frozen for a week or so. Do something about it before then."

If I'd been in Macallan with all the elementals, I could've kept it frozen for a year, but that wouldn't work in Horn.

“Very well,” she said after a pause.

“Phew, I think we’re good.” I sighed. That was tough.

“U-Um...” mumbled Princess Sophia.

“Princess Sophia, thank you for your mana,” I said.

“Y-You’re welcome...but, my hand?”

“Hm?”

Crap! I was still holding on to her.

“Pardon me!” I cried, dropping it immediately.

She looked as if she almost couldn’t speak for a moment, but then her face turned serious again.

“Listen well, everyone!” she called out. “The blight giant is defeated. Those who can move, scout for any remaining monsters. Continue evacuating citizens as you go. Adventurers, help as you are able. You will be well rewarded.”

“Lady Sophia!”

The first reply came from the former bodyguard.

What, hang on?!

“You’re alive, old-timer?!” I asked. He’d taken a massive blow from that giant. I hadn’t even expected his body to be recognizable.

“Aha ha. I would have been squashed like a bug if not for my *Iron Wall* skill...ugh!” Despite his skill, he must’ve pushed himself too far because he ended up dropping to the ground.

“Come on, don’t strain yourself,” I said. “You should rest.” I rushed over to try and support him, but he waved me off.

“I am fine. Knights, if you can move, aid the citizens. Several of you need to escort the prince and princess back to the palace!”

“Sir!” came a unified bellow from his subordinates.

The knights seemed to have rallied as well. They were all amazing... Though they’d been close to death, they were already moving back to the front lines.

Well, that organization might be the faintest bit exploitative...

“Makoto Takatsuki,” the princess called from behind me.

Prince Leonardo was slung over the shoulder of a knight who was standing close to Sophia’s side. Right now, he looked like a young kid, but he was, in fact, a hero.

I couldn’t help but feel for him a little.

“I offer you my gratitude...for earlier,” she said. “You will be properly thanked later.”

“No, it really wasn’t anything big...” The mana was hers, after all.

Without another word to me, Princess Sophia gave a command. “Let us be on our way.” The princess and knights left for the castle.

At that, I let out a relieved sigh and glanced at my own companions. Lucy was looking much better. As for Sasa...huh?

“Urgh...”

She was pale and shivering! Was this some curse from the blight giant?! Damn it! What was it?!

“I’m cooold...it’s so cold...Takatsuki...”

“Oh!”

Damn, lamiae were weak to the cold, and the huge ice phoenix and giant statue were here. Plus, the king rank magic had made it start snowing, effectively cooling the air three *more* degrees.

“Sasa, put this on!” I said, draping my jacket over her shoulders.

“Phew, thank you...Takatsuki.”

She was still shivering though.

“Aya, are you okay?” Lucy asked as she wobbled over.

I’ve got it!

“Sasa, come over here. You too, Lucy.” I got the two of them close and had Sasa hug Lucy.

“Hyah!” Lucy cried as Sasa’s freezing arms enveloped her.

“Ahhh, Lu, you’re so warm...”

Lucy was startled a bit, but Sasa relaxed.

“Wh-What’s going on?!” Lucy exclaimed.



“Sorry, Lucy, but we can’t let Sasa get too cold. Just stay like that for a while.”

“Hahhh, Lu the space heater.” Sasa’s pale face was regaining its color. Thank goodness. It was a great thing that Lucy was always so warm.

“Ugh, she’s so cold...” complained Lucy. “It’s all right, though. Are you okay, Aya?”

“Mmm, warm.”

“Wait, where are you touching?!”

Sasa had started feeling around Lucy’s body. “I wonder if there’s anywhere warmer.” Sasa’s hands were moving really lewdly. Yup...seeing two cute girls *together* sure was a sight to behold...

“Right, while we head back to the inn, let’s search for anyone that didn’t get away.”

“Sure,” the two chorused languidly.

And so, we progressed cautiously through the city back to the inn.

Goddess, that really was tiring...

◇ Fujiyan’s Perspective ◇

All around us, children were screaming, their eyes shimmering with tears as mothers tried to soothe them; frightened older people accompanied these families, and everyone was trying to escape the monsters. Yet, even in this panicked environment, Roses’s knights were keeping the groups of civilians calm as they guided us all toward the evacuation area.

“This is awful,” murmured Lady Chris, her face pale.

“I wonder if the others are all right’h? I’d prefer to join the fight too, but’h...”

“We are in Roses’s capital. Our friends will be supported by many superb knights and mages... Let us put our faith in them.” My own merchant’s skills were useless here, and I lamented my lack of combat utility.

“Nina, you are to become a member of the Macallan family. You cannot join adventurers and expose yourself to danger,” said Lady Chris.

“But everyone else is in trouble’h! And I’m the only one safe back here’h...”

Lady Chris did not want Lady Nina jumping into the fray, while the latter was worried about the rest of our friends. I myself felt pained since I understood both of their perspectives.

However, the anxious thoughts of our group were not dissimilar to those of the other fleeing citizens; it seemed like the whole evacuation shelter was filled with unease and sadness, all— *One moment?*

My *Mind Reading* skill had picked up something strange...

“Lady Nina, Lady Chris, a word?” I asked, interrupting their clash of opinions.

Everyone around us seemed consumed by fearful thoughts about the monsters...except for one person. Someone with a joyous mindset had suddenly appeared.

That man was possibly...

“Lady Nina, could you capture the man over there? The one wearing that deep hat.”

Lady Chris let out a noise of shock as Lady Nina questioned my motives. “Husband’h? What do you mean’h?”

Of course the two of them were surprised. “I will take responsibility for it, but he must not be allowed to escape,” I told them.

“You must have some reason’h...” mused Nina. “Got it’h.”

“Mr. Fujiwara, please explain later.”

I would need to tell them both about my mind reading...

“I will lure him to a secluded location,” I said. “Lady Nina, I am counting on you to handle the rest.”

“Leave it to me’h.”

“Both of you, be careful,” Lady Chris cautioned.

The others were risking their lives and putting themselves in much more danger, so I would do what I could as well.

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

The knights had been ordered to aid the civilians. I'd returned to the castle and left Leo in the care of the palace doctors. Now, as I neared my personal room, my escort spoke up. "Ah, Princess? Perhaps a period of rest—"

"I do not need it," I replied. "I need to check the temple and see how the civilians have fared throughout the evacuation. Are mother and father well?"

"They are! His and Her Majesties have been moved to a safe location."

"Good. I will get changed."

"I will help," offered my escort.

"That is unnecessary. Wait there."

I gave the order, then entered my room and closed the door behind me. I sighed out a breath. As the air left my lips, I let my *Coldhearted* skill drop. It was a unique skill I possessed that constantly kept my emotions running cool, and it had saved me in countless situations. However, it made my expressions rather frosty as well, which was a slight downside.

The emotions that *Coldhearted* had been suppressing suddenly flared up now, all at once, and made me gasp. I placed my hands on my cheeks and found them burning with heat. Striding over to the mirror, I peered at my reflection.

"What in the...?"

My face was flushed bright red like I'd been cooked in a pot. *This* was supposed to be the face of the "princess carved of ice?"

"Makoto Takatsuki..."

As I said his name, my body shivered, and I wrapped my arms around myself. I wasn't cold—if anything, my whole body was flooded with heat.

"That...*Synchro* magic..."

He'd rudely grabbed me, a *princess*, and had wormed his way into me... Into my heart, and into my body. Simply remembering it... I felt that sensation shooting through my back again, that pleasure. It was almost like being held by the man...

That was when I realized it.

“H-How lascivious!”

I was a priestess serving the goddess of water, Eir! I could not allow my body to become corrupted!

And yet, I could not forget the image of Makoto Takatsuki smiling at me. Leo had been cornered; my knights and the adventurers had been frozen in fear. I had thought it was the end, that Horn would be trampled by a single giant.

I’d been despairing.

“Then we’ll finish it with the next one.”

He’d been almost conversational, despite the situation.

“It’s thanks to you.” He’d smiled. His face was...

“This isn’t the time for that! Sophia!” I shouted at myself, activating my *Coldhearted* skill again and smoothing my expression out. I changed clothes quickly and left the room, then surveyed my uneasy subordinates.

“I am heading for the city. Those that can move, join me. However, no one that is injured should be pushing themselves.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they all chorused.

I need to forget it. Just for now. I am the symbol of peace for this country.

I cannot lose my composure.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

I returned to the inn with Lucy and Sasa. The monsters in town all appeared to have been slain since we didn’t run into any on the way back. Once at the inn, I made sure that the girls got some rest.

Then, I headed for the guild. I quickly reported the conversation I’d had while pretending to be the clown, along with the strange voice I’d heard before the fight with the blight giant.

“Those associated with the troupe are being searched, by order of the princess,” the guild worker told me. “As for that odd voice... I can’t really comment...” It seemed as though the circus workers were already being

investigated as the source of the monsters; however, the authorities weren't sure how to handle that voice.

Well, there *was* the possibility that I'd just been hearing things...

After speaking to the guild, I took a little look around town, but the knights were still guiding civilians, so I decided there wasn't much for us adventurers to do.

I headed back to the inn, and Nina told me that Fujiyan was apparently occupied with something important and would be gone for several days. He'd asked that we wait at the inn until he concluded his business. I agreed, figuring that I'd rest for a while.

Today sure was a day...

Once I'd checked that Lucy and Sasa were sleeping soundly in the next room, I let myself collapse into bed as well. In seconds, I was asleep.

◇

When I came to, I was standing in the goddess's space.

"Noah?"

I glanced around, and she appeared, smiling broadly.

"Hi, Makoto. Good work today."

"You really helped me during the fight with that giant." I dropped to one knee, expressing my thanks. Her hint had really saved my bacon... If I hadn't synchronized with Princess Sophia, I never would've beaten the blight giant.

"To be honest, I think you could've come up with it on your own. Still, if you had put forth less effort, Aya might've lost at least one of those lives." Noah said this in a disinterested voice.

I shuddered. Thinking back on the battle, we had been walking a tightrope—we'd managed to make it through, but only because Sophia happened to have a strong ice magic skill.

"That's not true," Noah remarked, having read my mind. "Roses has a lot of people with water-related magic skills. Leonardo has king rank water magic, so

you could have synchronized with him, right?”

“Oh, that might have worked.” He’d been fighting the giant, though. Synchronizing with him in that precarious position wouldn’t have been easy. Ultimately, Princess Sophia had been the best option.

Noah again responded to my thoughts. “That’s what I think too. Though, I didn’t expect you to synchronize so forcefully with a country’s princess.”

“Forcefully?”

You could synchronize gently?

“It wasn’t a bad thing though, looking at the results.” Noah was smirking meaningfully at me.

What was she getting at? It was bugging me, but other things were bothering me more. Maybe Noah would know something about *that*...

“I heard a kid’s voice just before the giant became blighted. What was it?” I asked.

After I’d heard that voice, the essentially dead giant had turned into an absolute terror. If that fight had carried on, even several extra lives wouldn’t have helped...

“Oh yeah, that,” she said, unconcerned. “That voice was from the being that you people call ‘the Great Demon Lord.’”

There was a *long* pause.

“What?”

That was a shocking truth. The voice...belonged to the Great Demon Lord?!

“The Great Demon Lord has revived?!”

“Nope. What you heard was just a leftover. Prerecorded.”

“Right...” I uttered after another pause. I wasn’t so sure... It’d sounded like a proper conversation between the child’s voice and the dying giant.

“You don’t need to worry about it,” Noah said. “Anyway, that revival hasn’t happened yet. I’d say you have at least another half a year.”

I couldn’t keep up. “You’re spilling incredibly important information like it’s nothing,” I pointed out.

“Like I said, you don’t need to worry about it. I’ll tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it.”

“That makes it feel like we’re all dancing in the palm of your hand,” I countered.

Was that a problem? Well, I was her believer, so I guess not.

“It sounds bad when you put it like that,” she muttered, sulking. “We gods can’t interfere directly, so we use our believers and priestesses to guide the people below, making sure our lost lambs find the way☆”

There was practically a cute little sparkle as she finished speaking. Even though what she’d said wasn’t cute at all...

“So, your followers are essentially pieces on the board?”

It seemed that Noah only kept me around as a pawn. That made for a pretty unbalanced game.

“I think you’d be more like a knight...?” she suggested.

“But you won’t deny the chess piece analogy,” I said. Still, I was happy that she’d called me a knight rather than a pawn... Though that reaction probably didn’t bode well for me.

Wait, now she was glaring at me. “For someone calling himself a chess piece, you sure don’t listen to me enough.”

“I don’t?” I mean, she had told me to abandon my friends and flee on several occasions, but there was no way I could do that.

There was another pause.

“Normally, a believer is better about listening to their goddess. If I tell you to run, it’s because I don’t want you to die.”

“Then give me guidance that saves the others as well.”

“And now you’re dictating to a goddess...” she grumbled.

Was I really saying something so strange? Was I?

“Whatever. You did really well today!” she cheered.

“I did? Thinking back on the battle, I feel like I have a lot to improve on.”

I hadn’t been able to use my elemental magic in Horn, and the blight giant had been too dangerous for my friends to fight. They’d even been unable to run away. I’d been too naive about a lot of things, so now that I was more aware, I needed to come up with countermeasures.

“I don’t mean good job with the battle,” she clarified.

I looked quizzically at her, waiting for her to explain.

“I meant about making friends with the priestess.”

My words faltered. “I...didn’t, though?”

I could probably say that I got along well with the hero prince, but his sister? As soon as we’d defeated that blight giant, she’d headed off somewhere. I guess she had to go take command since, after all, she was a princess.

Noah let out a sigh and shook her head, dismay apparent on her face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“This is why you’re called dense.”

“What did you say?” Huh, what was that? I’m dense?

“I said, ‘this is why you’re called dense.’”

She’d said it twice. Must be important.

But, I wasn’t dense...was I? After all, I’d talked to Fujiyan about Lucy and Sasa.

“I suppose I can try and build things up with Princess Sophia.”

“Hmm... I don’t think you need to...” Noah mused. “Well, anyway, do your best.”

“I will. I need to train more as well.” I had to make sure that I was never stuck in a situation like the blight giant battle ever again.

“My, how diligent. Then your wonderful, kind goddess will give you a hint.” She grinned, then patted me on the head. She seemed to be in a good mood now. “Makoto, you activate your *Calm Mind* skill while you’re using elemental

magic, right?”

“I do. Well, I’ve almost always got it running, not just when I’m using magic.”

Since *Calm Mind* was a skill that soothed the thoughts of the user, it was perfect for mages. Casting magic required concentration, and having a skill that cleared the restless mind was a huge boon.

“You need to stop using *Calm Mind* with elemental magic.”

“Why?” That was the exact opposite of what I’d learned at the Water Temple. My teachers had driven home how useful a calming skill could be in battle. So now, I had to stop using it on purpose?

“Elementals prefer it when you show your feelings.”

“They...do?” I asked. That certainly hadn’t been in the book.

“Well, the book said that, in order to use stronger elemental magic, you need to bond with the elementals. Is that right? Besides, doesn’t everyone prefer speaking with more sociable people?”

“Well...I guess so,” I conceded. Considering how much trouble I had with that sort of thing, her words hurt to hear. *The elementals think I’m unsociable? Ugh.*

“Well, just try it,” said Noah. “You’ve got a lot to learn as an *Elementaler*.”

“Got it. I’ll give it a go.”

“Yup, do your best.” She stroked my head. Recently, I’d been getting more used to her doing that.

And, just as I thought that, Noah started pouting. Whoops, guess she was reading my mind.

“Right, I should get going then,” I said, making my excuses and moving to withdraw.

“Hey, Makoto?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

Noah slid closer. I didn’t even have time to think about what was going on before she’d kissed me on the forehead.

I froze.

“Your reward for the day,” she said, smiling, as she vanished.

Whoa. Whoa, whoa, hold on! I thought my heart was going to stop!

Even with *Calm Mind* going, my chest was pounding. That was bad for my constitution... The worst thing she’d done so far...

Oh well, I guess. I’d just take it as a reward for working hard.

◇

It started the day after the attack.

“Heyyy, the Fujiwara Company is providing meals.”

“That’s not all—they’ve also got clothes.”

“My kids are young, so this shop’s a lifesaver...”

“The employees are all cute beastgirls too! It’s so soothing.”

“Maybe I should sign up...”

“Men find it tough to get employed there.”

Horn was in the midst of recovering from the damage that the monsters had inflicted. The area where the giant had rampaged was the hardest hit, but some other large monsters had damaged houses, and many folks had nowhere to go at the moment.

The country and church were providing temporary lodging to those displaced, but there weren’t enough supplies to go around. Food and clothes were a particular issue. Luckily, the Fujiwara Company had noticed that void immediately and had stepped in.

It was a decision Fujiyan had made. *He’s a bit too efficient, don’t you think? Are we really the same age?*

Apparently, he’d left on the day of the attack and had returned soon after with his airship full of goods and volunteers ready to aid Horn. When other nobles and companies finally moved to provide their own help, the refugees had already been supplied by the Fujiwara Company.

“Fujiyan’s amazing!” Lucy exclaimed. She was watching some of the refugee children as they played.

“Okay, everyone, wait your turn!” Sasa cajoled as she handed out sweets. “No cutting in line.” She’d lived with four younger brothers back on Earth, hadn’t she? It seemed like she was pretty used to handling children.

Since Sasa was also good at cooking, she’d been volunteering with Nina at Fujiyan’s place, giving out food and dealing with the kids. She’d actually suggested that task for herself, as a way of helping out.

On the other end of things, Lucy and I had been working with the adventurers to clear the rubble and rebuild the capital. Magic was extremely convenient in this case since even the hugest chunks of wreckage could be floated away. However, neither Lucy nor I could use that type of spell, so we’d just steadily cleaned by hand. Also, the guild *was* paying us to do so.

Once Lucy and I had finished our job for the day, we went to fetch Sasa.

“And that’s all of them. Oh! Takatsuki, Lu!”

“Good work, Sasa,” I told her.

“You must be exhausted,” Lucy added.

“Nah, I love playing with the kids.” Despite working hard day after day, Sasa’s smile didn’t show any hint of fatigue. She sure was something.

“Let’s head back to the inn,” I suggested. “Fujiyan might turn up today.”

“It feels like Fujiwara’s been flitting around and working this whole time,” Sasa said.

“Should we talk to Nina?” I asked.

Sasa hummed for a moment, then answered, “She needs to keep an eye on the other employees.”

“That’s awful...” Lucy commented. “She’s going to be getting married soon.”

“Yeah.” Lucy and Sasa both looked sadly over at Nina.

That’s right...she was engaged to Fujiyan. So was Chris. It was crappy luck that she’d gotten caught up with so much work despite that.

“We should head back then, just us three,” I suggested.

“Yup.”

“Suuure.”

Since we were all finished, we went back to the inn.

That evening, we were joined by a joyous Fujiyan.

“Ah, we finally meet again,” he commented with a belly laugh.

Chris was slumped by his side.

“Are you okay, Chris’h?” Nina asked, concerned.

“Ah... Nina, it’s been a while,” Chris murmured in response.

Sasa spoke up with a smile on her face. “Thanks to Fujiwara, all the kids are happy, even without a home to return to.”

Fujiyan turned to Sasa and said, “I heard that you have been helping Lady Nina.”

“She’s been a star’h!” Nina exclaimed. “Miss Sasaki is wonderful with children’h.”

“Well, I used to look after my little brothers a bunch,” Sasa answered, shyly scratching the back of her head. Honestly, though, it was just as I’d expected—all of the kids in the city now admired her.

“Incidentally, my esteemed Tackie, I have heard tell of your exploits! So, you defeated another blight monster?!” I didn’t know where Fujiyan had heard that from, but apparently, he wanted to discuss what’d happened a few days ago.

“Hey, hey, you can’t just say that, Fujiyan. We defeated it together, along with the Hero of Ice and Snow and the other adventurers.”

I tried to play up the collaboration aspect. The rumors around town right now said that Prince Leonardo, the hero, had defeated the blight giant. If the messaging shifted and revealed that he’d been on the verge of defeat, despite being a hero chosen by the goddess, then the citizens would probably start losing sleep.

The royal family and the guild had both taken that into account and had adjusted their policies accordingly. Even the guild's leader had asked each of the adventurers who'd been present to keep a low profile. Of course, the royal family had also provided quite the sum of hush money.

"There you go again, Makoto! Giving away your achievements..." Lucy chided with a pained grin.

"That just makes it cooler though!" Sasa exclaimed. "He's like a hero, protecting people from the shadows."

"Right?" I answered. Sasa had a way with words.

"Besides, we defeated it because Princess Sophia was there, so I'm not giving away my own achievements. It's more like the Roses family defeated it."

"You used *Synchro* magic with the princess, right'h? You don't know what fear means, do you'h?" Nina's face was flustered.

I mean, it'd been an emergency, and that's just how it goes.

"That's the spell thing from before, isn't it?" Lucy asked. There was a conflicted look on her face, likely from her recalling our prior experiences.

"What happened?" asked Chris.

"I used it with Lucy and got burned all over," I replied.

"Right... That must've been difficult." Chris looked a bit surprised, but not exactly stunned.

"Hey, Lucy, gimme your hand."

"What? Why?" she asked, trying to move her hand out of my reach.

I managed to grab hold of it and then started the sync.

"Hawww!" Lucy twitched.

It suddenly felt like boiling water had been poured all over me. "Hot!" I let go in a hurry.

"Wh-What's the big idea?!" Lucy stammered.

"Sorry, sorry. My mastery went up, so I thought it might work... Guess not,

though. Not even slightly.” If anything, her magic felt even wilder now.

She had the *High Wizard* skill, which supposedly let her use fire, water, wood, and ground-aligned magic. Since she could technically control water, I *should've* been able to sync with her, but maybe we just weren't compatible.

Though...that would mean that Princess Sophia and I *were* compatible.

“Pervert,” Lucy mumbled at me, her cheeks flushed red.

“My bad,” I apologized. Synchronizing out of nowhere was probably a bit inconsiderate. I was just piling on the failures tonight.

“Hey, do me too,” Sasa said, grabbing my hand.

“You'd better not, Aya,” warned Lucy. “It gives you chills.”

“Don't worry about it!” Sasa was looking at me with excitement. She didn't have a mage skill, so I wondered how it would work.

“*Synchro,*” I said, but...nothing happened.

“I'm...just fine?” Sasa reported, her voice questioning.

Well, I suppose it made sense. Sasa was a close-quarters physical fighter, not a mage. “Hmm, guess you need a magic skill.”

“Aww, that's boring.”

Nina was next. “I have mid rank earth magic and low rank water magic'h,” she cheered, eagerly reaching out her hand.

Huh, so she has water magic. Not that I've ever seen her use it.

“Do you really want to use *Synchro* with Nina?”

Yes

▸**No**

What was this about? *RPG Player* hadn't popped up for Lucy or Sasa...

Nina's ears were bouncing with excitement in front of me.

Well, she'll be marrying Fujiyan, right? I wasn't entirely sure what had caused

the selection screen to appear, but I was pretty sure I shouldn't pick yes. For some reason, I had a bad feeling about it.

"Lucy has the *High Wizard* skill, but it just failed, so maybe not," I said as an excuse. "It's just not going well right now."

"I see'h..." Nina looked fairly sad about my refusal.

You missed your chance with her, said Noah in my mind.

Uh... What was that, goddess?!

I suppose there were some risks to the skill that I didn't know about. From now on, I'd need to be more careful.

We finished up our food and then just chatted over tea. It was peaceful. Having us all together again and interacting like this really made it feel like the city was calming back down.

"Incidentally, the whole tumult was caused by a cambion," Fujiyan told us.

"A cambion?" I asked.

"What's that?" Sasa didn't know either, then.

"'Cambion' is what we call the offspring of a demon and a human," Chris explained. "In the dark ages of the last millennium, demons ruled the land and kept humans as slaves, leading to many cambion being born. The ones alive today are the survivors from back then."

"They don't have a country of their own," Lucy added. "Well, they never did, actually. Their culture is more nomadic. Over the last thousand years, they've moved across the west and north continents. I've heard that a lot of them are staying in the ruins of Laphroaig..."

"Neither humans nor demons accept them'h," Nina said, giving a touch more explanation.

"Seems like there are race problems here too." I sighed. Guess all worlds were the same in some ways, depressingly enough.

"So, one of those cambions caused it?" Sasa asked.

“Indeed,” Fujiyan said. “In fact, we were able to investigate the circumstances and discover their hideout.”

Lucy, Sasa, and I gave a trio of shocked gasps. Fujiyan had managed to do all that while evacuating the city? What even *was* he?!

“That’s right’h! Husband found the culprit as we were escaping the attack’h.”

“I was terrified. I couldn’t help but worry that they might be stronger than you...” Though Nina was all excited to relay the story, Chris seemed slightly nervous.

“What then, what then?!” Sasa pressed. I was curious too.

“We simply delivered the culprit to the knights. It was nothing too extravagant,” Fujiyan answered with a laugh.

Chris looked astounded as she elaborated. “I can remember the cambion’s face now. When we handed it over, Mr. Fujiwara told the knights exactly where their hideout was located.” She turned to Fujiyan. “I have no idea when you managed to find that out...”

I see that his mind reading is still serving him well.

“Leaving the cambions unchecked might lead to this happening once more,” he explained. “I simply did what I needed to.”

That’s Fujiyan, all right... I was honestly just impressed.

The town might actually be more peaceful due to Fujiyan’s work behind the scenes rather than the efforts of adventurers. Regardless, we all celebrated the conclusion of this ordeal and had our own little party.

The next day, we were summoned to the palace.

Princess Sophia was waiting for us, looking cool, collected, and gorgeous.

Fujiyan had said that she’d been working nonstop. That had to be tough.

“Merchant Fujiwara. Your contribution to the city is extreme in two regards: not only did you donate goods and aid to our citizens, but you also apprehended the cambion working behind the scenes. Due to your actions,

many of our people still live.”

“I simply did what any citizen of Roses should do,” Fujiyan said, bowing his head politely. He was playing this well.

“Is there anything you desire?”

“I have recently become engaged to the daughter of Lord Macallan, Lady Christina.”

“I see,” she stated without any sign of surprise.

I was shocked that he would bring up something so important. But, I got an explanation a little later—a few days ago, when Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris had taken the airship back to Macallan for supplies and aid, they’d reported the betrothal to Chris’s family. Apparently, the three of them had been heavily questioned, but the state of emergency in Horn had allowed them to convince everyone quickly.

That must’ve been why Chris had seemed so listless...

“I ask one thing,” Fujiyan said to Princess Sophia. “If I am to receive a peerage or any land, I would like it to be based near Macallan.”

“Very well,” answered the princess. “I shall make the preparations with that in mind. You will be informed of the details before too long.”

“Thank you, Your Highness.”

Well, that was all sorted. Now Fujiyan would be a noble, *and* he’d have two wives.

He’d advanced so far from where we’d all started in this world... It almost felt like he was but a distant glimmer. It was bizarre, like an old friend I’d fallen out of contact with had ended up as a startup CEO or something. Or, maybe not...?

“Next, Makoto Takatsuki.”

“Yes?” I stepped forward.

“By defeating the blight monster, you have served the country well.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say after a moment.

Officially, Prince Leonardo had done it. So...could I admit the truth here? No

one reacted negatively to the princess's words, and the prince himself had sparkling eyes as he looked at me. I suppose everyone here was trusted, and the gag order was more of a general thing for the citizens.

The princess took a slight breath. She was staring steadily at me, almost glaring. But...just as I thought that, I noticed her eyes were watering. She wasn't glaring, then.

Is she...nervous?

I waited quietly for what she'd say. Silence reigned in the hall for several seconds, and then, she opened her mouth.

"Makoto Takatsuki, I wish to bestow the title 'Hero of Roses' upon you."

Uh...you what?

Chapter 5: Makoto Takatsuki Makes a Choice

There were two types of heroes in this world.

First, there were heroes created by the goddesses. Sakurai, the Hero of Light, and Prince Leonardo, the Hero of Ice and Snow, were among this group and had been blessed with hero skills by the goddesses.

Second, there were heroes chosen by a country. These were called State-Authorized Heroes. They were often adventurers with great skills or knights that served the country. For example, the winner of the yearly combat competition in Great Keith always became their hero.

Countries sanctioned heroes so that they could keep strong people affiliated with the nation. Roses currently had *no* State-Authorized Heroes.

I never really thought it would have anything to do with me...

“Makoto Takatsuki.”

Hearing my name called me back to my senses. *Damn, the shock had me lost in thought for a minute...*

“Y-You want me to be a hero?” I stammered. “But...”

This was something I’d never expected. I’d thought that I might gain some monetary reward, or maybe a title... But heroes were more than just titles—they were symbols of their country’s peace and were not permitted to lose or falter. The responsibility of a hero...was a heavy one.

“You are not required to accept,” stated Princess Sophia.

Oh, I wasn’t? It’d definitely felt that way.

In which case, if I refused...

“But,” she continued, “should you become a hero, Roses will shoulder the charges for your bed and board, as well as your equipment.”

S-Seriously?! Whoa! It’s like being a diplomat!

“You will also receive a stipend of ten million gald each year.”

It came with a salary?! Things were getting more concerning.

What was a state hero expected to do?

“As a rule, heroes participate in countermeasures against the Great Demon Lord. Our nation’s current proposal is called the Northern Front Plan. At present, there are no pressing requirements for you.”

Huh? Really? That felt a bit too good to be true. This whole “Northern Front Plan” was weighing on me as well.

“Roses’s State-Authorized Hero would normally live within Horn, but since you seem fond of Macallan, we would have no issue with you remaining there. However, there is also a facility for your lodging within the palace.”

It seemed like she’d thought of everything...

But...I was a disciple of the Wicked Deity Noah. If I became Roses’s hero, I’d have to convert to following their goddess...

Right, can’t do that. I’d have to refuse.

But then, I heard Noah’s voice in my mind. *Makoto, you can accept. I’ll discuss things with Eir.*

Wait... She could do that? I thought the Sacred Deities were her enemies.

Just leave it to me. Eir’s a good girl—she listens. You won’t need to convert.

I supposed that was the relationship between the divinities? I wasn’t entirely sure, though.

Still...now I had Noah’s permission.

I looked behind me at Lucy and Sasa. Lucy seemed emotional, and her eyes were watering, while Sasa was smiling the same way she always did. Their reactions didn’t really help. As for my other friends, Nina and Chris were both wearing expressions of shock. However, Fujiyan looked conflicted.

Is he against it?

Fujiyan shook his head at me. Guess he’d read my mind and responded to my mental question. That meant he was fine with me accepting, right? Still...there

must be something concerning him.

“Makoto Takatsuki...an immediate decision is not required here. You may take time to consider our proposition in more depth.”

Too kind! But what should I do now? Because, well, my options weren’t great...

I could tell her, “*I’ll consider it back at the inn*,” and then, several days later, come back and say, “*I thought it over, but I’ll pass*.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen. It’d be too rude. If I was going to turn her down, it had to be now. In other words, I needed to make up my mind right here.

Just then, *RPG Player* activated.

```
Will you become the Hero of Roses?
Yes
No
```

The option appeared on the selection screen, and seeing it caused some hazy memories and feelings to bubble up within my mind.

There was a game that I’d loved as a kid, a remake of a famous RPG. The protagonist was a hero. This hero was given a pittance of money and a torch from the king and was then sent on his way, lacking any companions.

He was alone as he fought monsters and raised his level. He stood against dragons, rescued a princess, defeated the demon lord, and saved the world. He was so cool.

As a kid, I’d wanted to be a hero.

But now, I was a high schooler, so those childish dreams were behind me.

Actually... Maybe I’m wrong.

At the beginning of our time in this world, I’d been jealous of Sakurai and my other classmates. They had strong stats and skills, and I’d wanted the same.

Bigwigs from different counties had scouted my classmates, and I'd watched them leave one after another. I hadn't been able to sleep because of my envy, so I'd sometimes stayed up all night practicing my magic. Throughout that time, I'd suffered, focusing on my training at the Water Temple.

It wasn't that far back...but it almost feels like another lifetime ago.

But now, a beautiful princess was standing before me. The same person that had refused to offer me a blessing back then.

And now, she wanted me to be a hero.

I'd be fully supported, and Roses would cheerily give me money and equipment. On top of that, I had reliable comrades and even a goddess that would give me advice if I got stuck.

I was currently in a far better position than that hero from the RPG.

Guess this world's not a shovelware title...?

Hang on. I'm the focus of all this, but I'm not exactly strong, am I?

I didn't want any presumptions made about my abilities—as a mage apprentice, I could only use beginner-level magic. The protagonist from the game had the hero's bloodline, after all. That's why he was strong enough to defeat the demon lord on his own.

I...wasn't.

But, still... I had the opportunity to become a hero. Could I live with myself if I turned down the chance?

No. I couldn't. All my thoughts seemed jumbled like my mind wasn't working.

Luckily, I had a rule for times like these.

"Princess Sophia."

"Y-Yes, what is it?" she asked, a nervous look on her face.

When we'd first met, I hadn't been able to deal with her, but she seemed completely different now.

Will you become Roses's Hero?

▸**Yes**

No

As for my rule... When I didn’t know which choice to make, I always went for the hardest difficulty.

“I will gladly accept the title of hero,” I declared.

After all, I’ll get much better loot this way, right?

Princess Sophia took a sharp intake of breath before smiling slightly. “I see. Then, from this day forth, you will be the Hero of Roses.”

More than anything else, I felt that the hardest option was always more fun. This was my conviction, and I usually stood by it.

“Hero Makoto,” Princess Sophia called, giving me confirmation of my official title. Hearing it said like that made me feel kinda fidgety. It was embarrassing.

“Yes, Princess Sophia?”

“I have something else to discuss with you. Would you come to my room later?”

“R-Right, got it.”

What was it? Some lecture about what it meant to be a hero? That seemed likely...

“Makoto, this is amazing!” Lucy exclaimed. “You’re a hero now!”

“I mean, I’m just being paid for it, you know?”

“It’s incredible! This is the best day we could ask for,” Chris added.

I supposed I hadn’t realized until now just how important heroes were in this world.

“Good job, Takatsuki!” Sasa cheered. *Yeah...I’m not sure she really gets it.*

“My esteemed Tackie... If I may ask, what happened with Princess Sophia?”

“What?”

That was a strange question from Fujiyan.

“What do you mean, what happened?” I pressed.

“Well, Her Highness seems to have changed her tune rather significantly...” Fujiyan said.

Changed her tune? How? I guess she did seem a bit softer.

Nina’s sharp ears caught on to what Fujiyan was telling me. “Mister Takatsuki, Princess Sophia summoned you, didn’t she’h? You need to make sure you’re not careless this time’h...”

“Nina, what do you mean by, ‘this time?’” Chris asked.

“He fought with her in Labyrinthos.”

“What?!”

Come on, Nina, I won’t do that again. I’ve grown up.

Suddenly, a yell came from behind us. “Hero! My congratulations on your appointment!”

I turned around and saw the former bodyguard. “Old-timer! Glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Sir! You honor me!”

“Would you...speak a bit more normally?” I asked. The haughty tone he’d previously used with me was fine, but I just couldn’t settle down around him when he spoke so reverently.

“The difference in our positions must be clear though...” he said.

Well, that made sense—the old-timer was focused on physical feats, had a strong sense of hierarchy, and was super serious. There seemed to be a lot of people in Roses like that. I now felt kind of bad for having him pulled from his role as a bodyguard.

Maybe I should ask Princess Sophia to take him back?

Prince Leonardo was standing beside the old-timer, and he spoke up with enthusiasm. “Makoto, let’s do our best together as heroes of Roses!”

“Oh, Prince Leonardo. You’re right. Let’s work hard.” Since he and I were both heroes that would protect the country, I’d have to give it my all.

“I can show you to sister’s room,” he offered.

“No!” exclaimed the former bodyguard. “A prince should not need to act as a guard! We shall guide him.”

A lot of the people that worked in the palace were nearby, so eventually, one of the knights showed me the way.

“Princess Sophia!” the knight called when we arrived. “I have brought Sir Makoto, Hero of Roses!”

“Show him through.”

“Excuse me...” I said softly as I entered Princess Sophia’s room. The knight remained outside. She was alone inside. In other words, it was just the two of us.

“Please, take a seat,” she said, gesturing to some chairs that sat around an expensive-looking glass table. Atop the table were cookies and such, and on one side, there was a teapot with two teacups.

With practiced movements, the princess poured us some tea. *Wasn’t that usually something maids did, rather than the princess herself...?*



Regardless, I sank down into the soft chair. Unlike when I sat on the benches in Macallan's guild, I couldn't relax here. I took the offered cup and inhaled the sweet scent drifting up from it.

"Drink, by all means," the princess told me.

"Thank you," I responded, taking a sip. It...was delicate. Definitely top-quality, and it tasted good, but I couldn't specify *what* was good or bad about it.

"Hero Makoto," she said, fixing me with a piercing stare.

"Y-Yes?" I replied, straightening.

"I want to again offer my thanks. And I ask that you forgive my rudeness at the Water Temple."

She was bowing deeply to me... *Err, what?*

"Uh...Princess Sophia, you don't need to worry about the past." The only feeling I had in response to her deep bow...was guilt about my own behavior.

"You are a kind person," she said, raising her head and giving that slight smile of hers.

Yeah, that's better.

"You look nicer with a smile."

"What?"

Ack, I said it out loud!

"Ah, nothing! Excuse me..." Argh, I'd screwed up somehow. She was glaring at me again.

But, hang on, her face looks kinda red... Is she embarrassed? No way.

I decided to change the topic.

"Are you sure you want me as a hero?" I asked.

"You defeated the blight giant and saved the capital. A monster that Leo could not bring down, despite being a hero. It is only natural that you be offered the same title."

"Well, you and I destroyed it together, didn't we?"

“Together...” she mused. “I suppose so. Does it weigh on you?”

“Not at all. I’ll get strong enough to be worthy of my title.”

Essentially, I just needed the power to defeat a blight giant on my own. I would train hard. Plus, Noah had recently taught me a new way of using elemental magic.

“Then I shall put my faith in you.”

“Right, leave it to me.”

She smiled again. Yup, she was cuter like this.

“Incidentally, Hero Makoto. Speaking of my protection...would you perhaps...be willing—”

Oh, right, I needed to ask her about that.

I cut her off mid-sentence. “Princess Sophia, would you take that former bodyguard back? I feel bad that he lost his role because of me.”

She gave a long pause.

“Very well.”

Uh? She didn’t seem happy. Did I say something weird? I’m sure I didn’t.

I heard a long sigh in my mind. What’s with the theatrics, Noah?

You don’t understand women, do you?

I-I don’t? But that old-timer’s defense was incredible.

That’s not what I mean.

Then what *did* Noah mean? I’d have to ask Fujiyan later.

The princess sat in front of me, still glaring with a slightly sulky look on her face. They weren’t the same cold eyes that’d looked down on me before, though.

“Leo wanted to talk to you. It appears that Highland has summoned you as well, but in regards to the date that they expect you, there is some leeway. Please stay in Horn for the time being.”

“I-I will.”

That's right... We'd been heading off to Highland before all of this. Now that I'd become a hero, I'd first have to stay here and learn for a while.

The conversation between us dried up, and so we gazed wordlessly at each other.

Hmm, I guess we're done then. Still, this had been easier than I'd expected. Maybe I should close the distance between us like Noah had suggested. After all, we'd be working in the same place and she was my superior now.

I held out my right hand to her.

"Uh, what are you...?"

"I look forward to working with you," I said, simultaneously realizing that asking a royal for a handshake might be rude. I couldn't take it back now, though.

After a slight hesitation, she answered, "Likewise." Her grip was tight, almost painful. We clasped hands for a while, looking each other in the eye.

"Thank you for the tea," I said.

"Indeed..."

I let go of her hand and then exited the room. *That was tough.* At some point, I should ask Fujiyan for tips on interacting with noblewomen.

As I stepped out of the room, the waiting soldier closed the door. Muffled behind it, I heard a soft thump, like someone had dived onto a bed.

Wordlessly, the soldier and I exchanged glances.

"Lady Sophia, is there an issue?" he asked.

"Not in the slightest," came the aloof response. Maybe the sound had been my imagination.

I bid my farewell to the knight and then headed back to my friends.

◇ Christina's Perspective ◇

"Mister Takatsuki is just as incredible as you said, husband'h!" Nina's ears were bouncing in happiness.

“My, Nina, are you not happy that Sir Fujiwara is now part of the nobility?” I asked teasingly. This kind of interaction used to be much more difficult.

“Ah! I’m sorry’h!”

“Not at all,” Sir Fujiwara answered. “I am equally as proud that my friend was bestowed the title. There will now be a hero living in Macallan, and this will help develop the city. Am I right, Lady Chris?”

“You are quite correct.”

A hero’s name carried a vast weight. That was doubly true now since people were uneasy due to rumors of the Great Demon Lord’s resurrection. There were already doomsayers heralding a return to the dark ages when humanity was enslaved by demons.

Everyone was afraid, and desperation caused more fringe ideas to become commonplace; there were rising numbers of people who believed in heretical religions outside the realm of the goddesses, and an uptick in drug users partaking in weed to relieve fear. Therefore, a hero in Macallan would make the town seem safe, and swathes of people would want to move in. It was the same phenomenon that had happened in every country’s capital—the towns that housed heroes were all huge and developed.

So, if Macallan becomes home to a hero...

“We are going to be busy indeed,” Sir Fujiwara commented, almost as if he could read my thoughts.

“We are.”

Huge numbers of people would be flooding into Macallan. It was our chance to grow!

“You look happy’h,” said Nina.

“You will be just as busy as the rest of us, so bear that in mind!” She and I laughed together.

“Ah, Makoto’s back,” I heard Lucy say.

It seemed like the hero of the hour had returned.

“Takatsuki, how was it?” Sasaki asked.

“Hmm, we just talked,” he said, scratching his cheek. This man had just been appointed as a state hero, and now he was here.

He doesn’t look *all that strong...* And yet...he’d already triumphed over blight monsters twice.

Everyone from the otherworld was incredible.

“What did you talk about?” Lucy pressed.

“Uh, I just told her that I’d do my best as a hero, I guess? She wants us to stay in Horn for a while. Oh, and she made me some tea.”

“Hmm, that’s pretty normal.”

“Right?”

What?! I thought in shock as I registered what he had said. “Mr. Takatsuki! Princess Sophia herself served you tea?!” I demanded.

“Y-Yeah, she did. Is there an issue with that, Christina?”

“Maybe it’s rude to have a princess do that?” Lucy suggested.

“Yeah, but...”

“No, Lucy,” I interrupted. “Not at all...” I glanced around the rest of our group and found that I was the only one surprised.

“Is something the matter, Lady Chris?” asked Sir Fujiwara.

“What’s up, Chris’h?”

“N-No, it is nothing,” I answered. “I was simply surprised...” Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. It would be best to keep it to myself.

A woman of Roses inviting a man to her room and preparing the tea herself...meant that she had feelings for him. It was an old custom of Roses’s noblewomen. Though, it was obsolete, so not many people would indicate attraction in this way anymore. However, my tutors had taught me about the practice, and I’d been warned against doing so to avoid giving a man the wrong impression.

Princess Sophia would likely have had the best tutors in the country, so she would, of course, know of this custom. In other words, it had been intentional.

She had feelings for the Hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki. A chill ran down my spine.

I must avoid any possible rudeness toward him.

“You look terrified, Chris’h,” Nina said, glancing at me with worry.

“There is no problem,” I managed to say.

That’s right, no problem at all. Still, this situation was beyond me... *I will need to discuss this with Sir Fujiwara, and with Nina too,* I decided seriously.

The state hero of Roses, Makoto Takatsuki...may end up as Princess Sophia’s lover.

◇ Makoto Takatsuki’s Perspective ◇

“My esteemed Tackie. I offer my deepest apologies, but I must return to Macallan for a time.”

“We’ll be back in a few days’h,” Nina added.

They had been staying in the capital to assist with the repairs, but they’d be going back to Macallan for a while. While they did, Lucy, Sasa, and I would remain here. Fortunately, the princess had prepared a place for us to stay.

The only thing bothering me was Chris’s behavior.

She knew full well that Fujiyan and I were friends, but she still kept a sense of distance between us.

“Sir Takatsuki, upon your return to Macallan, I shall prepare the best lodgings I can, along with a fare cooked by our finest chefs,” Chris told me. “You may have whatever you desire!”

“S-Seriously, just something normal’s fine.” She was being pretty attentive... Guess my hero title was putting in *work*.

I’d need to make sure I didn’t get carried away...

The next day, I offered my prayers to Noah and then went out for my morning

training. I chose to practice in the garden with the biggest fountain. *Still, there are almost no elementals around...*

Well, this *was* Roses Castle, so that wasn't much of a surprise. Deciding to take Noah's advice, I turned off my *Calm Mind* skill.

"Elementals," I called, hoping to get a feel for the magic without *Calm Mind* active.

Mana swirled around me.

"*Water Magic: Waterball.*"

An armful's worth of water shot from my right hand.

"Yeah...it's not all that different..."

Maybe I was doing something wrong. Or maybe there just weren't enough elementals around here. It could even be some influence of the Sacred Deities since they were stronger in the capital.

As I pondered it all, I heard a voice ask, "Hero?"

I turned around to see the former bodyguard standing there. Wait, not "former" anymore.

"Oh, good morning," I replied.

"You begin your training early. I admire your determination."

"So do you," I said. "The patrols must require a lot of effort."

"Indeed. We never know when a monster may appear, so there is a twenty-four-hour watch."

That seemed meticulous. *Maybe I should help too.* After all, I was employed by the country as a hero.

"Incidentally, my role as a bodyguard has been restored, thanks to you! You have my gratitude!"

"Well, it was your job to begin with."

"Members of my family have served as Roses's shield for generations. You have allowed me to regain my honor!"

Urgh... So the role I'd taken from him had been really important. I felt so guilty...

However, he didn't seem to notice my regret. He let out a laugh, and his gaze turned toward the garden, which, like all the other gardens around the castle, was in bloom year-round.

"These spaces are wonderful, no matter how many times I see them."

"Yeah, they're pretty," I replied.

To be honest, I'd only checked the garden for elementals since I didn't really care about flowers...but when I took another look, it certainly was a sight to behold.

"We must all do our utmost to protect these places." He spoke softly while almost caressing a flower. There was something surreal about seeing a big burly man doing something so delicate, but I decided to keep my mouth shut and not poke fun.

He was more of a romantic than I'd expected.

"When the Great Demon Lord returns, I shall stand as your shield."

"I'm glad to hear it." After all, my defenses were like tissue paper, while the old-timer had walked away after taking a blight giant's blow—it would be a huge relief to have him as my shield.

I was still unsure about my strength, and also about what my job as a hero actually entailed, but I figured that I should work together with as many strong people as possible.

As I pondered that, something else came to mind. "Hey, that reminds me, what's this 'Northern Front Plan' that Princess Sophia mentioned?"

Working on that was apparently my first duty as a hero.

"Oh! The plan!" exclaimed the bodyguard. "Hero, are you aware that there is a separate continent from the one we reside on? It lies to the north of us, while we are situated relatively to the west."

"Uh, I know of it," I answered, thinking back to my lessons in the Water Temple. "From what I've heard, the northern continent is home to a lot of

demons and monsters.”

“That’s right. Of the nine demon rulers that once served the Great Demon Lord, three remain. Those demons have dominion over the northern continent.”

I’d heard about that. The land to the north was often called “the demon continent.”

With that context in place, I had some idea about what the plan might involve. “So, then, the Northern Front Plan...”

“Is to preemptively defeat the demon rulers on the northern continent before the Great Demon Lord returns,” finished the bodyguard.

“Oooh...”

It made sense. The Great Demon Lord’s return was *their* problem—there was no need for the human races to stand around waiting.

Still, exterminating demon rulers! What a prospect. I was getting excited. As a lover of RPGs, something in this plan called to me. However, my current strength wouldn’t be enough, so I’d have to master elemental magic.

“Hero, are you not scared?” the bodyguard asked with a strange look.

“What? Well, I don’t know how powerful these demons are, but I’ll have to train my magic and grow stronger.”

“You seem to be looking forward to it...?” questioned the bodyguard. “Even so, it is heartening to hear you say that.”

Apparently, I looked like I was excited about the impending battle... That wasn’t good...

“Alas, I must return to my patrol,” the old-timer told me.

“Sure. Thanks for all the information.” With that said, I returned to my training.

Though, I still wished that he would speak to me casually, like before.

Makoto, things are going well in Roses.

“You seem to be in a good mood, Noah.”

I spoke with the water goddess, Eir. She’s happy to have you as a hero. Roses has no strong fighters, so she’s honestly overjoyed.

I sighed. “So you can talk with the Sacred Deities.” I’d thought that the wicked gods and the Sacred Deities were enemies.

It was an old war. Why shouldn’t we be able to speak after all this time?

“Well, I guess you’re right...” If enemy nations couldn’t ever communicate after a war, then no one would be able to talk with anyone else. Since the war between the gods had happened so long ago, it seemed that they felt no animosity in speaking to one another.

That’s how it is, said Noah, confirming my thoughts. *But you can’t have her blessing, so you’ll have to make do without it.*

“I wouldn’t be that greedy. Yours is more than enough.”

Good boy. Now, do your bessst... Noah replied, her voice fading away.

“Hmm...” I folded my arms and looked up at the sky.

The Northern Front Plan... The demon continent... Exterminating the demonic rulers...

Did those things align with what I should be doing as Noah’s (a wicked deity’s) disciple? Fighting *against* demons felt a bit contradictory to the “wicked” label. The plan also felt a bit roundabout, but it also seemed like an easier path.

Besides, I’ve got no save or reload. There wouldn’t be any save-scumming here. Well, I’d just have to train as hard as I could.

Me, a hero... How would this go?

I thought I heard someone giggling, but maybe it was my imagination.

Chapter 6: Makoto Takatsuki Makes Preparations

I had a dream. For once, it was just a dream, and not a vision of Noah.

Higashishinagawa, Shinagawa City, Tokyo. I was in a room in a low apartment. The room was plain, with no real decoration. In other words, it was my room. A boy and a girl were inside.

“Hey, your parents are never home,” commented the girl, Sasa. This dream was a recollection of when we used to play games back in junior high.

“They both work, so they don’t get home until late. That’s why I like games so much.”

She paused for a moment. “Doesn’t it get lonely?”

“Not really. It’s always been this way, so I’m used to it.” Even when they were home, we never spoke much. I preferred being on my own.

“You’ve got three little brothers, right?” I asked her.

“Four,” she corrected. “They’re so noisy.”

“Do you get along, though? I’m an only child, so I don’t really get what it’s like.”

“More or less. They used to love me, but now they won’t play games with me.” She pouted.

“So that’s why you come here. Aren’t there any girls that game?”

“There are...but none of them like the same action games I do.”

“I’m not that great at action games either, though,” I said.

“It’s fine. I like your RPGs too.”

“Guess so.” Before Sasa, I’d thought that I liked playing alone...but then, I’d realized that playing with another person was also fun.

Sasa was currently at my side, munching on pocky. She loved sweet things, so she always had snacks like that. If I had to choose, I preferred savory stuff like

chips, so we split our snacks.

“Say, don’t you think you spend too long getting ready for the boss battle?” Sasa asked. “You’ve got all the weapons and armor, and so many items.”

“Do I? I thought it was normal.”

“Wellll, I figured you’d give the boss a shot first to see if you were strong enough. If you get wiped out, you can always use a continue.”

“I hate playing like that.”

“Hmm.”

When playing RPGs, I did my best to never get a game over. Sasa found it annoying to watch, but her playstyle, by contrast, assumed that she’d be using continues.

“Hey, if you beat him, we’re playing mine next,” Sasa declared.

“Got it.”

I’d have a game, Sasa would bring a game, and we would take turns playing them. We’d always done that since our first year of middle school.

In my game, I made it through the dungeon and entered the boss room.

“This is the boss room! Are you ready?”

Yes

▸No

Anime-style portraits of the protagonist and the cute heroine were bantering on-screen. The heroine had huge eyes and enormous breasts, and she wore fairly exposing clothes.

Lately, I’ve noticed that girls in games are all designed for sex appeal.

Maybe my thoughts showed on my face.

“So, is this the kind of girl you like?” Sasa asked.

“No,” I answered after a pause.

“She’s cute, though. Are you *sure*?” she needled, poking me in the side with a grin.

“Sure, she’s got big tits, and she’s cute... ’Cause she’s got big tits.” I glanced at Sasa. When we’d been in our second year of junior high, Sasa’s chest had been extremely modest. Unfortunately, it hadn’t changed much, even in our first year of high school.

“Why are you looking at me?” she asked softly.

“I don’t mind a smaller chest,” I remarked with a smile.

“I’ll kill you, Takatsuki.”

“Hey, no violence!”

She hit me. It hurt.

Still, that was fine. Payback was served, and I challenged the boss. I’d been extremely prepared, so I won without much issue. Once I saved, I quit the game.

“Okay, so next we’re playing this!” Sasa cheered, whipping out a game.

“Oh! That only came out yesterday, didn’t it?”

“My brother bought it, and I borrowed it to bring here!”

“Your poor little brother.” It seemed like a common thing that happened when you had older siblings. I’d seen the same thing play out all the time in junior high. That took me back.

Then, everything started getting hazy. I figured I was about to wake up. Why did I have that dream?

Now that I think about it, the heroine kinda looked like Lucy, I thought, just before I regained consciousness.

“It’s morning?” I asked blearily. This was the Hero of Roses’s room. My room.

I’d stayed the night here. The bed was, what, a king-size? Well, it was huge, around three times bigger than my bed back on Earth.

As I rubbed my eyes, Sasa came into the room. “Takatsuki! We found a great

crepe place in town!” She still liked her sweet stuff. Also, she didn’t look much different than she had in the dream. Strange, considering that she’d actually reincarnated as a monster.

That’s right—the dream had reminded me of something important. Recently, I’d just been training on my own. That was wrong, though. We were a party, so we should all aim to work together as much as possible. I also needed to buy the best gear and items that I could.

After all, that was my playstyle.

“Sasa, let’s go shopping!” I exclaimed.

“Hmm?” She cocked her head sideways like a little bird. *Really, she hasn’t changed much since junior high.*

“Wow, for a minute, I almost thought you were taking me out on a date,” Sasa griped.

“It’s kinda like that, isn’t it?” I asked.

“You don’t go to a weapons shop on a date!”

She really wasn’t happy. I needed to do something.

“Then, what do you want to go for?” I asked.

We were in a weapons shop with swords, axes, and spears. The product range here was way bigger than it was in Macallan, and if I showed my identification as a hero, the royal family would pay for my gear. This was great!

“Hmm... Bladed weapons aren’t exactly my thing...” Sasa muttered with a conflicted look.

“Oh? What do you mean?” I asked.

Turns out, there was a sensible reason for it: while I loved fantasy to begin with, Sasa was a more normal high school girl, so she didn’t want to be swinging swords or knives around. That made sense. She hadn’t been given much choice while living in Labyrinthos, but now that she was on the surface, she also didn’t want to actively pick up a blade and kill monsters. If you cut them, they’d bleed, and she didn’t want to see blood. That’s why she’d rather fight barehanded.

“There are monsters like that blight giant that you can’t touch with your body,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, you’re right...”

That thing had been covered in lava. There was no way anyone could’ve hit it without a weapon.

We both sighed in unison.

“Let’s check out some other gear and items,” I suggested.

“Sure. Sorry, Takatsuki.”

“It’s fine. There’s no point in forcing you to fight with a weapon you’re uncomfortable with.”

And so, we bought her a complete set of fighter gear and some accessories enchanted for defense. As for me, I got bucketloads of recovery items. The royal family’d be picking up the bill anyway.

This was great.

“Makoto, you and Aya are back?” I’d bumped into Prince Leonardo on the way to my room.

“Yup. We just went shopping around the town. What have you been up to?”

“I was training magic with Lucy.”

“She didn’t cause you any issues, did she?” I asked hesitantly.

Lucy had said she was training magic today, so I was just a little worried she’d lose control in the castle grounds.

Her fireball would burn the gardens to ashes...

“It was fine,” he said, laughing. “She just got a little manasick, so she’s resting in her room.”

“I see. I’ll go and check on her later.”

Lucy was pushing herself too hard. I’d have to tell her to dial it back a bit.

“What did the two of you buy?” asked the prince.

“Uh, clothes and items, I guess. We bought a whole bunch!” Sasa exclaimed. She seemed happy, but she was also right in front of a member of the royal family. In other words, she was excitedly discussing the money she’d spent in front of the person footing the bill.

“I really wanted to check out the weapons, but we didn’t find anything suitable in the shops,” I explained.

My words caused Prince Leonardo’s face to shine. “In that case, would you like to see our vault? As our hero, you and your companions are welcome to use things from it.”

For real?!

“I’d love to!” I answered immediately.

Sasa was bouncing in place, her body language saying much the same.

“This way, then.”

We should have talked to him to begin with!

He led us to the vault beneath the castle. The huge metal doors squealed open to reveal a dim room.

“It’s kinda...musty,” Sasa commented.

“Yeah...but there’s so much mana in the weapons and armor,” explained the prince. “They’re all enchanted.”

The huge stone room was lined with countless weapons. Selling just one of them would probably earn you enough to buy a house.

“You can look at any of it, but make sure you talk to me before you touch anything,” warned Prince Leonardo. “Things covered with chains or cloth are cursed and have been sealed, so take care.”

“Cursed?!” Sasa exclaimed, yanking her hand back. She’d been right about to touch something... *Phew, that was close.*

I gave the room my full attention as I peered around. Soon, my eyes fell upon a single magic blade. There was a chill coming off it, and it was shining with mana.

“Prince Leonardo, what’s this?” I asked.

“That is a magic blade, an ice sword. Do you want to touch it?”

“So this is an ice sword...” *My dreams...* “Can I?”

“Go ahead,” he said with a smile.

I pulled the blade from its sheath, and it shone a pale white. So this was a magic sword... It was extremely heavy. *S-Seriously?! I can barely lift it...*

I staggered slightly beneath the weight.

“Are you okay, Takatsuki?” Sasa asked, trying to hold me up.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Was it...too heavy?” Leonardo asked with a rueful smile.

“I guess it’s not suited for me,” I responded, putting it back.

My dreams...crushed to smithereens.

“Prince, what’s this?”

Apparently, Sasa had found something.

“Is that a hammer?” I wondered. It had the shape of one, at least, but looked more like one of those squeaky mallets rather than a tool a carpenter would use. It appeared to be made of metal, but the glimmer it exuded meant that it was probably also enchanted. Was it mythril? Despite being a hammer, it was cute... *Just what Sasa likes best.*

“Whaaat?!” the prince exclaimed in shock.

“What’s wrong?”

“A-Aya! You can lift that with one hand?!”

“Uh? Is there something wrong with that?” She gave the hammer a few test swings. Was that a magic weapon as well?

“Can I try?” I asked, holding out my hand.

“Sure,” she said. “It’s a bit heavy, though.”

“Hmm, let’s have—ahhh!” She passed the hammer over with one hand, and

the moment I grabbed it, I was dragged to the floor with a thud.

Wh-What the hell?!

“Makoto, that’s the Fierce Deity’s Hammer. A hero wielded it a thousand years ago, but it’s so heavy that no one has used it since.”

“That’s *too* much.” It was small, but dense, like it weighed at least a hundred kilos.

“I’ll show you what it really looks like... Let’s see, you spin this and...” He twisted the handle around several times.

The two of us gasped.

In seconds, the hammer had grown to a ridiculous length, at least two meters long. So, this weapon’s size could be changed at will. That thing’s gotta weigh a lot more than a hundred kilos.

And Sasa had waved it around one-handed...

“Oooh, that seems fun. It’s super cute too.”

“Cute?”

Sasa was currently swinging the hammer around again.

Watch out, Sasa!

“I-If it is to your liking, then you can have it. I will inform my sister,” the prince said, backing away slightly.

“What do you want to do, Sasa?”

“Yeah, I’ll take this,” she agreed, twisting the handle back and making it shrink again.

“At its smallest size, it can be worn as an accessory and is much lighter,” Prince Leonardo explained. “When you aren’t using it as a weapon, you can carry it like this.”

“Sure thing.”

That was pretty convenient, though there weren’t many people that could use it.

At least Sasa seemed to like it.

I parted with Sasa and decided to go train my magic. While I was headed to my room, I came across a certain red-headed elf who was swaying on her feet.

“Lucy?”

“Oh, Makoto...?” Her clothes were in disarray...it was kinda hot. *Wait,* not *the time.*

“I heard you used too much magic and got manasick. You okay?”

“Yeah... I’ll be fine if I just lay down a bit,” she mumbled, gazing at me with hazy eyes. She looked like she was still half asleep.

“You shouldn’t train *too* much,” I told her.

“But *you* train all the time,” she grumbled with a pout.

I suppose she’s right. “Well, I’m heading back to my room right now to do some training. Want to come with?” I hoped to have a chat with her anyway.

“To your room?! S-Sure,” she answered, eyes wide open. I guess she must’ve woken up a bit.

I made it to my room and stepped inside, beckoning Lucy after me.

“E-Excuse me...” she said.

“What’re you being so uptight for?” I asked, watching her cautiously enter the room. Seriously, when’d she get like this?

“I mean, this is the first time I’ve been in your room...”

“Hmm, is it?” Back in Macallan, I’d stayed at the guild, which hadn’t really afforded me my own private space. This was the first room in this world that was *mine*. Still, it was a room in Roses’s castle. It was borrowed, more like a hotel room, so I didn’t feel any ownership over it.

Oh well, forget all of that.

“Sit down around there,” I told her, gesturing.

“R-Right.”

She sat on the bed, and I sank down beside her. We were alone in the room,

and here in front of me was a short-skirted beauty... *Wait, begone, unclean thoughts!* I cleared my mind and turned to face her with a serious expression.

"Lucy, would you consider taking a break from practicing magic to learn some other skills?"

"Eh, why?"

"When the blight monster appeared, none of the mages could cast anything, could they? If you learn *Calm Mind*, it'll come in handy next time."

Come to think of it, maybe it'd be better if every mage and adventurer in the country learned it. At some point, I'd have to discuss this with Princess Sophia or Prince Leonardo.

"Makoto...*Calm Mind* is a rare skill, isn't it?"

"Wha?" *Huh? It is?*

"There are a lot of skills that stabilize emotions, but *Calm Mind* is a high-level one. The only thing I could learn would probably be *Serenity*."

Huh, I hadn't known that. "Let's go with *Serenity* then. I use *Calm Mind* all the time, and it kept my concentration up during the battle, I think."

"You use it...all day?" Lucy was looking at me like I was some bizarre creature. "In that case, it probably has a similar effect to *Concentration*... I guess using those skills to train might work well."

"I haven't paid much attention to that aspect of it, but maybe it does have that effect." I'd just been using the skill to stave off my unease as my classmates left the Water Temple one after another. *Calm Mind* must offer a secondary focusing effect too.

Lucy seemed to perk up. "Yeah, you might be onto something there! So far, I've been going full tilt into magic, but if I learn *Serenity* and *Concentration* first, I might do better! Thanks, Makoto."

"No worries." Hopefully, she'd be able to fight alongside us the next time a blight monster showed up. Sasa also had a weapon now. There were plenty of things for our party to practice before the next battle.

"Let's work on that for now."

“Right!”

And so, we practiced skills for the next few hours. After a while, I heard gentle and relaxed breathing coming from my training partner.

“Lucy?” I asked softly. “Guess she fell asleep.”

She’d been working hard for a while now, and she hadn’t gotten enough sleep to begin with. She was sprawled on my bed, so I pulled the covers over her. I’d feel bad if I woke her up. She looked really comfortable...but I could see the mood taking a weird turn if I kept watching her as she slept, so I returned to my own training.

First, I disabled *Calm Mind*, then I called out, “Elementals.”

I heard a chuckle. Had it come from an elemental, maybe? *Hmm...I’m not really sure...*

I was in my room, so I couldn’t use any large spells...and as time went on, I just got sleepier. At some point, I could no longer fight off sleep, so I fell forward onto my bed and passed out.

The next morning, I awoke to voices speaking outside my room.

“Good morning, Aya.”

“Good morning, Princess Sophia, Prince Leonardo. Do you need Takatsuki for anything?”

“Leo wanted to meet with him.”

“Sister, didn’t you say you wanted to talk to him as well?” That was definitely the prince’s voice.

“Leo...be quiet.”

Urgh, so noisy.

“Takatsuki, you up?” Aya asked with a knock.

“Mrgh, yeah,” I answered, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

I really trained until late last night... Quietly, I opened the door.

“Morning, Takatsuki. Let’s eat break—”

“Good morning, do you—”

Sasa and Sophia both walked in and began to speak, but they immediately froze, their eyes wide.

What was the problem?

“Morning, everyone,” I said while stretching out a bit. “What’s up?”

For several long moments, I got no response.

“Say, Takatsuki...” Sasa began in a frigid tone. An awful chill raced down my spine. *Sense Danger* was blaring like crazy. *What the hell?!*

“Makoto Takatsuki...” Princess Sophia’s voice was like a shower of hail. Literally, I felt the room cool down by several degrees.

She was using her ice magic...? *Wh-What’s going on?!*

“Makoto,” Prince Leonardo said in a cherubic voice. “Lucy seems to not have any clothes on. Maybe you should cover her so she doesn’t catch a cold.”

As soon as he asked that question, I knew what kind of hot water I was in...and boy, was it boiling! I glanced to my side where Lucy was dozing. Right, she’d fallen asleep in my bed last night. Thinking back, I vaguely remembered her stripping her top off while complaining about the room being too warm...

This is awful!



“Hmmm, I see... After we went shopping, the two of you...”

Sasa? Why are you expanding that hammer?! You shouldn’t be pointing that at a classmate!

“You are in the holy room of the hero... This is why otherworld heroes are...”

In all the time I’d known her, Princess Sophia had not given me a colder look than the one she wore now. Even some ice elementals were quickly swirling around her.

Offhandedly, I thought, *Cool, the elementals are all stirred up. So this is what Noah meant when she said that emotions affect them.*

Wait, not the time!

Hurry up and make an excuse, Noah interjected. *You’re on course for a bad ending...*

“W-Wait just a minute!” Frantically, I explained what’d happened.

Lucy had been roused by the commotion, and she apologized when she heard the situation. “I-I’m so sorry I fell asleep here.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I told her. It was fine—we’d managed to clear up the details of what’d happened.

“That’s great,” Sasa said, seeming relieved. She grabbed my arm. “I’ll sleep here tonight.”

Prince Leonardo was sitting on the bed with a wide smile. “That sounds like fun!” he exclaimed. “Can I come too?”

“Sure. I’ll be training, though, just so you know.” I guess those two had decided to hang out here tonight. I didn’t exactly mind.

Suddenly, I felt someone’s gaze on me, so I turned and saw Princess Sophia staring. “Did you want to come as well?” I asked her.

“Wh-Wha?!” she sputtered. “How could you even suggest such a thing?!”

Whoops, guess I pissed her off. And here I was, thinking that we were getting along now.

“Hero Makoto,” she said, reverting to a more serious demeanor. “We have a discussion that needs to take place. Come see me this evening.” She then pivoted and left the room.

Once she was gone, the other three started speaking up enthusiastically.

“Hey, Takatsuki, shall we go shopping somewhere?” Sasa asked.

“Come out with me today!” was Lucy’s contribution.

“Makoto! Let’s practice our magic,” Prince Leonardo suggested.

They were all fired up! In the end, I was able to work all three into my schedule—I helped Leo with his spellwork, then went shopping with Sasa, and finally, I had tea with Lucy. Overall, it was a pretty enjoyable day.

That evening, I found myself standing in the castle’s dungeon. The entire area was covered by an inescapable holy barrier; those who had committed wicked crimes were thoroughly trapped within...or something like that. Princess Sophia had brought me here, and I now stood in front of a cell that housed a man. Thick shackles bound his feet, linked with a hefty chain.

Did his face seem familiar...?

“He was the leader of the group behind the monster attack the other day,” the princess explained.

“Huh...” I looked closely at the man’s face. Though we’d only spoken for a brief moment, I thought it was probably him.

“What’s with you two...?” the man said, peering up at us with darkened eyes.

“Makoto Takatsuki is the Hero of Roses,” Princess Sophia answered. “He defeated the monster you incited.”

“This brat? Damn, the awakening must have failed...”

“The awakening?” That wasn’t a term I’d heard before.

“The giant became a blight monster. He defeated it,” the princess stated.

The man stared agape for a second before his face contorted into a hateful glare.

Oh, so when a monster becomes blighted, that must be referred to as an “awakening.” Now that I understood, I decided to bring up something that’d been bothering me.

“You were one of the circus clowns, weren’t you?” When I’d transformed into a clown, I’d had a conversation with someone. I wanted to confirm that the man in the cell was the same one I’d spoken to.

“What are you talking about?” the man answered with a blank expression. Guess he wasn’t going to play ball.

“Hero Makoto. Have you had contact with this cambion—the man from the Snake Sect?” asked Princess Sophia.

“I saw him once when I was around the circus tent. He was with a suspicious-looking clown...” I explained. “Wait, what’s the Snake Sect?”

So, this man was a cambion... Fujiyan *had* told us that the incident had been caused by them. I’d never heard of the Snake Sect, though.

The man didn’t say anything more. Princess Sophia spoke up in his stead.

“We have proven that the organization of cambions known as the Snake Sect was pulling the strings behind the event. They infiltrated the city and awaited their opportunity, and that clown was likely one of the sect’s upper members. We are currently pursuing him. This was all discovered by your merchant friend, Sir Fujiwara.”

“That’s Fujiyan, all right.” He just never stopped! When the prisoner heard Fujiyan’s name, his face twisted with rage.

“Damn! What *is* that man?!” The cambion slammed against the bars with a crash. “We’ve hidden that base for over *ten years* and he found it?!”

More than ten years... So they’d been planning this. They were essentially terrorists, but thanks to Fujiyan, they were being rounded up.

“The Snake Sect has pledged allegiance to the Daemon Typhon,” explained Princess Sophia. “The Great Demon Lord is said to have founded the sect a millennium ago.”

“The ‘Great Demon Lord?!’ Your filthy mouths are not fit to speak of Him so

lightly! Our Lord is the prophet that guides us! His miraculous revival will see you humans yanked out by your roots!" The man's eyes were bloodshot as he hurled vitriol at us. It was kinda scary, to be honest.

"Oh, by the way, Princess Sophia," I asked. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Now that you are a hero, you need to understand that monsters are not your only enemies," she said, looking sorrowfully at me. "Most cambions are said to dwell within the ruins of Laphroaig, but some exist in other countries. If they just lived their lives, there would be no issue. However, there are those who threaten our peace. Please learn this well."

I gave a sigh. "I see..." Just defeating the Great Demon Lord wasn't enough. Up the difficulty slider goes...

"Oh, so just living our lives would be fine?!" The man was yelling, and he grabbed at the bars with clawed hands, heedless of the chains on his legs. "You root us out of our quiet existences, then exile and kill us!"

"That is the past," Princess Sophia countered. "The current policy of Roses dictates that a cambion who does no wrong will not face unreasonable discrimination upon discovery...in general." Her expression didn't change, but her voice grew quieter.

So, cambions had been hunted here in the past...and the practice might still be happening in other countries. Though a nation might forbid state-sanctioned discrimination, their citizens' actions were another matter.

"Heed my words... Confining me here is meaningless. Our allies are countless, and your time of peace is at an end," the man spat, cursing us.

The princess's reply was calm. "We know that your next objective is Highland's capital. We have already informed them."

The cambion's mouth dropped open.

"How did you..."

"There is no need for you to know that," Princess Sophia said with finality. "Hero Makoto, let us depart."

At her word, the two of us left the dungeon.

Once we were back inside the castle proper, the princess apologized to me. “I am sorry. While I doubt it was a pleasant meeting, it felt necessary considering your position.”

“I didn’t have a clue before, so it was definitely helpful.” Seriously, I hadn’t known any of that. It was a bit depressing... There was still a lot for me to learn, and the books in the Water Temple hadn’t contained anything about the dark history of this world.

“The cambions are deserving of pity... Since the Great Demon Lord’s death, they have faced persecution on the western continent and have been ostracized from the northern continent... Over the last millennium, they have been pushed into a nomadic lifestyle, with no country of their own, facing discrimination the entire way.”

“The northern continent’s for demons, so why can’t they live there?” I asked.

“Pure demons look down on cambions. They call them demi-demons.”

“I see...” I gave another sigh. So they couldn’t live with humanity or with demons... That was a hard life.

“With no lands to call their own, they have supported themselves with a heretical religion.”

“What? Heretical?” I asked, jumping.

She doesn’t mean us, Noah interjected in my mind. *She’s talking about the snake god.*

Oh, *that’s* what she meant. Thank you, goddess. That was a nasty scare.

“Is something the matter?” Princess Sophia inquired.

“N-No, I’m fine,” I said, before steering the topic of conversation in a different direction. “So, the cambions follow the snake god?”

“‘Snake god’ is an epithet for the Daemon Typhon. Legends say that the Great Demon Lord was Typhon’s disciple, and those same legends aided in spreading the moniker.”

“So that’s the history behind it,” I mused. I needed to get everything together mentally... It would be difficult to remember it all at once. “By the way, are they really trying to go after Highland’s capital?”

“That information also came from your companion, Lord Fujiwara. I do not know the specifics, but investigations by Highland have revealed evidence of a plot...”

“A plot, huh...” Considering that I’d be heading there soon, this news didn’t exactly inspire confidence.

“We will provide you as much protection as we can,” she reassured me.

“You don’t need to go that far.” Things would actually be more dangerous for her; she was a princess being targeted by terrorists, which was a truly perilous position to be in.

Still, though... I reflected on how race and religion seemed to be deep-rooted issues in both this world and my old one. Considering that I also followed a goddess I couldn’t admit to, this whole issue was pretty close to home.

Actually, I should check on that, just in case.

“In Roses, is it forbidden to believe in a deity other than the water goddess?” I asked. That’s what I’d heard from Noah, at least.

“No. People are free to have their own beliefs.”

“What?” *Noah! You’ve got it wrong!*

“There are a large number of adventurers and travelers in Roses, so restricting religion would mean that fewer people would come to our country,” Princess Sophia explained. “However, *spreading* the belief system of any god but Eir is forbidden. Anyone found to be doing so is exiled, or, if their intentions are malicious...punished severely.”

“Understood.” So the belief itself wasn’t restricted, but recruiting people to your religion was. Gathering more believers for Noah would be illegal. I was glad I’d checked.

“Hero Makoto, you believe in a deity outside of the six grand goddesses, yes?” asked Princess Sophia.

“Y-Yeah, a minor goddess...” When I’d been granted my hero title, officials of Roses had suggested that I convert, but I’d refused and told them that I followed another goddess.

“If you converted, then I could ask Eir for the greatest blessings she could bestow... But that would be an insult to your faith. Forget I said anything.”

She was indeed an earnest soul. But I didn’t want to convert, so I was grateful for her discretion.

“Incidentally,” she said, changing the subject, “Leo will be coming to your room tonight, it seems. I offer my apologies for the disturbance.”

“It’s fine. We’re just going to practice magic.”

“You really are diligent,” she told me with a smile. “Your otherworld friends that used to reside in Roses simply played around while they were here.”

“Ha ha... Well, they were strong without training.” Thinking back to Okada and Kitayama brought back some fond—and not so fond—memories. *I wonder what they’re doing now. Probably chasing tail in some other country...*

“I would not be so sure of their strength. I doubt that they would be able to defeat a blight monster.”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s a high hurdle to clear,” I remarked with a laugh. “Anyway, I need to train every day because my stats are so weak to begin with.”

“Um, I do not want Leo to impose on you for too long, so I will come to fetch him at a reasonable time,” she offered hesitantly.

To be honest, I wouldn’t care if he just stayed. “You don’t need to worry about that. If anything, I wouldn’t mind if you came along too. I’d like to hear more about that Snake Sect and the Northern Front Plan.”

She gasped, then spoke in a hard, resolute tone. “V-Very well. I shall, then!”

Maybe I made her angry? I guess inviting the princess directly was disrespectful.

“Actually, I shoul—”

“Until later, then,” she interrupted with an elegant bow. In the next instant,

she was gliding away with light steps.

Well, whatever. A proper talk would bring us closer...probably.

And it did—that night, the two of us had a long conversation.

Chapter 7: Makoto Takatsuki Visits a Southern Island

“I want to go away somewhere...” My voice came out in a murmur as I was practicing water magic.

“You want to go somewhere, Makoto?” asked a voice from my side.

“What?!” I turned and saw Prince Leonardo looking at me with a smile. *Ack, he heard me talking to myself...*and *he’s a prince.*

We were currently in front of a fountain in one of the palace’s courtyards. Several of the (few) water elementals in Horn tended to gather here.

“Well, I just thought it’d be good to train somewhere with more nature,” I replied, adding context about the lack of elementals under my breath.

“Nature... Well the crown does have several villas for retreats. Would it be better to practice by some mountains or the ocean?”

Now *that* sounded like a vacation.

“Well, I wasn’t looking for somewhere to play around,” I said with a rueful laugh. I was about to turn him down, but then I had a sudden thought. “Actually, Prince, do you have a place close to the Habhain Islands?” That was the name of one of the most popular tourist areas on the continent.

“We do! The royal family owns a villa in the area.”

Seriously? He’s a prince, all right!

“Can we go?” I asked intensely, grabbing his hand. He glanced up at me in surprise, his face reddening. Hm, was it because grabbing his hand was rude? But we were both heroes, after all, so it was probably fine.

“W-We can,” he stammered. “I’d be glad to go if it would make you happy. I’ll talk to my sister.” He turned and walked off, presumably to ask the princess.

Hmm, so Princess Sophia’d be coming too... Would we be able to get along? I

guess we *had* been much friendlier lately. Besides...

Just then, Noah spoke up in my mind. *Aren't you living it up, holidaying on the southern isles...* Her voice seemed slightly unhappy. Was she sulking?

I'm not suuulking, she whined. *I'm not jealous that my believer's enjoying an island in the south.*

She definitely was. But she was wrong about my motivation.

How am I wrong? she asked.

Mentally, I shot back another question: do you know what's near the Habhain Islands?

Umm, the islands are almost in the center of middlesea and are of various sizes... Wait...you can't be planning that...

That's right. That's my goal.

Noah's panicked voice echoed in my thoughts. *No! It's too soon!*

I was just going to check it out, but maybe I'd clear it at the same time.

You can't! Quit it with the death flags!

But Noah should know by now—telling me that I couldn't do something always made me more determined.

There was a trench near the Habhain Islands that was known to be the deepest in the world. It was called Deep Scar, and my goal lurked in its depths...

The Abyssal Seafloor Temple.

One of the "last dungeons" that mankind had yet to set foot in—the place where the Wicked Deity Noah was trapped.

I told the others of my planned trip to the southern islands. Lucy immediately started cheering. "We're going to the Habhain Islands? Yay, I can't wait!"

"What're they like, Lu?" Sasa asked.

"Like a famous resort," she gushed. "The sea's gorgeous!"

"That sounds fun! Shall we go buy our swimsuits together?"

“Of course!”

Sasa then turned to me and asked, “Wanna come, Takatsuki?”

“No!” Lucy protested. “We need to tempt him during the trip.”

“Right! Sorry, Takatsuki, you’ll have to wait until we get there.”

And so, the two of them headed off, jubilant and giggling. I’d noticed that they’d been getting a whole lot closer lately. But, we weren’t going to the islands to play around...

Well, whatever. I’d look forward to their swimsuits, but before then, I had my own arrangements to make. The Seafloor Temple was even more difficult than Labyrinthos. I’d need to prepare properly.

“My esteemed Tackie! I hear you are heading for the Habhains!”

Typical Fujiyan, always the first to know!

“That’s the plan,” I replied. “We’ve got a bit of time to spare before we need to head for Highland.” Although, it was only a fortnight. Not exactly enough time to take it easy.

“Leave the specifics of travel to me,” he said. “Our flying ship is more than capable of making it to the islands.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Fujiyan.” It was nice to have our transportation sorted. The royal family had an airship of their own, but I didn’t want to rely on royalty for that, and would rather fly on Fujiyan’s.

“If we will be visiting one of the villas owned by the Roses family, would Lady Chris and Lady Nina be able to join us? Lady Chris in particular wishes to deepen her ties to the royal family.”

“I’m fine with that, obviously,” I confirmed. Nina was a friend after all, and Chris was Fujiyan’s fiancée, so I didn’t have anything against it. “But, I’ve got some other things I want to ask for.”

“You wish to prepare items for an expedition, correct?” Fujiyan asked with a chuckle. “I will gather a bounty of supplies within the capital.”

Reliable as ever. Plus, Roses would be picking up the bill. He and I exchanged

grins. It was time to go all-out on high-class items!

As I tried and failed to heft the substantial bag of supplies onto my shoulder, I realized something: *With my pitiful stats, I'm not even strong enough to carry all the support items... Well, guess I'll have to be more discerning.*

Just then, I felt a presence behind me.

"Hero Makoto. Leo told me that you wish to go to the Habhain Islands."

Ah, Princess Sophia. She was technically my boss, considering that my Hero of Roses title was state-authorized. Maybe I should kneel before her like that bodyguard always said?

I got halfway there before she told me not to bother, so I straightened back up. Guess I didn't need to do any exaggerated posing.

"I will be accompanying you," she informed me. It made sense—Prince Leonardo was still young, so he would need a guardian. "Would that be acceptable?"

"I-It would." She outranked me, so she really didn't need *my* permission...

Princess Sophia heard my response but kept staring steadily at my face. Did she need anything else?

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"N-Nothing at all!" she stammered before quickly striding off. Even now, I still couldn't understand what she was thinking.

Oh well. I needed to get ready for an adventure.

Finally, with all of our travel preparations complete, we departed for the southern islands.

◇

"Wow! It's so clear that I can see straight down through the water! It's beautiful!" Sasa cheered, splashing through the waves. The swimsuit she'd bought for this trip was orange with a flower motif. It fit her well and she looked really cute.

“It’s so hot,” Lucy complained. “I feel like my skin’s gonna burn.” She was wearing a red two-piece, and the contrast between her pale skin and the bright color of the swimsuit looked incredible.

I asked why she didn’t cover up since she was worried about a sunburn, and got promptly told off and yelled at for not “getting it.”

Behind Lucy, Prince Leonardo was wearing summer clothes, and Princess Sophia had donned a slightly more casual gown. Despite the beachy location, she was still properly dressed. *Honestly, she could stand to let her hair down more.*

Anyway, the sun was shining, the beach was white, the water was clear, and the beauties—Lucy and Sasa—were in swimsuits. It looked like those resort islands I’d seen on TV when I was younger.

Yup, this is amazing...but we don’t have time to just lounge around on vacation. Time to head for my goal.

As I enjoyed the scenery, Prince Leonardo hesitantly got my attention. “Um, Makoto?”

“What is it?” I asked, turning to him with a smile.

Before the prince could answer, Lucy cut in. “What’s with that getup, Makoto? Aren’t you too hot in that?”

While everyone else was in summer clothes or swimsuits, I was still wearing my sturdy adventurer clothes, just as I had been when we’d gone to Labyrinthos.

“I’m gonna explore the Seafloor Temple,” I told them. With that said, I turned to leave, but a chorus of voices stopped me in my tracks.

“Makoto?!”

“Wait up, Takatsuki!”

“Please wait, Hero Makoto.”

Lucy, Sasa, and even the princess had called for me to stop. *Why?*

“You’re not going on a solo expedition, are you?” Lucy asked.

“Takatsuki,” Sasa chided. “You’re not allowed to go off alone.”

I glanced around at everyone’s face, and they all seemed against the idea. *Even Fujiyan! The traitor!*

“Well now, my esteemed Tackie, there is only a small amount of time before we will head for Highland. Why don’t we all just enjoy the southern islands for a time?”

“I, uh, guess we can do that...” I’d follow the decision that my party made, even if it wasn’t my first choice. After all, I *could* work in a team.

It hardly seems that way, does it? I heard from my goddess. *Teamwork isn’t your strong suit.*

Noah, I changed my plans after hearing everyone’s input. That makes this a team play. Got it?

Right, sure.

Jokes aside, I stripped off the stuffy adventuring gear and finally changed into swimwear. *If I’m going to be here, I may as well enjoy the island.*

I was resting on the beach, somewhat tired and taking a break from the sun beneath a parasol, when I heard an unfamiliar voice talking to the prince. “Good day, Prince Leonardo.”

“Oh, Sir Deeno. It has been a while. Your aid with the capital’s defenses was...”

Guess they knew each other. This “Sir Deeno” didn’t even spare the rest of us a glance. Actually, I take that back—he’d looked at Lucy and Sasa. I guess he liked the ladies.

“Let us dispense with the formalities,” said Deeno. “We are in private, after all. I see that Princess Sophia is as lovely as ever.”

His words set my teeth on edge... He reminded me of a certain type of guy, the gaudy kind. And he didn’t just sound like one, but he looked like one too. The blond was probably his actual hair color, but the silver necklace and rings glinting against his tanned skin were blatantly expensive. He was probably some

flavor of royalty, or maybe a rich noble.

“Still,” the man continued, “it is such a shame that there are no waves to ride.” He was holding onto something that looked similar to a surfboard. So, I guess he was a surfer, just like the ones in my old world. “It really is too bad. I was looking forward to displaying my skill.”

“Your talent on the waves is famous indeed,” Prince Leonardo answered, keeping the conversation flowing. Roses was a small country, so even the prince had to play nice with influential people from other nations.

Hmm, I thought, *is there anything I can do to help?* That gaudy guy was complaining about poor surfing conditions.

Just then, I got an idea, so I turned to Deeno and asked, “Would it help if there were some waves?”

“Hm? Who are you?” he scoffed. “Don’t you know I’m the eldest son of Count Berkley of Cameron? I was speaking with the prince. What benefit could you possibly offer with your interruption?”

“Watch this, if you would,” I said as I stood and walked toward the sea.

“*Elementals, let’s play*,” I murmured. At my words, the elementals in the air began to stir, and they shifted to answer. Unlike the capital, this island was surrounded by the ocean and had a plentiful population of water elementals. In fact, this was the most I’d ever seen in one place.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Deeno.

In an instant, the previously calm ocean had started rolling. There were no strong winds and no clouds in sight. The weather hadn’t changed at all. Only the sea itself had grown more turbulent.

“M-Makoto, what did you do?” the prince asked.

“I just got some waves going.”

“That’s possible?!” Prince Leonardo’s eyes were wide.

“Wonderful!” Deeno exclaimed. “Absolutely superb waves! That’s just what I’ve been waiting for!” He excitedly made his way into the ocean, surfboard under one arm, and then paddled out beyond the breakers. When a huge wave

rose in front of him, he skillfully glided onto it, then popped up on his feet and rode the wave to its conclusion.

Yup, it was just as he'd said—Deeno was good at surfing.

"Umm...the waves seem to be bigger all across the sea, not just in front of us. Are you going to have enough mana?" The prince sounded worried.

I was actually fine. Elemental magic was powered by mana from the elementals themselves, and they had a ton of it. I didn't have to touch my own meager reserves at all. But, explaining that was too much effort, so I just deflected the prince's question with a smile.

"I'm all good."

Prince Leonardo stared at me like he was at a loss.

"Look, other people are enjoying your waves'h," Nina pointed out.

She was right. When I glanced at the ocean, I saw other surfers having fun.

"My esteemed Tackie, I have a proposition..." Fujiyan began. "Recently, the seas have been tremendously calm, so the lack of adequate surfing conditions seems forecasted to continue. There are also many other wealthy people in the area... Could we possibly take advantage of this, perhaps?"

"I don't see why not," I answered. *That's Fujiyan... He never misses a trick.* Plus, it *was* a pretty good idea.

Princess Sophia must've overheard us because she spoke up, her tone reserved. "Lord Fujiwara, I cannot condone using a State-Authorized Hero in such a way..."

Fujiyan bowed immediately. "My apologies, Your Highness."

Welp, our new business had been tanked before it'd even started. I wasn't all that disappointed. I'd mostly gone along with the idea because I didn't want to turn Fujiyan down. However, this conversation had raised a question: was there a problem with heroes being involved in business? That seemed likely since reputation was important.

As I pondered this, I watched everyone swimming and surfing.

“Takatsuki, look, look!” Sasa called, grabbing my attention.

“Wha?!”

I wasn’t the only one to shout—everyone that saw her gave a shocked yell.

Sasa was running on top of the water.

“Um, Makoto...is Aya using magic?” the prince asked, confusion evident in his voice.

“No, she’s just running...on the water.”

Sasa couldn’t use magic, but thinking back, I remembered that she’d used a water traversal skill in Labyrinthos. When I’d asked Sasa about it, she’d just explained that she had to step with her left leg before her right leg sank, and then vice versa. Right... Sasa was probably the only one that could use that logic to run on the water.

Lucy was much more idle and was floating in a ring, enjoying the sea. She was from a race that lived in the forest, so she didn’t really have a ton of experience swimming. Fujiyan, Nina, and Chris were all enjoying themselves as well.

“Makoto, let’s swim together,” the prince suggested.

“Sure,” I answered, and we both dove into the water.

Water Magic: Flow.

I hadn’t been that great at swimming in my old world, but now I was better than anyone. After all, I constantly used my free time in Macallan just like this—training my water magic!

“Wait!” Prince Leonardo called.

“Oh.” I’d left him pretty far behind. Damn it. I got carried away. Hurriedly, I pulled a U-turn.

“Pardon me, Prince Leonardo.” I apologized immediately, but the prince didn’t look unhappy with me.

“No need... I cannot measure up to your skill, despite my blessing from the goddess of water...” He slumped in disappointment. Was his performance in the last battle still weighing on him? I’d have to cheer him up...

I know! I thought with a flash, grabbing his hand.

Water Magic: Walk on Water.

Suddenly, the two of us stood softly on the surface of the sea.

“Makoto?” he asked, puzzled.

“I’ll use *Synchro* to show you my magic,” I explained. “Once you know how it’s done, it’ll be easy for you.”

“I see. Very well!” he answered excitedly, seeming to catch on.

“Then let’s go. We’ll start with an ultra rank spell.”

Synchro. I joined our mana pools, feeling the connection through our clasped hands. Normally, I’d need to borrow his mana to use ultra rank magic, but we were on the ocean right now, so there was a surplus of water elementals for me to draw from.

“Hauuu,” the prince mumbled. His knees began to buckle as he leaned toward me. I caught him by his small shoulder to keep him from falling.

“Are you okay?”

“I am...” he murmured. “Your *Synchro* skill is amazing. It’s completely different from when my teacher first taught me magic.”

“Oh...?” Maybe it was just because his teacher and I were different people.

“Amazing how, by the way?” I asked.

“W-Well...I don’t think I should say...” His face had gone bright red.

In my mind, Noah chastised me. *Quit sexually harassing the prince, Makoto.*

Noah? What’s sexual here? The prince was a guy, after all.

“Let’s carry on with the magic, then,” I said, keeping the synchronization active as I cast.

“*Water Magic: Water Dragon.*”

A dozen or so ultra rank water dragons burst from the sea. There weren’t any monsters around, so I didn’t make them attack. They just flew through the air above the waves.

“What do you think?” I’d turned around with a smug look, but found the prince staring at me, eyes wide and mouth gaping. “Prince Leonardo...are you okay?” He also didn’t seem to be able to stand properly, likely because of the synchronization, and his knees were shaking.

“Makoto...” he said in awe. “You used ultra rank magic without an incantation, and did it several times simultaneously...”

Wait...? *That’s* what he was surprised by?

“Well, Prince Leonardo, you have the ultra rank skill for that spell, so I thought it worked perfectly.”

“N-No way!” he stammered. “I can’t do that!”

Apparently, that wasn’t a good example... I’d have to teach him another way. “We can make fewer, then. Seven water dragons to start.”

“Why are you assuming I can do several at the same time?!” he exclaimed.

Whoops, I got him angry.

“Okay, then, one to start with...”

I’d just been planning on showing off a bit, but that seemed counterproductive to this lesson. I kept my arm around his shoulders as I cast the ultra rank spell. The water dragon soared gracefully through the air.

“You don’t drop the mana link, even after you’ve cast it,” the prince noted.

“If I severed the link, I wouldn’t be able to hit anything, would I?” That was a technique I’d learned for controlling the spell after casting—if you maintained the mana connection, you could direct a spell’s movements. If not, it would just travel in a straight line. The greater the distance, the harder it was to maintain control, but as long as the line of sight wasn’t broken, it wasn’t all that difficult.

“I can tell because of the synchronization...your proficiency is way higher than mine,” Prince Leonardo said.

“It’s not *that* great... How about we move on to three water dragons?”

“Seriously, why are you upping the number right away?” He had an aghast look on his face, but he still put all his effort into trying to learn. The

synchronization was probably hard on his body, though, since his breathing was rough and his face was red. He felt even warmer than before.

“Should we stop about now?” I suggested.

“N-No. My body is finally getting used to it... Let’s continue.”

The prince sure was a hard worker.

“Makoto...can we do this tomorrow, and every day?”

I agreed easily. “Of course we can.”

“Uh...is that all right?” I heard Lucy ask. “The prince looks like a girl in love.”

“Lu, no interfering in their quality time,” scolded Sasa.

“Uh, Aya? What are you on about?”

That conversation sounded a bit worrying...

After we’d finished swimming, we decided to take a break and eat on the beach. Everyone had seemed to enjoy themselves, but there was one person in particular on my mind.

“Princess Sophia, won’t you swim?” I asked. She was watching the sea from underneath a big parasol.

She let out a slight gasp at my question and stared at me in surprise.

Then, her bodyguard jumped in. “Hero Makoto...I cannot overlook that. The princess cann—”

“Silence,” she commanded, halting whatever he’d been trying to say. She turned to me. “I am the priestess of Roses, so I cannot show my skin in front of others.”

“I see...that’s a shame.” The sea was so beautiful... It was a bummer that she couldn’t enjoy it like the rest of us.

“Um...you think my circumstances are less than ideal?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do.” Going to the beach honestly seemed like a waste if you couldn’t swim. However, my words seemed to put her deep in thought. *Did I say*

something weird?

A while later, Sasa and Lucy returned. Just as I was thinking about leaving the beach, I heard an earsplitting scream.

Lucy and Sasa immediately spotted the predicament and pointed toward the ocean.

“Makoto, look!”

“Someone’s drowning!”

I peered in the direction they’d pointed, and noticed a girl struggling in the waves. Uh...was this because of my magic?

I dove into the sea and used *Walk on Water* to pull the girl free of the waves.

“Ahhh... Wh-What?” the girl sputtered as she suddenly realized that she was standing on the surface of the ocean. She looked around in shock.

“Are you okay?” I asked, holding out a hand. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, and there was a sense of refinement to her appearance, so she was definitely a noble.

“I-I am.”

Maybe it was a bit rude to grab a girl’s hand so soon after meeting her? Well, almost drowning was a scary situation, so hopefully holding her hand would calm her down.

Using my magic, I shifted the water and propelled us back to the beach.

The instant we set foot on the sand, a group of knights surrounded us. “You there! How dare you lay your hand on Miss Carina?!” They must have been her guards. This was a high-class resort where even the royal family had a villa, so the girl I’d saved was probably a high-ranking noble herself.

“Excuse me,” I said, intending to leave. But the noble girl wouldn’t let me. She clutched tightly onto my hand as she scolded the knight.

“Enough!” she ordered. “This man just saved me. Apologize to him immediately.”

“B-But...”

“You still wish to talk back? Then you’ll be fired.”

“M-My apologies!” said the knight as his head dropped into a bow.

“Well, you don’t need to...” I started.

“I offer my apologies for the disrespect. May I ask your name?” The noble girl’s voice softened quite a bit as she spoke to me, and it almost sounded like she was a different person.

After a pause, I answered, “I’m Makoto Takatsuki of Roses.”

Her eyes started to shine. “Oh! The man that just became a State-Authorized Hero of Roses! What a wonderful quirk of fate. My apologies for the late introduction, I am Carina Berkley of Cameron. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I would like to hold a banquet in your honor tonight, as thanks for saving me.”

Hmm...Berkley? Didn’t the gaudy guy from earlier mention that name?

“Oh, you there, mage. That was wonderful magic. The waves were sublime.”

Speak of the devil, here he is...

“You shouldn’t call him ‘mage,’ brother. This is the Hero of Roses.”

“Oh, it’s my sister,” said the man from earlier, Deeno. “So I hear. Please, Hero, excuse my rudeness.”

“I-It’s fine...”

Yup, he was her brother.

“This man saved me from drowning just moments ago,” explained Carina. “I wish to invite him to our home this evening.”

Uh, things were getting a bit out of hand...

“What?!” exclaimed Deeno. “The dignity of the Berkley family rests upon this! My good hero, do you have a preference for women? I can provide such a girl.”

“Whaaat?!” This guy was saying some pretty crazy stuff.

But then, the princess arrived. “W-Wait. You cannot do such things

arbitrarily.”

“Oh, if it isn’t Lady Sophia? Of course, you are all invited as well.”

The princess turned to the noble girl, and the two started having an impenetrable conversation.

“Carina...is this a coincidence?”

“What could you possibly mean?”

Later, Princess Sophia would tell me that the Berkleys were one of the biggest noble families in Cameron and that they had deep ties to the Roses family.

The Berkleys’ main source of revenue was banking, incidentally. In other words, loaning money. They were a family that loved strategy and connection, so that was what Princess Sophia had been worried about. But, in the end, we all took up the offer of hospitality.

“What’s with this building?” Lucy wondered in amazement.

“It’s almost like a castle,” Sasa added.

The Roses family villa was large, but this was on another level. There were rumors that the Berkley family had more money than even some royal families.

“Welcome,” chorused rows of maids and butlers as they ushered us in.

Princess Sophia took the lead and we nervously followed along the patterned carpet.

“My esteemed Tackie,” Fujiyan murmured. “This carpet alone is worth several million gald.”

Seriously? I’d have to be careful walking on it, then.

“Fujiyan, do you know this family?”

“The trading firm that originally scouted me from the Water Temple is headquartered in Cameron. I know that you cannot live in that country if you are against the Berkley family...”

“Guess I’ll need to watch what I say...” Things were getting scarier and scarier.

Deeno Berkley was waiting, and he greeted us as we entered. “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. Enjoy yourselves tonight.”

So, he was the eldest son of the biggest family in Cameron... It showed—he was wearing even more gold than when we’d met him this morning. “Now, let us begin the feast,” he said, clapping his hands at the stage and prompting the dancers to begin performing. Behind them, a huge orchestra started playing.

The only people present at this banquet were those related to the Roses family. There weren’t many of us, but the amount of food and drink that’d been prepared could’ve satisfied well over a hundred people. The meals in Roses Castle had been delicious, but this spread was just as good.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Deeno asked suddenly.

“I am,” I answered. “The food and drink are both wonderful.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said with a grin, clapping me on the shoulder. Guess he was a touchy-feely guy.

“Incidentally, Hero Makoto, do you have any acquaintance with the Hero of Light?”

He was well informed. And yet...he hadn’t even recognized me during the day...?

“Oh, he’s a friend. We arrived in this world at the same time.”

“Ah, so you are childhood friends with Sir Sakurai?” pressed Deeno.

“I-I am.” How’d he know that?! Terrifying... He’d looked everything up.

“Eventually, you will be heading for the demon continent for the Northern Front Plan,” Deeno continued. “The Berkley family will support you to its fullest extent. This is a token of our acquaintance.” As he spoke, he passed me a sheet of paper.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A bond against our family. Write in whatever sum you wish. Naturally, this is not offered as a loan.”

Will you accept the Berkley family’s bond?

Yes

▸ **No**

Well, that was a blatant warning from *RPG Player*. I...probably shouldn’t, right? They’ll use it to leverage me for something crazy later, won’t they?

Just as I was about to turn it down, Princess Sophia did it for me. “Wait, Sir Deeno. Hero Makoto has the support of the royal family of Roses. He does not need that bond.”

“My, you were gorgeous during the day, but a classic dress suits you far better,” he answered with a bright smile. Deeno’s face looked like Fujiyan’s when he was in the middle of negotiations.

“Thank you, Deeno, but I cannot accept this,” I said. The princess was here, so I could turn it down clearly. “That was not why I saved Carina earlier.”

“I see, Hero of Roses. If that’s the case, please feel free to call upon our family if the need should ever arise.” Deeno easily pulled back the sheet of paper.

Princess Sophia’s help had gotten me through, and luckily, that was the last time I had to speak with him. I stayed on guard, but nothing much happened after that.

“I drank too much...”

As soon as my glass dipped below full, some maid or another would be there to top it off. The food was continuously coming out, plate after plate, but it was still delicious to the last mouthful. My chopsticks were a blur.

I’d *clearly* gone over my limits.

Expensive booze...goes down like water...

I’d always been satisfied with the cheaper stuff at the guild, so I hadn’t realized what pricier alcohol did to me. Wanting to shake off some of the fugue state, I went out to the courtyard to wash my face in the fountain. Alongside the huge fountain was a pool, and its waters were spread out beneath the gorgeous moonlight.

I might as well take a dip to wake myself up.

Just as I was convincing myself that no, I shouldn't just drop into someone else's pool, I heard a voice. "Oh, Sir Makoto? What are you doing here?" It was one of the masters of the house—Carina. I'd seen her in a swimsuit earlier, but she was now wearing a cute party dress.

I'd spoken to her older brother during the banquet but had barely talked to her at all. *Guess I should say thanks for the invite.*

"I would like to offer my than—"

My words trailed off as she interrupted me, placing her index finger on my lips. "None of that now. You needn't be so formal."

At some point, she'd wound her arms around one of mine. Her movements were as smooth as a martial artist's... She had blonde hair and blue eyes, carried all the bearing of nobility, and, on top of that, was pressed against me. I found myself unable to react, which led to the pair of us walking along.

"I'd like to be much closer with you, Sir Makoto," she told me. She smelled slightly sweet, and I thought it must've been some kind of perfume. I was tugged farther and farther in the direction of her whims as she pulled me by the arm.

Is this where the party is? I wondered.

"Now, over here." She'd guided me to an adorable room that was filled with a floral scent. There was a huge four-poster bed in the center.

This was not, in fact, where the party was being held.

"Uh, where are we?" I asked.

"This is my room. Could we speak for a while?" Before I could reply, she pulled on my arm again, yanking me across the threshold.

Alone with a girl in her room...

Well, I guess this wasn't their primary home, but a vacation villa, so this space was more like a hotel room. A quick glance around revealed little in the way of personal effects, and it didn't really feel "lived-in."

Guided by her, I sank down onto the canopied bed in the middle of the room, and without a moment of hesitation, she sat next to me.

She's just like her brother... No sense of personal space...

Maybe it was genetic?

"You saved me from great peril today, and I need to thank you for that," she murmured.

"Well, anyone would try and save a girl that was drowning..."

Carina molded herself to my side again. "I suppose as the new Hero of Roses, you must have a fiancée. After all, you refused my brother's offer of a woman for the night. You're a diligent person."

"Well, I only became a hero a little while ago..."

Wait, that's *what he meant by offering a woman?! Maybe I made the wrong call... Nope, Lucy and Sasa would have killed me. It was definitely right to have turned him down.*

"You are aware that I am nobility, no?" Carina asked. "That has led to me being encouraged to find a fiancé...but, so far, no men have attracted me. After all, they just want my family's wealth..."

I nodded. "That sounds awful."

She was a noble daughter of Cameron's leading aristocratic family. While she didn't outwardly appear to have any hardships, she still had various concerns. Well, that assumed she was telling the truth, of course.

"And so, our meeting today set my heart pounding," she continued. "To think that I would have a fateful meeting with a man such as you." She leaned in, moving her face closer to mine.

This is bad.

She was on the same social level as the Roses family. Reciprocating was out of the question, but turning her down could be equally as bad in the future.

Time to sidestep. I slipped a hand into my pocket and opened a small bottle. It was one of the magic items Fujiyan had gotten for me—the vial contained a

liquid enchanted with sleep magic.

Water Magic: Mist.

I magically manipulated the liquid and spread it around the room, obviously being careful to not breathe it in myself.

“Phwahh... Strange, I suddenly feel exhausted...”

The item’s effect was top-notch. Carina didn’t even manage to finish her sentence before her eyes drifted closed, and she fell back onto the bed. I could hear soft little snores as she dozed.

That was quick...

The sleeping liquid was ultimately harmless. I let her rest, pulling a cover over her before leaving the room.

Right, so where’s the actual party then? I wandered around for a while before using *Listen* to find the direction that produced the most noise. Following my ear led me back to the party right away.

“Makoto, where’d you go?” Lucy asked.

“Takatsuki? Were you with someone?” Sasa sniffed the air around me. “I can smell perfume.”

Are you a dog or something?

“Oh, Sir Makoto,” Deeno said, his tone questioning. “Were you not with my younger sister?”

How’d he know that...?

“She seemed tired, so I escorted her to her room. I assume she’s asleep by now.”

After a pause, he said, “Hmmm, I see.” He then continued speaking in a low murmur, so soft that I could only pick it up because of my *Listen* skill. “So, she failed.”

He was in on it too...

“Hero Makoto, did anything happen with Carina?” Princess Sophia asked nervously. It was fine though—she had nothing to worry about.

The rest of the banquet proceeded without incident, and after it concluded, we returned to the Roses family villa.

That night, after things had settled, I quietly walked outside.

Since we're here, I should do what I came to do.

There was an ocean trench a few kilometers away from this island—Deep Scar. Within it was the Seafloor Temple where Noah was being held.

I made my way to the shore and stepped out into the gently lapping waves.

But then, I heard a voice behind me. "Hero Makoto."

"Princess Sophia?" I asked. I expected her to be asleep by now.

"I was looking out at the sea when I saw you," she explained. "Are you going to the dungeon?"

"Well, yes, that's why I'm here."

"The Berkleys seemed rather taken with you. Are you certain you should not have conversed with them for longer?" She spoke in a teasing tone. "Perhaps you would even have a better lifestyle currying favor with them."

I thought back to Carina's approach during the party. "Well, I'm..." *Not exactly interested.*

"You aren't greedy, are you?" the princess asked with a smile. She hesitated slightly, and her gaze meandered away. "Incidentally, you mentioned wanting to see my swimsuit during the day, no?"

"What?" *Did I?* I'd just said that it was a shame she wasn't going to swim. After all, we were vacationing at the beach.

"Come to the shore at this time tomorrow, understood?" She stated this plainly before pivoting around and striding away.

Well...*that* was obviously an order. I'd need to remember. *Either way, it's a problem for future me.*

With a splash, I dove into the sea.

Water Magic: Flow.

I used my magic to swim farther out. This far south, the sea was warm and crystal clear. I stared at all the vivid fish as I swam, just enjoying the submerged stroll for a while.

I knew that the Habhains were an archipelago made up of islands of various sizes. Apparently, on the larger islands where people lived, magical barriers had been put in place to repel monsters. That was the same as in Horn, and it made for peaceful waters surrounding the islands.

However, after a short time swimming, the sea suddenly changed.

I'd ventured outside the barrier.

A sea serpent...

In the distance, I saw a huge snake monster coursing through the water. I activated my *Stealth* skill so I could pass by it undetected. There were a few other big figures, all of them sea monsters, but none showed any sign of noticing me.

Am I nearly there...?

There were no landmarks out in the open ocean like this, so I could get lost in an instant. Fortunately, I'd bought a compass-like tool from Fujiyan that I was wearing on my right arm. This magic compass was absolutely essential for navigating the sea, as it created an arrow of light that pointed toward my destination.

The arrow was currently angled almost straight down.

So the Seafloor Temple is at the bottom...

The currents were gentle around the islands, but they were far from that now. Water rushed by me, flowing rapidly, and I could see several whirlpools breaking out and fading away on the surface.

Water Magic: Water Breathing.

I slowly let myself drift down deeper. The moonlight that had illuminated the surface soon faded away, and the water darkened. I used *Night Vision* to look around, but I didn't see any lurking threats. There were, however, a lot of marine animals that weren't monsters. The sea was apparently pretty plentiful

here.

Nothing around me really seemed dangerous, but there was something eerie about being alone in the middle of the ocean.

I feel isolated...

It reminded me of hunting goblins alone in the past, back when I'd spent days in the dark forest by myself.

No, it's not quite the same.

This time, small blue lights were floating all around me—water elementals. They'd be my allies. I'd only just arrived here, so I hadn't yet introduced myself, and the elementals might not be willing to do what I wanted just yet. Even so, I knew they weren't against me.

I used *Calm Mind* to, well, calm down as I sank into the depths.

Even with *Night Vision*, my eyes didn't penetrate the darkness as much as I would've liked, so I relied on my *Scout* skill. I detected something writhing through the water right past me, and, because it was close enough, *Night Vision* showed me a jellyfish around a dozen meters long. I was using *Stealth*, so it didn't notice me.

Suddenly though, my *Scout* skill reacted and picked up something new. Out of nowhere, a huge shark swooped through the dark water, opened its jaws. and swallowed the massive jellyfish in a single bite. It was just stupidly big, like almost submarine sized. Fortunately, the shark was slow, so I just kept on diving. Using *Stealth*, I made it past several other huge sea creatures and monsters.

There's no sign of anyone...

"Last dungeons" were places where mankind had yet to tread, and there were three of them in this world: the Celestial Tower, Tartarus, and the Seafloor Temple.

Recent rumors of the Great Demon Lord's return made conquering them seem less appropriate, but I knew that some adventurers had tried to explore the first two. However, not once had I heard about someone trying to take on

the Seafloor Temple.

And now that I was here, I understood why.

To get to the dungeon, you first had to go to Deep Scar and dive way down into the depths. Not everyone had the capabilities for that. To start, an adventurer would need the right type of magic. Water magic was the best option, but it had low offensive capabilities, so not many adventurers bothered to train it. And for dungeon crawling, the *entire* party would need to have those skills... Thus, exploring the Seafloor Temple just wasn't feasible for most adventurers.

My skills could handle it though. I had enough proficiency with water magic and could use *Water Breathing* for hours.

So, I kept swimming. A few dozen more minutes passed before I arrived at the seabed. There was what looked like a giant tear in the seafloor, and a vague glow shone from the opening.

This must be Deep Scar...

The trench was so long that I couldn't even guess how many kilometers it was from end to end. Weird...I could see something that looked like packed magicite. It was glowing and illuminating the depths of the ocean.

Makoto, that's the entrance, Noah said in my mind. I felt like I could hear her more clearly than normal.

Listen up, she continued, *there's a nest of sea monsters farther in. Inside the trench is like another world, and all the beasts are really strong. If you're going to turn back, now's your chance.*

I thought back a thanks along with a promise to be careful.

You're coming despite the warnings, then... If it gets bad, turn back.

I thanked her once more and fell down toward the tear in the seabed. Suddenly, a wave of dense mana made my body shudder.

The water here felt...different...?

That made sense—the water was imbued with so much mana that it changed the environment completely. And the deeper I went, the denser the mana got.

How strong were the monsters that lived down here?

In the distance, I spotted several huge silhouettes. *Sea dragons... Three of them.* Every dragon was calamity level. If I just dove right into the thick of things, I'd definitely die.

I guess I should do what Noah said and not push too hard.

And thus, my first attempt at the Seafloor Temple ended.

I returned to my room in the villa and used magic to dry the ocean water from my clothes. Once clean, I fell into bed and slept the sleep of the dead.

Bright...

It was past noon when I woke up. The sun was high in the sky and streaming in through the window.

Still groggy, I placed my hand down, attempting to push myself upright, but was met with a soft sensation under my fingers. *Lucy's chest...* The girl I'd accidentally touched was lying next to me and she sent a sleepy look my way.

Why? Did I go to the wrong room?

I moved to check, shifting away from Lucy's sleeping form. But then, I bumped into someone else, and they let out a soft cry... *Sasa.*

"Mhm, morning, Takatsuki," Sasa said, sitting up as she rubbed her eyes.

"That was a good sleep," Lucy commented, stretching in her t-shirt and shorts.

"What're you two doing?" I asked.

"Sleeping in your room," replied Sasa.

"Sleep in your own rooms," I retorted. The villa had plenty of space for guests. Lucy, Sasa, and I all had our own rooms, so both of them being in my bed was bizarre.

"It's fine. There's no harm in it," Lucy said. "Oh, I'm getting changed, so look that way."

"Wow, your underwear's so cute, Lu," gushed Sasa. "Where'd you get them?"

“Yours are cute too.”

“Get out!” I yelled. As the two of them brought out day clothes to change into, I chased them out.

It...almost felt as though, lately, they’d stopped seeing me as a guy.

That afternoon, we all went to the beach once more, and almost everyone swam. I got the waves going for Deeno again, and Carina did join us, but things on the whole were peaceful.

Then, nighttime came.

I’d come to the beach as Princess Sophia had directed. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and the moonlight was luminous and beautiful. The only sound was the soft lapping of the waves on the sand. It was so peaceful and I almost forgot this wasn’t Earth.

Of course, the water elementals whirling through the air were an unmistakable sign that this was another world. I stared up at the moon and I practiced my magic until I heard the soft crunch of footsteps in the sand behind me.

“M-My apologies for the delay.”

It was Princess Sophia, and unlike normal, she wasn’t wearing a dress. Instead, she’d donned a thin, robe-like garment that was pure white.

“I haven’t been here long,” I answered, as any man should. Fujiyan had taught me a lot recently, like how to perfectly (I hoped) interact with women.

“There is no need to fib... I saw you waiting.”

“That’s right...you can see this spot from your room.” *Welp, caught red-handed.*

I couldn’t ask what she’d called me here for because, before I could speak, she loosened the robe she was wearing. It dropped to the sand, and her pale skin was revealed.

She was wearing a swimsuit with a light-blue pattern on it.

“Wh-What do you think?” she asked.

I gulped. “I-It suits you, really well.”

Her giggle sounded happy, and she shyly added, “I see.”

She’d brought a swimsuit...just because I’d said it was a shame that she didn’t get to swim...? Would she really go this far for a State-Authorized Hero from her country?

No...this wasn’t the sort of thing that you needed to be a hero for.

A man and woman alone...on a moonlit beach... Of course, something will happen...

Noah? What do you mean?

Come on, this is why I call you dense, she answered triumphantly.

Okay...you’re right.

I had to admit it... I was dense! Even *I* could work out what was going on here.

Guess I’d already almost maxed my affection with the princess. *But, what? When? Was it when we defeated the blight giant?* Since then, her behavior hadn’t been much different...

Forget about that and do what you need to, urged Noah.

What exactly is it that I need to do?

Pin her down.

Are you an idiot?!

Who are you calling an idiot?! Noah exclaimed. *I told you to build up a relationship with the priestesses!*

There’s a time and a place. Plus, we’re outside right now...

Doesn’t that make it more exciting?

There was no helping this goddess. I had to do something.

Returning my focus to Sophia, I asked, “P-Princess, shall we swim?”

Ugh, coward.

Shut it, Noah!

“S-Swim?” The princess’s expression tightened. I hadn’t said anything ridiculous, had I? She’d worn a swimsuit because she wanted to swim, right?

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

She fidgeted in embarrassment and looked away. “I-I can’t...swim...”

Apparently, the princess swam in much the same way as a rock did. Well, actually, it was more like she’d never learned. As a child, she had come to the beach, but her duties had kept her busy, so mastering swimming just hadn’t been a priority.

That made sense, but fortunately, I had a simple way for her to learn: she had king rank ice magic, and we’d already proven that her power was compatible with my water magic, so...

“I can use *Synchro* to show you how to swim with water magic. You’ll learn in minutes.”

I’d meant it as a nice suggestion, but she immediately shot me down. “*Synchro?!* Wait a moment! My heart isn’t ready!”

What did her heart have to do with it?

We didn’t end up using *Synchro*. With no other choice, we stuck to the shallows where she could practice swimming while still touching the bottom. In my mental fantasy, I’d wanted her to say something along the lines of “I’m nervous... It’s been a while...” And then I would’ve given her a sparkling grin before telling her I’d teach her. But, it didn’t exactly play out that way.

Ten minutes later, and—

“Look, Hero Makoto!”

—she was gliding through the water like a fish.

That’s without *magic?*

She was propelled purely by her physical talent. As the water goddess’s priestess, she had high stats and good reflexes.

“What is it?” she asked after a moment.

“Nothing. I was just thinking that you’re a good swimmer.” Honestly, I

couldn't teach her; without my magic, I was slower than she was.

After a while, she tired herself out, so we walked back up to the beach and sat down side by side.

"The stars are beautiful tonight," she murmured.

"They are."

The sky over the southern island was a sight to behold. However, in this world, the moon was seen as a bad omen, so annoyingly enough, there was no commenting on the sublimity of the moon.

We just chatted for a while—I talked about my adventures, and Princess Sophia spoke of the country's situation. Talking with her like this felt just the same as it did with Lucy or Sasa, like she was a normal girl.

Eventually, she suggested, "We should head back."

"I'll walk you there," I offered.

I stayed with her until we reached her bedroom. Just before the door closed behind her, she showed her face through the gap.

"I had fun today," she whispered. "Good night."

"Good night, Princess Sophia."

The way she smiled at me with her hair mussed and dampened...it looked hot.

I left her and I headed to my room, but I didn't prepare for bed. Instead, I got changed into my adventuring gear.

"Right, off we go." Time for my second attempt.

You're trying again tonight? Noah asked, exasperation evident in her voice.

I'd be trying *every* night. It had been a lot of effort to come to the Habhain Islands.

Don't push yourself too hard, she said, seeming just as worried as yesterday.

But, in the end, the same thing happened—once I got deep enough, I was again surrounded by huge sea monsters. I decided to retreat.

“Hrmm...”

After I’d come back from Deep Scar, I’d fallen asleep in my bed. When I woke up, the light in the room was bright. That wasn’t what drew my attention, though. On either side of me were Lucy and Sasa.

They’re here again...

Did they think I was a body pillow or something? They both had their arms and legs wound around me. Plus, their clothes showed more than yesterday... What were they thinking?

I used *Stealth* to get out of bed without waking either of them. Then I went to the kitchen, toasted some bread, and sandwiched it around some ham and a vegetable salad. Just as I started to eat, I heard the patter of footsteps.

“Makoto! When did you go?!” Lucy exclaimed. “One second I was hugging you, and then it was Aya!”

“Takatsuki! I was holding on so you wouldn’t get away!”

“And you were holding too tight,” Lucy protested. “You had your legs all intertwined with his, you perv.”

“And you pretended you were half asleep to try and kiss him!”

“I did! Then it ended up being you! I need to kiss Makoto to get rid of the taste.”

“No trying to push kisses! You should just kiss the wall!” Sasa countered. “I’m having him first!”

The two of them strode into the room mid-argument. Regardless of the dispute, they sat down next to each other and enjoyed a late breakfast together. What the hell, guys?

“Right, let’s play rock-paper-scissors for his lips!” Lucy cheered.

“Just what I wanted to hear!”

“Knock it off,” I interjected, thumping both of them on the head as the idiocy ramped up. Yesterday, I’d asked what their plans were for today, and

apparently, they were going shopping. The island had a big market in the middle of it or something.

“So, what are you doing, Makoto?” Lucy asked.

“You should come with us,” Sasa suggested.

What to do...?

I didn’t have anything I really wanted to buy...but this was considered to be a large island, even among the other folks at the resort, so this would likely be the biggest collection of shops I’d encounter.

Shopping on the frontier... Maybe I’d find a bargain.

“I’ll come along,” I decided.

Everything’s so expensive!

I had joined them for their trip around the market and the prices were extremely high. A single meal went for the same price as a whole day’s worth of eating at the guild in Macallan.

Since I was a hero now, Roses picked up my bills, so shopping here didn’t hurt my wallet. But...maybe I was just a scrimper because everything felt all too luxurious.

I checked some second-hand shops and other places for weapons or armor...but the only things I found were expensive and decorated with jewels and stuff. I didn’t come across any useful weapons, and the available equipment was just clothing for marine sports.

This was a tourist hotspot, and they sold items catering to the royal family, along with other nobility. The island also had a king rank barrier around it, so there was no risk of a monster attack. All of this meant that there was nothing on sale that an average adventurer would buy. Eventually, I gave up on my search and just enjoyed the trip with Sasa and Lucy.

Before we went back to the villa, we stopped for dessert—five layers of pancakes filled with fruits and cream. Incidentally, it’d cost the same as three days’ worth of food in Macallan. Resort pricing was scary...

That night, I tried for the Seafloor Temple again. I didn't even get halfway down the trench before I had to turn tail and flee.

A big fat lot of nothing...

I'd been in good spirits the first time I'd gone for the dungeon, but since then, I hadn't progressed any further. Wherever I went, there were calamity level monsters that I couldn't stand against.

Guess I'll have to take it slow...

Time to go back to the basics. I thought about when I'd first gotten to Macallan... I'd had to look for somewhere to hunt goblins in the Great Forest. Back then, the key to my success had been finding a place and method that worked for me.

All right, I'll get plenty of sleep tonight and restore my energy.

It was pitch-black and the curtain was drawn, but as I crawled into bed, I had a sudden thought: *are Lucy and Sasa going to show up again?*

They'd snuck in yesterday and the day before. It stood to reason that they'd turn up tonight as well. This room was dangerous... When I thought about how they might get in bed with me, I couldn't calm down and sleep.

I normally wouldn't mind... But it was different this time. I was up against one of the last dungeons, and that wasn't something I could face on anything less than a full night's sleep.

I needed to find somewhere else to rest, so I left the room and started thinking.

The first idea I had was Fujiyan's room. However, he was engaged, so I didn't want to get in Nina or Chris's way.

What about that bodyguard? Actually, I didn't really know him well enough...

Huh, that was everyone I could think of. Oh well, I'd just have to find an empty room...but then, someone called out to me.

"Makoto, what are you doing up so late?" It was Prince Leonardo. He must have been going to the restroom or something.

“I was looking for somewhere to sleep,” I replied.

“Isn’t your room over there, though?”

“Unfortunately, my room is no longer *mine*,” I answered. After all, I had a couple of intruders every night.

“R-Right... Then what about my room?” he stammered. “Ha ha, just kidd—”

“I can?!” He was a lifesaver! That’s the prince, all right. He’s great!

“Wh-Whaaa?! Y-You can, if you don’t mind...”

“I’ll sleep on the floor,” I asserted. “Let’s go, then.”

They wouldn’t be able to ambush me in the prince’s room. Safe sleeping place secured! The prince’s guard gave me an odd look as we entered, but I was a hero too, so it was fine...probably.

His room was designated for royalty, so it was even bigger than mine with better furniture. Along the side of the room, there was a huge bed and a sofa. Just as I decided to crash on the couch, I felt a tug at my sleeve.

“Prince Leonardo?”

“Um...you’re a guest,” he said a bit hesitantly, “so making you sleep on the sofa would—”

“Don’t worry about it. We always sleep on the floor in the guild.” There weren’t even beds at my home in Macallan, but the prince didn’t seem happy about that.

“U-Um! If you’d be willing, we could sleep together!”

“Oh, sure. You don’t mind?” He didn’t seem to. The prince was looking at me with rosy cheeks, and I couldn’t say no. Besides, the bed looked like a king-size, and at least four adults could fit comfortably atop it.

I got into bed and rolled to the side of it, using my arms as a pillow and looking up at the ceiling. Prince Leonardo hesitantly got in on the other side.

“I-I’m nervous...” Prince Leonardo admitted. “I haven’t slept with someone since Sophia, back when I was younger.”

“Your Highness...” By the standards of my past world, he wasn’t old enough to

be out of elementary school yet, so he ought to have been spoiled more. But, maybe his position as a hero made that impossible. The world was harsh.

I wanted to say something to cheer him up, but all I could think about was my adventuring. “As an adventurer,” I began, “you don’t get much privacy. A lot of us all sleep together in the guild, and when we’re out on quests or in dungeons, we camp. You have to rest in turns and keep watch because you never know when a monster might attack. We can’t really relax.”

After I spoke, I gave it a bit more consideration and realized that Prince Leonardo might not understand. After all, the cultural gaps between royalty and commoners were vast.

And yet, his eyes were sparkling as he asked me to recount my tales. Apparently, this was the right topic after all.

“Wow! You have such a hard life?! You don’t sound like you suffer with it, though...could you tell me more?”

I decided to oblige. “Which would you like to hear about, the Great Forest or Labyrinthos?”

“Both of them!”

What a greedy prince. I didn’t mind though, and I started telling him what I could recall, with maybe a few embellishments. By the time we fell asleep, the sun had already started to lighten the sky.

“Leo, Leo. Wake up. You’re usually awake much earlier.”

I was being shaken.

Sleepy... Because of my conversation with the prince, I hadn’t gotten much rest.

Who was shaking me? It didn’t feel like Lucy or Sasa...

“Honestly, you can be such a child—” The voice abruptly cut off, then picked back up in an incredulous tone. “Excuse me?”

The covers were ripped away from me.

“Makoto Takatsuki? Why are you in Leo’s bed?” I’d been halfway between sleep and consciousness, but the princess’s voice woke me up with a start.

She looked down at me from the side of the bed, and I looked back up at her. Both of us were silent.

“Mmh... Phwah. You didn’t let me sleep last night, Makoto.” The princess and I let out strangled gasps as the prince’s high voice came from my side. His pajamas were slightly open, just showing his collarbone.

He really did look just like a girl...

“Hero Makoto...?”

I suddenly paled at her cold look and frigid voice.

“I-It’s a misunderstanding!” I swore. “I didn’t sneak in!”

I was a social goner at this rate!

“I know,” she replied. “Leo probably wanted to speak to you. Go and wash your face.”

Apparently, it wasn’t a misunderstanding. I was happy that it was cleared up though, so I rose and did as she told me before heading to the dining room.

“Makoto! Where were you?”

“We waited all night.”

Those comments from Lucy and Sasa met me at breakfast. I knew it!

“I slept in Prince Leonardo’s room,” I said.

“Whaaat?!”

“Why?!”

I brushed aside their protests and didn’t answer. Instead, I turned to the prince. “So, Prince Leonardo, I’ll be counting on you.”

“O-Okay...” he answered. “I’m happy to hear your stories, but you don’t mind sharing with me, right?”

“It’s fine. Most of all, I want to beat the Seafloor Temple, so I need to get my energy back at night.”

The girls were still arguing, so I calmed them down while we finished breakfast. Once we'd eaten, the princess invited me to greet the nobles on the island. Speaking with new people was...difficult. Hard in a different way than dungeoneering.

Then, as night fell, I tried my luck again.

I altered the spot where I dove down, changed when I decided to explore, and watched the tide. I looked over every variable I could find, but nothing seemed like it would work.

The next day, and the next, and the one after that... They were all the same.

Am I missing something? I wondered. It had been going well, but now it wasn't. My current approach just kept failing.

Noah didn't give me any real hints either, just warnings like "Don't go that way," or "You're not strong enough to beat that monster." I guess it was too soon to try.

I wanted to at least see the dungeon's entrance though, so I kept on going.

And then, our last day of vacation arrived.

Chapter 8: Makoto Takatsuki Challenges the Seafloor Temple

Tomorrow, we would be leaving the Habhain Islands and traveling to Highland...which meant that today was my final chance to attempt the Seafloor Temple. However, there was something different about my strategy this time.

“The weather’s awful, Lu,” Sasa grumbled. She seemed bored and was splayed out on the bed, kicking her legs in the air.

“Yeah, this is our last day! It’s not fair,” Lucy whined. She was also on the bed, though she was tending to her staff.

The rain outside was torrential. It wasn’t just drizzling—the weather was honestly bad enough to be considered a storm. Maybe a tropical cyclone or a typhoon was bearing down on us. I looked out at the scenery, gazing past the raindrops striking the window.

“We are leaving for Highland tomorrow, so let’s get packed today’h,” Nina suggested. She’d been here on and off when she’d had breaks from working for the Fujiwara Trading Company.

Fujiyan had also come along with her today. “Make sure you do not forget anything. If there are any items you need, then I shall prepare them...” He trailed off as he noticed what I was doing. “My esteemed Tackie? Where are you going?”

“Just, you know, around,” I answered vaguely. That was enough information for him to infer my true intentions.

“Take care.”

“Thanks, Fujiyan.”

I was wearing the same gear I’d worn back in Macallan, and the only weapon I carried was Noah’s dagger. In a change from my previous attempts, I was pretty lightly equipped. I had a feeling that I’d been pointlessly weighing myself down

with all those extra supplies.

Time to go back to basics. It reminded me of being in the Great Forest, facing off against goblins with my dagger.

As soon as I left our lodging, I was buffeted by the storm. The rain sprayed against my whole body, drenching me and making me feel like I'd stepped under a shower. Trees in the courtyard were bending like bows, and every flower petal had been blown back.

I heard an amplified voice in the distance—it stated that today would be the last day of our trip and advised everyone to wait inside.

"Hero Makoto...? Are you going somewhere?" I turned to see that Princess Sophia had walked outside to address me. That was a shame since the rain was now soaking through her gown.

"*Water Magic: Flow,*" I incanted, using magic to stop the drops from hitting her. I also dried her dress.

"Th-Thank you," she answered, bewildered.

"I'm going to the Seafloor Temple," I told her.

She looked at me like I was crazy. "In this weather?!" she exclaimed. "We're in the middle of a storm!"

"Makoto! It's dangerous to go out when it's like this," Lucy protested.

"She's right," Sasa added. "When we were in school, they taught us not to go outside during a typhoon."

"Makoto! Are you leaving right now?!" Prince Leonardo asked in shock.

Everyone was right—I'd normally never go out in a storm like this. The temple and guild had both given similar advice on that topic. I'd also learned that every contingency should be taken into account when adventuring. Your condition, your equipment and tools, and the environment should all be as ideal as possible before you embark on a quest. That was the norm for adventurers in this world. Though, of course, risk was part of adventuring, and it was difficult to plan for everything.

By all of that logic, it was a mistake to go out in this storm.

But...

"Leaving now is actually the right choice," I told them as I looked toward the edge of the pelting rain. "It'll give me the best shot at making it to the temple." I saw blue lights sparkling all around us, which indicated the presence of water elementals. In fact, there were more of them than I'd ever seen in one place.

"Makoto...?"

"Takatsuki..."

Lucy and Sasa were looking at me in concern. The two royals wore similar expressions. But since I was the only one who could see the elementals, explaining things wouldn't help any of them understand.

"Elementals," I called softly, placing my right hand in front of me, palm up.

Huge amounts of mana swirled toward me.

"Wha...?" Lucy was the first to react since she was a mage. Next was Princess Sophia, and she shuddered slightly at the sensation of the flooding mana.

The amount of mana whirling around me was massive, easily dozens of times the amount I'd used against the blight monsters.

"M-Makoto?" Prince Leonardo asked, but he faltered as the wave of mana overwhelmed him.

"*Water Magic: Water Phoenix.*" I cast the king rank spell without an incantation and created an enormous phoenix made of water.

"M-Makoto, that's a king rank..." Lucy murmured, her eyes wide.

I smiled at her as I climbed on top of my phoenix. "With so many water elementals around the islands, I can use as many king rank spells as I like." There were more of them than ever—this was the right time and the right place to try and achieve my goal. My chance at conquering the Seafloor Temple had finally arrived, along with the final day of our vacation.

Lucy, Princess Sophia, and Prince Leonardo were all dumbstruck. On the other hand...

"Wahhh, that's amazing," Sasa said openly. She was the only one of them that

wasn't a mage.

I gave farewell with a quick, "See you later, then," and this time, no one stopped me.

"Later, Takatsuki," Sasa called, waving. As she did, my phoenix and I set out for the Seafloor Temple.

As I left the magical barrier that surrounded the island, the storm grew even stronger. The rain posed no issue for me, and I thought of it as a firm ally. The water phoenix also blocked out the driving wind.

In moments, I was flying high above Deep Scar. The sea's surface was rougher than usual, and huge whirlpools swirled among the waves. The water elementals were all frolicking about energetically. It made sense, I reasoned, that they were causing the ocean to become more turbulent.

So...how should I proceed down to Deep Scar? Until now, I'd used *Stealth* to swim there peacefully. However, that only seemed to work on the fringes—there were strong monsters within the trench that could find me despite using *Stealth*. I certainly couldn't treat this quest the same as ones in the Great Forest.

Should I try forcing my way through? That wasn't a method I'd tried before, and it went against my usual policy of being careful with encounters. But...there were more water elementals here than I could even count. And if I called out to them, even more would flood the area. In these circumstances, fighting through the monsters was worth a try.

"Heeeyyy, elementals!" I yelled out across the deserted tempest. "Let's play!"

Their interest immediately shifted toward me. Waves the size of buildings rose above the sea, and sheets of rain drove sideways into them. A boat would have capsized in moments, downed forever to sleep with the fish.

If I hadn't been a water mage, this environment would've been a hellish sight. The elementals, though, were whirring around in enjoyment.

"Come on, elementals! Let's play even more!"

They answered my cry.

This...might work. I kept greedily gathering mana. More, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more, more...

Uh, Makoto, I heard Noah say, *that might be a bad idea...*

Just as I was about to ask why, a chill ran down my spine.

“Hey, you there? I think that’s quite enough.”

The deluge halted. It didn’t exactly *stop* raining—the actual drops were still there, but they hung motionless and quiet in the air. Water, wind, and waves, the whole storm... Everything had stopped.

“Hmm, that’s pretty impressive. Who taught you elemental magic?” asked a beautiful voice. It rang out so clear that the voice seemed to not even be of this world.

I shuddered. The idea of turning around to look at the speaker frightened me, but I didn’t have a choice—something I couldn’t see rotated my body.

Then, I saw. A bright light shone into my eyes, so I couldn’t really tell what the figure looked like.

“Oh...so you looked after all. Maybe you don’t know fear.” The voice laughed.

“U-Uh, who are you?” I asked, even though I knew. The woman in front of me was no human. Several wings of light stretched out behind her, and she looked like the angels we’d learned about in the Water Temple.

They were known as guardians of the lands, and they appeared from time to time, though the number of sightings had markedly diminished as the years wore on. They were only supposed to have one set of wings, though. The being in front of me had far more than that.

There was a sensation of pressure on my soul. It felt like I was up against an enormous wall. Fear and unease clouded my mind as if I were being left behind in the dark. It...felt just like when I’d first met Noah.



The divine being didn't bother to answer my question or offer her identity. "I came to check on the sea because it was more energetic than usual. So, you're the cause?" She seemed to stare at me for a moment, then spoke, as if realizing something. "Oh, are you Noah's precious child? The one I've heard so much about? Hmm..." *She used Noah's name...*

My goddess piped up immediately. "That's right, so don't scare him so much."

"Noah?" I asked. Her voice wasn't in my head like normal but was tangible and something I could actually hear.

"Teach him properly then," said the divine being. "You *know* that he'll cause a disaster if he gathers too many elementals."

"All right already. Makoto, you shouldn't call anymore," Noah warned. "If you go too far, the island that Lucy and Aya are on will end up sinking."

"What?" I'd thought we were far enough away to avoid that danger...but no, this was coming from Noah, so I should believe her. "Got it. I'll be careful," I said, responding to both Noah and whoever was in front of me.

"Good boy." The mysterious girl giggled. "Well then, see you, Noah."

"Bye, Eir."

In the blink of an eye, the divine being vanished, and I felt like I'd imagined the last few minutes. The storm came back full force and the rain pattered against my cheeks, gradually cooling me down.

But, before I got back to my quest, I suddenly registered the name that Noah had used.

"Eir...?" That was the name of the goddess that held dominion over water in this world. *That's a bit bigger than some* angel*!* I thought frantically to myself. I set *Calm Mind* to 99% and willed myself to relax.

It was fine... One of the Sacred Deities had found me, but she'd let me go.

Don't worry, Makoto, Noah reassured me. *It's one of the rules of heaven—goddesses can't directly interfere with mortals.*

Oh. I get it.

Elemental magic will cause environmental disasters, though. If you go too far, you'll attract divine attention...like you just did.

I'd...need to be more careful about overdoing elemental magic.

"Elementals," I called softly.

They'd vanished in fear at the water goddess's arrival, so I called them forth again. A blue glow rose around me.

Right then, let's go. I'd gotten my wits back and was ready to proceed.

Without hesitation, I leaped into a huge whirlpool.

The water beneath the roiling waves was pitch-black, but I carried on through it. While this area was teeming with huge monsters, there weren't many aggressive ones.

Let's cut through!

This time, I was going to make a beeline straight for the depths, carrying with me all the elementals I could manage. They schooled around me like a shoal of mackerel and formed an orb-shaped shield that protected me from the monsters. The mana from thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of elementals was apparently a threat to the underwater beasts—none of them bothered to attack.

Was...this the right call? I wondered. I honestly wasn't sure... It felt a touch too violent.

By now, I could see a glimmer of light further down, and it was getting gradually brighter. Before me once again was Deep Scar, a massive rift that sliced across the ocean floor. Strong monsters lived within its depths. At first, I'd thought that there must be a less-dangerous path to the Seafloor Temple, one with fewer enemies. However, I'd spent every day so far looking for it without any success. I guess this wasn't exactly a normal dungeon, but a *last* dungeon, one where humans had yet to step even a single foot.

There was never going to be a simple route.

The opening of the trench was getting closer, and I could see the monsters

inside it as well. Each and every one of them was calamity level. Normally, I'd turn tail and run right about now, but I had the elementals with me this time. While lots of the fierce beasts made threat displays in my direction, many of them also fled from the power surrounding me.

And so, I dove headlong into the trench.

It's going well, I thought to myself after a while.

I'd just come across some sea dragons, monsters that I'd usually be doing my best to sneak past. However, they'd fled when faced with the mana of the elementals all around me.

There was magicite lining the walls of the trench, and it glowed brighter as I passed, reacting to the swirling mana. It was as if a path had been lit up just for me.

Not everything was going to go perfectly, though.

One particularly large sea dragon stared irritatedly in my direction. Judging by its size...it was probably an ancient dragon.

Crap, it's attacking!

Dragons that lived for longer than a millennium were called "ancient dragons." They were prideful creatures and had no patience for anyone who trespassed upon their territory.

Water Magic: Yamata no Orochi. When faced with the massive eight-headed serpent I'd conjured, the ancient dragon turned and left in anger.

That paved the way for a new strategy—every time a monster came nearby, I drove it off with magic. I didn't outright *beat* them; I just needed them to flee from me.

I went deeper and deeper, progressing ever further, and thinking only of one thing: Noah was waiting for me in the Seafloor Temple!

After swimming a while longer, a wall loomed up from the darkness in front of me.

A dead-end...?

I stopped, staring at the huge wall that had appeared within Deep Scar.

Wait...it's not a wall... It's moving!

The width of the trench had gradually narrowed as I'd gone down, but even so, the opening was still easily more than a hundred meters across. And this creature was large enough to block up the entire space.

The beast was a kraken—an enormous mollusk that was known as the "terror of the seas." They were usually rare sights but would sometimes appear above the waves and swallow ships whole. Even sea dragons were said to avoid them.

Normally, I'd run away...

As I peered around more carefully, I could actually see several of them. Was this their nest...?

Suddenly, my *RPG Player* skill showed an option.

Will you cross the nest of the krakens, terrors of the seas?

Yes

No

I didn't hesitate. Besides, I wasn't here to defeat them or anything. My goal was to reach the Seafloor Temple.

I'll push through! I activated my *Flee* skill to ensure that no kraken would grab hold of my legs, and then sunk even farther down into Deep Scar.

The trench itself kept narrowing. As it did, there seemed to be more and more magicite clinging to the walls. At this point, pretty much the whole area was reacting to the mana and shining brightly.

If I chipped a piece of it off to take home, would I be able to sell it and live out the rest of my life just playing around?

Then, a massive amount of mana rolled past me. I had no idea what was

producing that much power. There were rumors of ley lines that could produce infinite mana...so maybe down here...?

Suddenly, one of the kraken's tentacles whipped toward me with a rumble.

Barely missed! That was close! One of them was still chasing me.

Water Magic: Yamata no Orochi. The king rank spell hit the kraken dead-on. That magic had been at least somewhat effective against a blight dragon, but...

Not against a kraken.

The monster's tentacles effortlessly wound around the water serpent I'd created, and my *Yamata no Orochi* was crushed.

I realized then that if the path down the trench got too narrow, I'd find my way back blocked off by the kraken. *Should I turn back before I get cornered...?*

Just as I was considering that, I swam out into an open space. It seemed to be a wide, cavernous area within the trench. And, for a moment, it felt like I was swimming through boiling water.

A barrier?

The huge space before me was covered with a barrier...but I'd just gone straight through it. Was it to block out the monsters?

That hope was immediately dashed as the kraken followed me through. Guess the barrier's not for blocking out beasts... So what *was* it for?

This kraken's damn annoying! It still hadn't given up on catching me and was stretching its tentacles toward me again.

Fine, I'll go on the offensive then, I decided. I shifted to speak with the elementals.

What...?

I was in shock—there wasn't a single water elemental surrounding me. Where'd they go?!

Was that barrier set up to block *elementals*?!

I had no time to think as the kraken started attacking me. Time to get away! I used *Flee* to put some distance between us, but the huge monster was already

coming for me again. *Crap!* I thought, dodging a blow from the tentacles.

But seconds later, there was a *swish*...and a spear of ice pierced right through the kraken.

What?

The monster had been skewered... I couldn't follow what'd happened. That kraken was easily over a hundred meters long, and an ice spear large enough to stab clean through its body had just...appeared! Out of nowhere!

As I processed the first icicle strike, several more thudded into and through the monster's body. The kraken slowly faded into the depths as it sank toward the seafloor.

Magic...? Who cast it, though?

I peered around the strange environment once more. This open space within Deep Scar was huge—large enough that Roses's capital city could fit inside it several times over. The walls glimmered with magicite. At the base of the cavern, I could see a circular ridge of what looked like underwater mountains.

Not a single soul was here with me... There was no one who could've cast that spell. The only things moving were me, and the corpse of the slowly sinking kraken...

But then, there was an earthquake. That's what it felt like at least... If the earth shudders, it's an earthquake, right? This wasn't really that, though. The ground was simply moving.

More precisely, the mountains beneath me were stirring. I soon realized that there wasn't a mountain range down there. It was one huge creature. I'm not sure if "creature" is even an appropriate term.

It was the divine beast, Leviathan.

According to legend, this monster had the strength to destroy the world. The beast, divine or otherwise, had also learned magic at some point. It was as big as a mountain range, and it shifted, opening a mouth that was large enough to swallow the entirety of Roses Castle. It engulfed and consumed the kraken whole. The currents produced by its open mouth knocked me away.

That's...a divine beast. The pinnacle of all sea creatures.

I watched it. At a glance, it had looked like a mountainous landscape, but seeing it move was a nightmare. The real nightmare, though, was something I'd only just noticed.

On the back of this divine beast was something that looked like a small temple.



Uhhh...what?

That's right... In the abyssal depths of Deep Scar was a temple. I'd been aiming for this place the whole time, and it was supposedly on the seafloor.

But...I'd never expected that it would be on Leviathan's back.

"Is this...for real, Noah?" I said, sending a prayer her way without even thinking about it.

I thought that telling you might scare you off, so I didn't mention it...but yes. You're currently looking at the Seafloor Temple. Her voice echoed in my mind ethereally.

The Seafloor Temple...was on Leviathan's back...

Makoto, I get that you're shocked, but it's looking at you.

I whipped around and saw that its eyes were slit open and peering my way. Even with *Calm Mind* at 99%, it felt like my heart was being crushed with fear.

I-I need to run!

Leviathan had seen the enormous kraken as nothing more than food... This thing was so far beyond my level, that fighting it wasn't even worth considering.

Suddenly, the beast roared. The sound wave made the water swirl, knocking me back toward the wall of the trench. Was it rampaging in the abyss?

I could sense that the other monsters were afraid, terrified of the king of the ocean's wrath.

Makoto, it was just yawning, said Noah.

But regardless, I was tired of being shocked and thrown off-kilter. Plus, I no longer had any water elementals with me.

I didn't fight against the currents dragging me away but just used my magic to swim furiously toward the surface. Thankfully, the krakens and sea dragons had been afraid of Leviathan's yawn and had hidden.

Before I knew it, I was on the beach. The awful weather had broken up. My body felt immensely heavy, and I didn't know whether it was from physical or

mental exhaustion.

Leviathan. What the hell am I supposed to do about that?!

It was a legendary creature...like a living mountain range! This wasn't something that could be defeated.

I looked dazedly up at the sky, but suddenly, a shadow fell over me.

"Makoto? You took your time." It was Lucy, peering over me as I lay on the sand. "Princess Sophia and Aya were worried when you didn't come back." She was standing right above my head. From this position, I could see her underwear. They were red today.

"Lucy, I can see your panties."

"Idiot," she retorted before sitting next to me. I pulled myself upright to sit beside her. We stayed side by side in silence for a while, staring out toward the sea.

"So, what was the Seafloor Temple like?" she asked eventually. My memories shot back to life.

There were monsters down there bigger than anything in Labyrinthos. Among them were the terrors of the seas, the krakens. And then, on a whole other level, was the divine beast Leviathan, who saw the krakens as nothing more than tasty snacks.

That last detail in particular made my heart stop.

After a long pause, I answered. "Terrifying."

It was impossible to make it to the temple...just not something I could do. I'd almost died.

"Hmm, right."

Her bored response put me on edge. "You don't really seem to care," I pouted.

But a second later, her arms were around my neck. She held tightly to me. "I'm so glad you're safe!"

"L-Lucy?"

“Did you think I wasn’t worried?” she demanded with a glare. I’d pissed her off... I could tell by her voice. “You were being reckless! And you wouldn’t listen to anyone trying to stop you,” she chastised. Her speech was similar to the one that Noah had given me. “I can’t help now, but take me with you next time! Got it?!”

“Yeah...you’re right.” Lucy was the first comrade I’d found in this world. She’d asked about my goal back in Macallan and had been scared when she’d heard me say “the Seafloor Temple.”

Yet, I’d tried it alone. Gone in alone. And was now moping...alone.

“We’ll go together next time,” I agreed.

“Hmph, it’s a promise,” she replied with a smile. Her grin lifted my mood a bit.

“Oh, right. Look over here,” she said, putting her index finger in front of my eyes.

“Hm?” I wondered, turning to look.

Then...

I got kissed.

It felt like there was a red light sparkling at the edge of my vision, but I couldn’t spare the brainpower to check.

“L-Lucy?” I stammered.

“Got you,” she said cheekily. “Now cheer up already!”

I was going to shout, but the second I saw her smile, I couldn’t complain. Well, I didn’t exactly have any *complaints*. That had been my first kiss though, okay?

“Ahhh, Lu! No fair!”

“Mmph.”

Sasa grabbed onto me and pressed me down, our lips locking the whole way.

“A-Aya?!” I heard Lucy say, panicked.

“Mmmmhh!” Sasa put the full weight of her small body on top of me, not once breaking the contact of the kiss. Her tongue made its way past my lips and started caressing the inside of my mouth.

About ten seconds passed as we were suspended in the middle of a deep kiss.



“Phwah,” exclaimed Sasa as she finally released me. Behind her, Lucy was trembling.

“How was it?” Sasa asked shyly.

Does she think she can get away with anything because she’s cute?

After a moment, I spoke.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“One more time then!” cheered Sasa.

“A-Aya! Stop!” Lucy protested, pulling her off. “You went too far. I only got a peck!”

“Well, you cut in for it!”

The pair of them grabbed onto each other and looked like they were about to start scuffling.

“Hey, guys,” I interjected, trying to head it off. The two of them peered at me with glinting eyes.

“You idiot, Makoto! You’re so dense!”

“You moron, Takatsuki! You womanizer!”

Then, they both ran off, yelling back at me as they went.

What the hell? *It kinda feels like I don’t even have time to feel upset about Leviathan...* Were they...trying to cheer me up? Well, the way they did it was...a bit too stimulating.

The storm had already blown past the southern islands and now there wasn’t a cloud in the sky. The waves were calm, and the water stretched out as far as the eye could see, with pale white sand visible beneath it. The sea was gentle...so gentle that you’d never think a divine beast could lurk under the surface.

I’ll just have to figure out some strategy, I decided.

The last dungeon. The Seafloor Temple.

Well, that place was certainly difficult enough to earn its name.

And I still had no idea how to beat it.

Epilogue: A Chat Between Hero and Princess

We were all aboard Fujiyan's airship. Our next destination? The biggest country on the continent—Highland. It was also the nation that was home to Sakurai and Yokoyama.

We bid our farewells to the blazing sun, white sands, and the sparkling sea. Beneath that gorgeous ocean was Deep Scar, an abyssal trench full of calamity level monsters. Even deeper was a creature of legend, Leviathan. The Seafloor Temple was enshrined on its back.

To meet Noah, I'd have to get through all of that.

I need to train and adjust my approach, I thought. Lucy and Sasa's encouragement might've cheered me up, but my objective was extremely difficult.

I was lucky to have survived... Perhaps I should thank my goddess for her guidance.

The Habhain Islands were gradually shrinking into the distance. *When will I return?* I wondered.

I'd been spacing out on deck, but then Princess Sophia snapped me out of it. "Hero Makoto. You seem to be in an ill mood."

"Not at all," I answered, putting on a smile. It felt like she'd read my mind.

"The Seafloor Temple is a dungeon that mankind has never explored," she said. "Being unable to reach it is simply nothing to be concerned about." Her tone was gentle. I suppose she was encouraging me as well.

"Well, Leviathan's more of an issue than the temple itself. I need to figure out how to get past it and into the dungeon..." I wasn't sure whether I should talk to her about it, but I let out my complaints in a relatively familiar tone.

"You're speaking of the divine beast...the one that legends say protects the Seafloor Temple? I've heard it is larger than a town..." she commented before

giggling. “I certainly wouldn’t have the faintest idea of how to stand against such a huge monster.”

Larger than a town, huh...

“‘Town’ my foot! It’s more like a whole mountain range moving! Unfortunately, the legends played this one down for once.” I sighed and leaned against the railing.

“That makes it sound like you have seen it with your own eyes,” she said in an amused tone.

“Well, yeah, I have. I was shaking.”

“What?”

“Hm?” I realized that we were talking slightly past each other.

She looked dubiously at me as she spoke again. “Just to be certain...you claim that you have seen the divine beast Leviathan?”

“I have. When it looked at me, I thought I was going to die.”

When she heard my confirmation, her face twisted. “Leviathan is a monster that apparently has the ability to make it rain continuously for forty days and nights if angered. It could flood the whole world and destroy everything in it! That beast has never even been seen...has never been confirmed to exist!”

I hadn’t ever heard her shout like that before. Fujiyan and the others—even the knights—looked our way.

Still...she made sense. I was feeling down in the dumps because I’d barely gotten a glimpse of the temple, and I certainly hadn’t gotten inside...but seeing the divine beast itself was still a rather rare occurrence.

“Thank you, Princess Sophia,” I said. “I’m more motivated now.”

“I have no idea why you are thanking me...” she murmured. “If I hadn’t asked, did you have any intention of telling anyone that you had seen it? Do you know what a feat it is?”

“It’s nothing that special...is it?” I’d only gotten a distant look. Mostly, I’d just planned to brag about it to Jean and Mary once I returned to Macallan’s guild.

But when I explained that to the princess, she shook her head in dismay. “Hero Makoto...you lack much of our common knowledge.” She left me with an invitation to her room later, so she could further explain. *Sounds like a meeting with the boss to me...* I was probably going to get it in the neck for not giving a proper report.

There was also the matter of the elementals... Namely, how I’d called upon too many before diving into Deep Scar. I remembered the divine figure—who was apparently the water goddess, Eir—and how she’d appeared to me. It’d been a significant amount of time since that’d happened, but I still remembered all the details. I was pretty sure Princess Sophia would be even more shocked if I told her about that...

Right after Sophia left, Lucy sidled up to me. “Hey, Makoto, what were you talking to the princess about?”

Sasa followed up immediately. “Something important?”

Those two must’ve been waiting for the princess and me to finish our conversation.

“Nothing big,” I answered. “She just wanted to hear a bit more about the temple.”

“Hmm.”

“Oh, that’s it?”

Neither of them seemed really interested.

Were they even adventurers?

“She told me to come see her later, so I’ll be back in a bit.”

Suddenly, they turned to face me again, and both of them began asking pointed questions.

“Makoto! Princess Sophia said to go to her room?”

“You’re going to be alone with her?!”

“I don’t know about *alone*...” I replied. The princess had a VIP room on the ship. It wasn’t big enough for a *ton* of people.

“Aya...this is dangerous...” said Lucy. “She’ll ambush him...”

“I told you she was giving him eyes!” Sasa exclaimed.

“But she’s a princess! Why would she fall for a commoner like Makoto?”

“You don’t get it, Lu. A difference in standing makes love burn even hotter.”

“What are you two on about?” I interrupted. Whether they were joking or not, they were insulting a princess... Even if said princess was way more friendly than she used to be.

“I’m going to see Fujiyan, then I’ll head for the princess’s room,” I told them. Fujiyan had become a noble now, so I’d get him to tell me all about manners.

As I looked over the side of the airship, I saw that the Habhain Islands had already vanished from sight.

Until next time, Seafloor Temple.

Noah was far away...but I’d get there. I’d put every effort into my role as a State-Authorized Hero to make sure of it.

But first, I needed to see my boss.

“Makoto,” Lucy said, “if you’re going to meet with her, then I’ll come along too.”

“That’s right,” Sasa added, backing Lucy up. “We can’t allow any mistakes.”

Well, Princess Sophia didn’t tell me to come alone, so I guess it’s fine?

Though, when we all showed up at her door, the princess seemed really put out.

What’s with you? I heard Noah sigh. *I’m glad you’re happy again, though. I didn’t know what would happen when you made it to Leviathan.*

Her voice sounded slightly cheerful, but also somewhat lonely. Maybe she’d held out some hope that I might rescue her. I’d have to live up to that hope...

I’ll get to you next time, I promised her mentally.

After a moment, she answered, *I’ll be waiting.* It wasn’t her usual bright voice but was something more somber.

The next time I was there, I'd get to the temple. I swore it to myself.

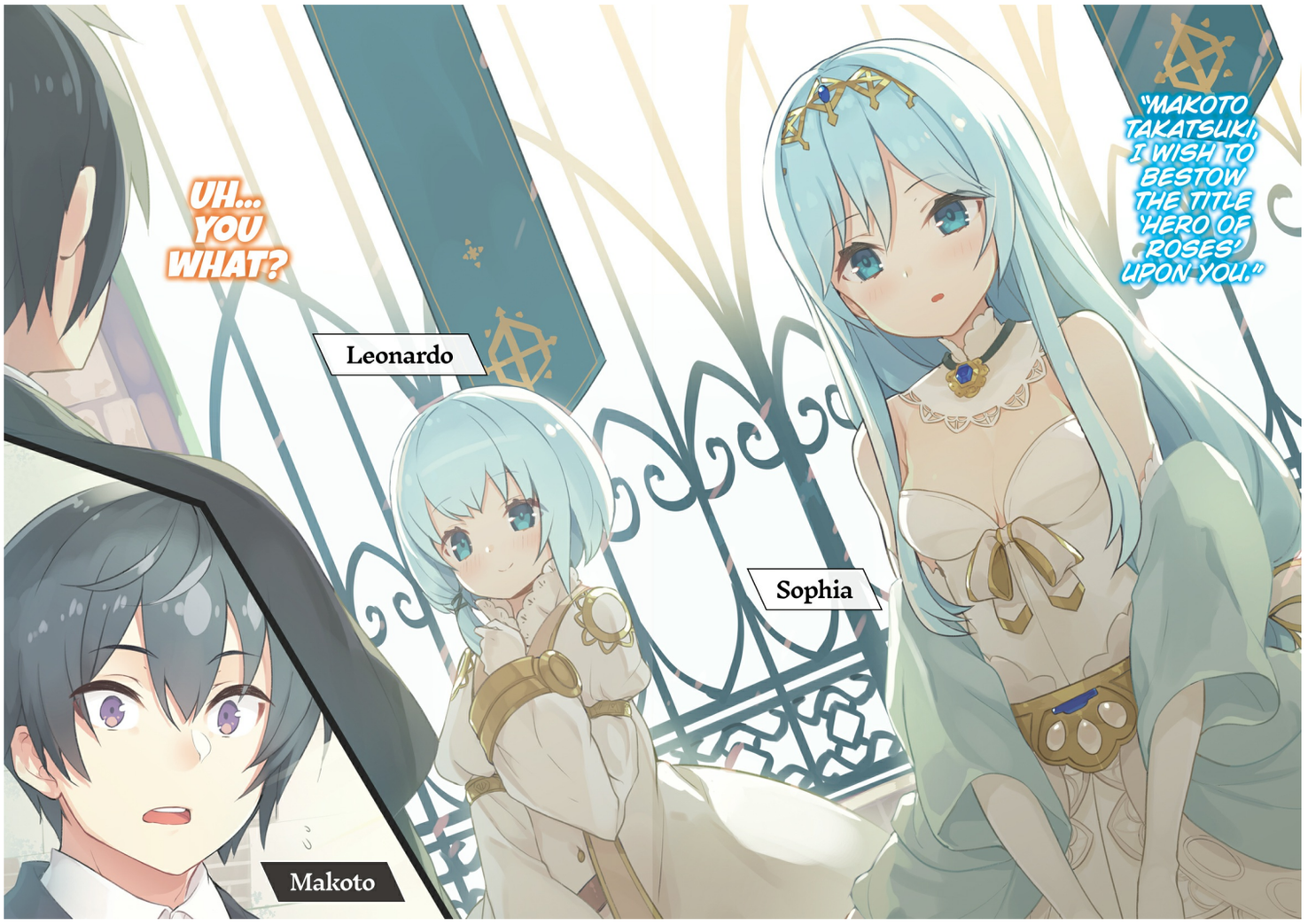
Afterword

This is Isle Osaki. Thank you for picking up volume three of *Zero Believers*. To my readers on *Naro*, thank you once again for all of your support.

This volume was the Roses arc, aka the “Softening Princess Sophia Arc.” In volume one she was cold, in volume two they fought, and in volume three... Well, it was a fairly quick development. She was never originally intended to be a heroine—I’d just lined her up to play the heel. On *Naro* there’s a trope where people who act against the protagonist get what’s coming to them. But Princess Sophia’s a girl, so I didn’t want whatever was “coming to her” to be too awful. Therefore, I thought that falling for the protagonist but getting shot down might be enough. Her crush on Makoto turned out to be cuter than I’d expected though, so she became a heroine in her own right. Incidentally, my notes for Prince Leonardo have “sub-heroine” written on them. It’s just the author’s craziness.

Finally, I’d like to thank my editor Y and my illustrator Tam-U. I hope that you readers will continue to support me so I can keep writing fun adventures into volume four.


Noah
Full Clearing Another World under a GODDESS with Zero Believers
3
Coldhearted Princess Carved of Ice
Story Isle Osaki
Art Tam-U
"MAKOTO, LET'S BEGIN TODAY'S MEETING."


UH... YOU WHAT?
Leonardo
"MAKOTO TAKATSUKI, I WISH TO BESTOW THE TITLE 'HERO OF ROSES' UPON YOU."
Sophia
Makoto


PRINCESS SOPHIA LOOSENED THE ROBE SHE WAS WEARING AND LET IT DROP TO THE FLOOR, REVEALING HER PALE SKIN.
SHE WAS WEARING A SWIMSUIT WITH A PALE BLUE PATTERN ON IT.
"WH-WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Bonus Short Stories

A Conversation between Princess Sophia and Her Goddess

◇ Princess Sophia's Perspective ◇

"Look! I'm much better at swimming now, wouldn't you say?"

For the past few evenings, I had been swimming in the night sea with Hero Makoto.

"Yeah, definitely," he answered with a soft smile. Makoto was standing atop the water using his magic. The gentle look in his eyes made my body heat up, but...

You don't seem interested in me...

He was wearing his usual adventuring gear, an entirely ash-gray outfit. I glanced at the rest of his equipment on the beach.

He's going to try and make it to the temple again tonight...

Just then, I saw that Hero Makoto was staring at the water. His eyes were pointed toward where the Seafloor Temple lay beneath the waves...rather than at me. From what he'd told me, I knew that he dove down there each night and tried to progress through the trench called Deep Scar.

It was a perilous place full of monsters, and he went back every day.

I wish he wouldn't put himself in so much danger... But, if I had said as much out loud, I'm sure he would have given me an exasperated look.

Suddenly, I recalled a conversation I'd had with the Goddess of Water, Lady Eir.

◇

"Heyyy, Sophieeee☆ You good?"

"L-Lady Eir?!"

While I was offering my daily prayers, the goddess spoke to me. Though she was normally very relaxed with her speech, she was still the goddess that watched over all of Roses—it was no trifling matter for her to converse with a mortal priestess.

“Is something the matter?” I asked hesitantly.

“Yup! It’s an emergency, a real one.”

“A-An emergency?” *What sort of disaster would a goddess consider an emergency?* Anxious nerves suffused my body.

“So, Sophie,” she began.

“Y-Yes...?” I replied, waiting for what she’d say next.

“You’re in love!”

“Wha...?” Despite my *Coldhearted* skill, I could only manage a half-witted noise. “Um...Lady Eir, what...?” As I struggled to respond, I thought back on my behavior over the past few days...and immediately broke out into a cold sweat.

“Come on, don’t be coy,” Lady Eir teased. “You’re always so serious when you pray, always thinking of your citizens. But! Your head’s been all full of a certain ‘hero’ lately. Of course I’d notice,” she told me with a giggle.

“I-I’m so sorry!” I blurted, lowering my head to the floor before the statue that bore her likeness. “I’ve neglected my position!”

“Oh, no, no, I’m delighted!” she exclaimed, and I could feel the joy in her words. “You’re so serious! You haven’t ever had feelings for anyone like this before, have you? Of course I’m happy that someone’s finally caught your eye. I know it’ll be a *revelation*. Sophie, you need to have your man fall for you.”

“L-Lady Eir?!”

I couldn’t do that! I had no idea how to even begin!

“It’s okay! I’ll teach you.”

Well...that was very kind of her, but I could feel the mischievous goddess getting into it...

◇

“I’ll see you later then,” Hero Makoto told me. We’d finished up at the beach, and he had escorted me back to my room. This was usually where we’d part ways.

“Um...be careful,” I said. In a departure from my usual behavior, I held onto him with both hands and peered up into his eyes. Lady Eir had said that this technique was effective on men, but I wasn’t so sure.

I did, however, get to see the rare sight of a flustered Hero Makoto with reddened cheeks.

“R-Right. I will be,” he stammered. Then, he left with hurried steps.

Nicely done, said a voice in my mind. *It’s working.*

Lady Eir was watching?!

Wanna try hugging him next time?

I-I couldn’t do that! It was dirty. Oh, but...he looked so cute with flushed cheeks. I wanted to see that sight again. As far as my emotions went, it was probably too late for me...

Makoto, Lucy, and Sasa

“Heavy...” I grumbled.

I was just waking up, and it felt like there was a weight on either side of me. Last night, I’d tried to enter the Seafloor Temple again but had accomplished yet another flawless tactical withdrawal.

I’d decided that barging in on Prince Leonardo’s room every night would be a nuisance, so I was in my own bed this time. As I’d expected, the usual intruders had arrived.

Well, it’s not like I locked the door... I thought to myself.

I glanced to my side and noticed the long red hair draped over my neck. The elf wreathed by all that hair was breathing softly in her sleep.

“Lucy,” I murmured, “come on.”

“Mmph... Oh, you’re back, Makoto?” she asked, stirring awake and rubbing

her eyes sleepily. As always, her nightwear was more like underwear because of her high body heat, and the strap of her camisole was slipping from her shoulder.

“It feels like I’ve said it a few times, but the way you wear that—”

Suddenly, I was interrupted by a pair of arms slipping around my neck.

“Takatsukiii.” Her voice was close to my ear, and she brushed Lucy’s hair away. The owner of those chilly arms was none other than...Sasa.

“Morning, Sasa.”

“Good morning. So you came back to your room this time! It’s been a while...” As she spoke, she pulled me closer with her arms and wrapped her legs around mine. She was coiling around me...almost like a snake. Well, she *was* a lamia, so I guess that made sense...

“Come on, Aya, you’re clinging too much,” Lucy protested. She pulled off Sasa’s arms and replaced them with her own.

“Luuu, what’re you doing,” Sasa whined, grabbing Lucy right back.

“We promised we’d help each other, right?” Lucy asked.

“So why are you getting in the way?” countered Sasa.

The two of them glared at each other over me. *Uh...guys?*

“You’re too close to him.”

“And *you’re* not wearing your clothes properly.”

Meanwhile, I was being deprived of air. “C-Can’t breathe...help...” Sasa had superhuman strength, and Lucy was stronger than she looked... I was being crushed between the two of them.

“Ah! Makoto!”

“Oh no, Takatsuki!”

The two of them quickly realized what they were doing and backed off.

That was close... I’d been heading for a bad end, crushed between girls.

Are you sure that’s not a good *end?* Noah interjected.

No, goddess, that’s not how I want to go out!

While I caught my breath, Lucy and Sasa stared at me in worry.

“Are you okay, Makoto?”

“Are you angry?”

“Nah,” I replied. “Actually, we should all go out today.”

I honestly felt kinda bad... During our vacation, I’d been focusing entirely on the Seafloor Temple, so I’d barely made any time for them.

At my suggestion, their faces both broke out into smiles.

“We’ll go change!”

“Wait here.”

The two of them quickly scampered off to their rooms.

◇

“Makoto!” exclaimed Lucy. “First off, there’s this really pretty beach! After that, we can stop somewhere good for lunch, and I want to buy a new outfit for practicing magic...”

Sasa then cut in with her own ideas. “Takatsuki! I want to look around that bazaar. There’s this place with great cake, so we can go there. I also want you to help me pick out some new shoes...”

“That sounds great, Aya!” Lucy said enthusiastically. “Maybe I should pick up a new pair too.”

“That’s fine!” Sasa agreed. “What about plans for tonight?”

“Leave that to me! I booked a private room at a restaurant—the view is supposed to be amazing! Prince Leonardo told me about it, so it’ll be perfect!”

“Yay! Then we can play cards in your room, Takatsuki.”

Our schedule was packed to bursting. The pair of them just didn’t stop...

Just as we were confirming our itinerary for the day, I felt someone’s eyes on us. I glanced around and found Princess Sophia looking our way. But when our eyes met, she hurriedly averted her gaze. What was that all about...?

Makoto, time to show your manliness.

Noah... All right. I'll speak to Princess Sophia as well.

A Chat between Goddess and Believer

It was the night we left the Habhain Islands, and I was dreaming.

"N-Noah?" I stammered. "What're you wearing...?"

"What do you think? Does it suit me?"

My goddess was in my dream...wearing swimwear. *I-I mean, as far as how it looks on her...* I swallowed. I was used to seeing my normal friends in swimsuits now, but this was...brutal.

"It's cute, right?" she asked, pulling a pinup pose.

"You're ruining it," I said, and she acknowledged my criticism with disinterest. "But *why* are you wearing that?"

At my question, she suddenly looked sulky. "Well, you've all been enjoying yourselves at the beach this whole time! Think about how I feel watching you!"

"Ah, so you were jealous..."

I felt bad.

"Hmph, it's fine. You're with me today," she said, snapping her fingers. I could hear the lapping of waves now.

"What?!"

At her gesture, the area had turned into a landscape of sandy beach and blue sea.

W-What the heck?

"It's not real," she admitted. Then, she added proudly, "But it's the principle of the thing."

"I mean, it *looks* like a real beach," I told her. "I didn't know you could do this."

"Well, there's no point when I'm on my own, but since you're here now, I can

have a bit of fun.”

She looked bright as she said that, but her smile had a tinge of loneliness to it. Seeing her expression made my chest hurt.

If only I could’ve made it to the Seafloor Temple...

“Idiot! I told you it’s too soon.” Noah’s scolding came with a smack to my head, and her expression looked dismayed for a moment. She perked up immediately though. “Right! We’ve got the beach and the sea, so you know what’s next. Come on, this way!”

She pulled at my hand. Noah was always touchy-feely, but her unfamiliar swimsuit and the memory of her earlier expression had my heart pounding.

“Look over there,” she said. “*This* is what makes it a beach trip!” She was smiling and pointing to...a hut with a table. An array of foods were lined up, including yakisoba, fried squid, beer, and shaved ice.

A clubhouse...?

“Come on, sit down,” Noah urged.

Within moments, she was hanging out on a cheap-looking bench with a beer in hand. “Ahhh, it’s a real beach trip now!” she exclaimed. “Aren’t you going to eat?” She was happily munching on yakisoba as she drank her beer. Any sense of her earlier loneliness—or divinity—was gone.

Are you some old geezer...? I thought.

“Rude! Hurry up and sit down.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll top up your drink.”

Floundering a bit, I managed to take a seat next to her. I poured two beers, and she gulped hers down. Noah looked beautiful as she drained the glass.

“Hey, yours is still full. Come on! Chug, chug!”

I sighed. “Could you quit with the frat-bro vibes?”

Well...she was gorgeous if she kept her mouth shut. It was just a dream, but the two of us had a blast. Noah...seemed like she was having fun, at least in front of me.

I'll beat that dungeon, I swore to myself.

Makoto and Prince Leonardo's Little Adventure

◇ Prince Leonardo's Perspective ◇

After gathering my courage, I called out, "Makoto!"

"Prince Leonardo?" he answered, looking quizzically back at me. The two of us were standing atop the sea, quite far away from the area where our holiday villa was located.

"What's up?" he asked. "We'll be past the barrier soon, and that'll be dangerous for you. Maybe you should head back... I can escort you."

When Makoto grabbed my hand, it made me jump a little.

"No... Please take me with you! You train in the dungeon every night, and I want to come along!"

My statement elicited a dubious expression from him.

"I'm heading for the Seafloor Temple," he stated.

It was just like I'd heard from my sister... Makoto goes to one of the last dungeons every night. It was one of the hardest dungeons in existence, and no human had ever conquered it, but Makoto was always sneaking out and devoting himself to that task. It had only been a few days since he'd saved the capital... Just how dedicated was he?!

I want to be a brave warrior, I thought, *one just as strong as Makoto!*

Ultimately, my request was granted—I got him to bring me along.

◇

Eep!

I was already regretting my decision. The sea was pitch-black at this time of night, and awful monsters were swimming through the waters past the barrier.

"W-What was that?!"

"A sea serpent, I think. A pretty big one," came a nonchalant answer from my

side.

Makoto was currently holding my hand as we swam through the water using magic. He was managing to hold a conversation along with his water-breathing spell.

What even...

“T-There were ten of them!” I exclaimed. “And they’re coming this way!”

“Weird. They normally ignore me. I wonder what’s up?”

Makoto! Don’t stay calm! We need to run!

“Well, since you’re with me, we should probably get away,” Makoto suggested.

“Wawaa!”

Instantly, our speed shot up, and we rushed away from the sea serpents. However, we soon encountered more monsters.

“Makoto!” I pointed in front of us. “There’s a swarm of kelpie!”

“Ooh, I haven’t seen any of those before.”

Kelpie were evil spirits said to roam the seas. They were dangerous monsters too... I’d heard that they would drown mortals on sight. Also, kelpie were far faster than sea serpents.

“They’re coming toward us,” I warned.

“Huh, they’re kinda pretty,” mumbled Makoto.

“Is now really the time?!” They did have beautiful fur, but they were also known to attack people!

“Come on, over here.” Makoto was beckoning them. The kelpie must have seen his gesture as provocation because they were *all* swimming in this direction now.

“This is bad!” I said. “They’re going to catch us.”

“I guess it’s a race, then.” As Makoto spoke, he used his magic to speed us up even further.

W-Was he playing around this whole time?! If I tried to speak, I'd certainly bite my tongue, so I could only scream that mentally.

"Oh, there's some more," Makoto observed.

I looked, and yes, there were other monsters interested in the prey the kelpies were chasing...aka, us.

Eeeep!

Scary, scary, scary, scary, scary, scary, scary, scary...but...

"Wow! Sirens as well!" Makoto exclaimed. "Oh, wait, you shouldn't hear their song." He quickly covered my ears.

But you can?!

We ended up spending the night being chased around by monsters, though none of them managed to even touch Makoto.

◇

"Man, that was fun," Makoto said, laughing like a mischievous kid. "I usually just stick to Deep Scar, so that was a nice change of pace."

I laughed weakly. All night, we'd been dragged around by his water magic, escaping attacking monsters. I felt like I was on the verge of collapse.

But now I knew—it wasn't *courage* that Makoto possessed...he just lacked any semblance of common sense.

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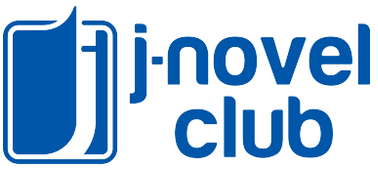
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Full Clearing Another World under a Goddess with Zero Believers: Volume 3

by Isle Osaki

Translated by MPT

Edited by C.D. Leeson

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