
Hanashi
MEDIA
Story by
Shiraishi Arata
Illustrations by
Famy Siraso
I'm Just a Villager
Vol 1
So What?


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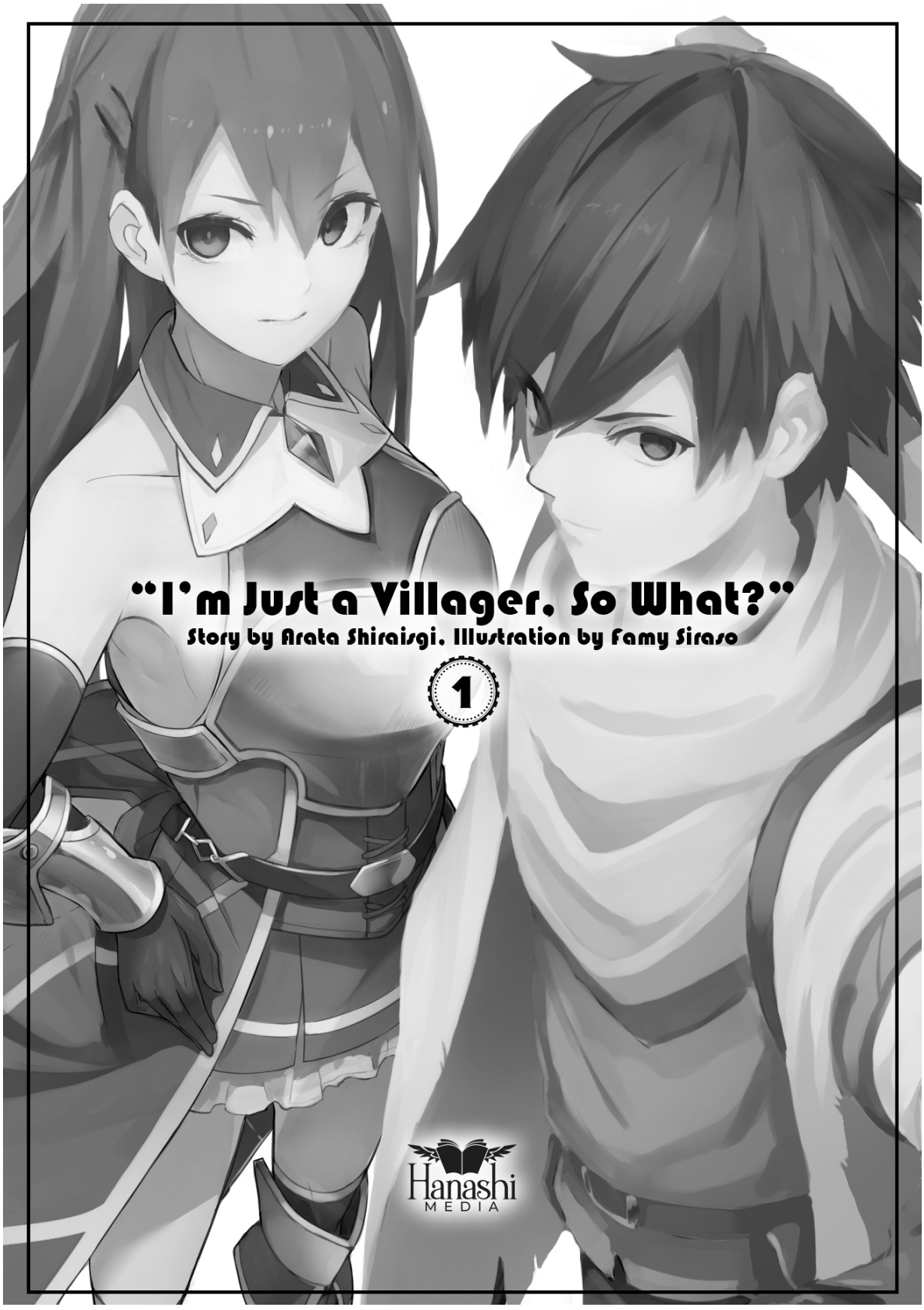
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Hanashi MEDIA



"I'm Just a Villager. So What?"

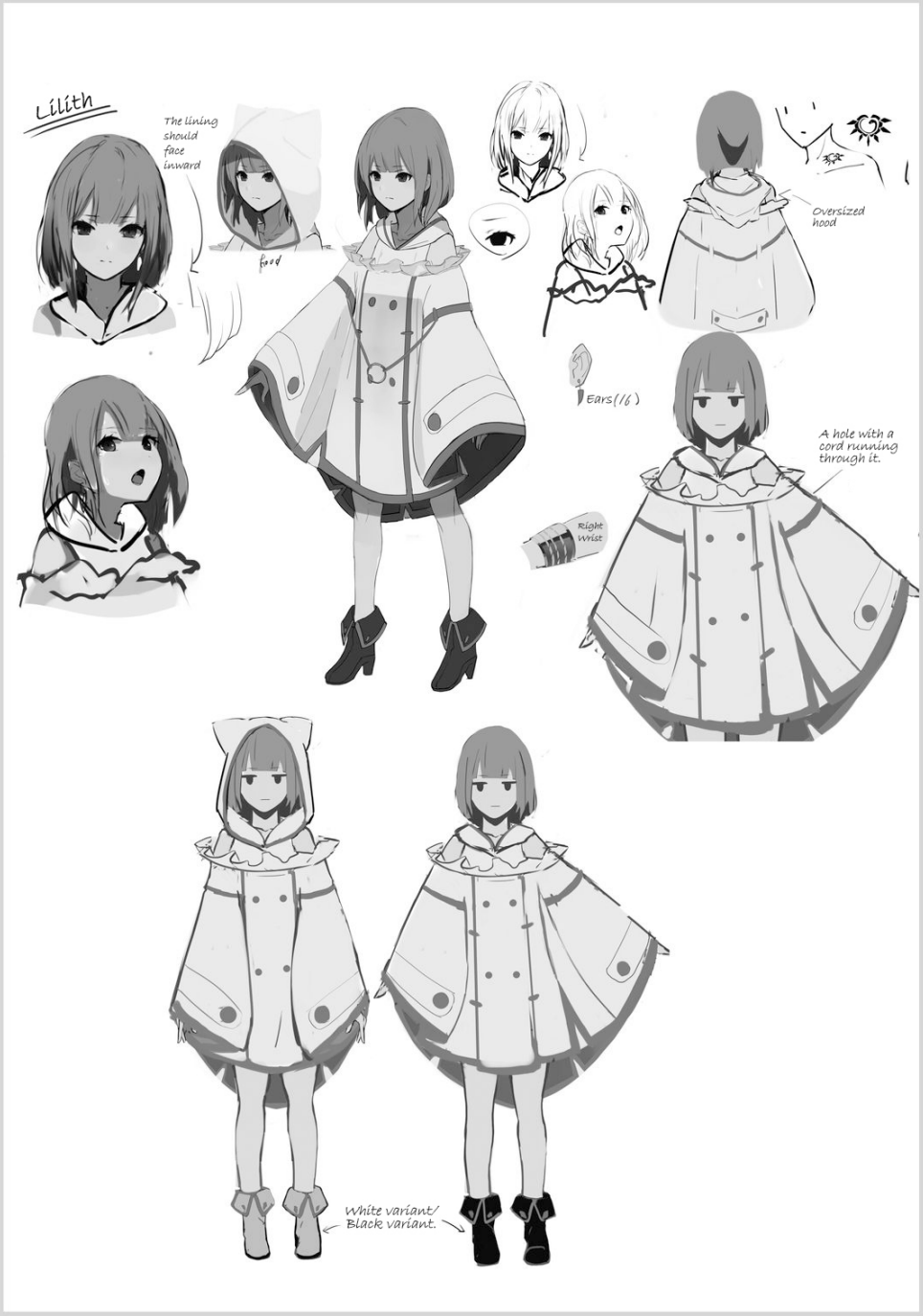
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Hanashi MEDIA


I'm Just a Mage So What?
Vol. 1


"Ahaha! Ahahaha! Ahahaha! Hey, hey, big sis?
And you too... big brothers?
What's wrong? What's the matter?"
Before I, a hero, could even sense her presence, she suddenly appeared—no more than ten meters ahead.
Wrapped in a gothic lolita dress of black and violet hues, she looked about ten years old, her golden hair falling in elegant ringlets.
She was a few years younger than me.
And yet her appearance matched perfectly with the legends—of that dangerous being whispered of in old tales.
"...Who are you?"



Character Sketches



Character Sketches



Character Sketches


I'm Just a Villager So What?
Vol. 1
Story by
Arata Shiraishi
Illustrations by
Famy Siraso

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Story by Arata Shiraishi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

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Prologue: The Weakest Villager in the World

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Prologue: The Weakest Villager in the World

When you hear the word "reincarnation," you probably imagine cheat-like powers, right? I certainly did.

It all happened just like in the stories: a flash of headlights followed by a deafening screech of tires. The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a new world, ready for a fresh start… only to be granted the *exhilarating* job class of Villager.

No noble birth. No hidden destiny. Just another poor farmer's kid, born into a family that constantly struggled to make ends meet. Our soil wasn't cursed; it simply didn't yield much. Even during prosperous seasons, evenings often brought scarce food, and hunger became a persistent, intimate tormentor in my gut.

Still, I grew up. Skinny, sure, but strong enough. By the age of fifteen, my stats and skills were so painfully average, they could've been scribbled onto a blank sheet of paper, and no one would've noticed the difference.

Let me say it again for those who hold onto false hope: reincarnation is supposed to come with cheat powers, right?

Even after drawing the shortest straw and being saddled with the Villager class, I expected *some* advantage—hidden talents, insane growth rates, perhaps even a latent secret skill. At least, that's what I kept telling myself. I waited. I prayed. I searched for signs.

Yet nothing manifested. There were no divine gifts, no grand miracles—just my utterly unremarkable self, devoid of power and distinction in every meaningful sense.

Meanwhile, right next door, a *true* cheater was born. Three days after my birth, Cordelia Allston graced the house across the lane.

Her very name seemed plucked from a ballad. By the age of fifteen, Cordelia had already blossomed into a captivating beauty capable of mesmerizing an entire village. She had red hair that sparkled in the sunlight; sharp, fearless eyes; and an intimidating aura that caused even veteran warriors to falter. But she wasn't just beautiful; she was terrifying in the most remarkable sense.

Her class? Hero.

Not a trainee, not a squire—a full-fledged, world-saving, battle-scarred Hero, divinely blessed and brimming with innate power. She was the kind of one-person army written of in legends, and she lived just a stone's throw away from my own humble home.

Same village. Same year. Same starting point. Yet, the trajectories of our lives diverged so sharply, we may as well have been born on different worlds.

She was, without exaggeration, a warrior worth a thousand men. From my perspective as a mere Villager, she existed on an altogether different plane, a monstrous force I simply couldn't comprehend.

I could still remember the overwhelming sight of her, just fifteen, effortlessly swinging a dull training sword and slicing through a massive boulder like butter. If she'd sprint a hundred meters, I wouldn't be surprised if she completed it in a fleeting second or two. Frankly, she'd just about stopped being human.

Back when we were four or five, I used to win the occasional scuffle simply because I was a boy. But from that point, her growth had been nothing short of astonishing.

Nowadays, even in casual interactions, she exercised extreme caution, diligently controlling her strength to avoid accidentally harming me. Once, a playful *smack*—intended merely as a joke, really—resulted in my dislocated shoulder. Though under no obligation, she devoted three full days and nights to nursing me back to health. So consumed by guilt was she that I almost felt pity for *her*, the one who had inflicted the injury.

Anyway, back to the present: both Cordelia and I are now fifteen.

At the moment, I was camping out in the Great Manakis Forest. Rumors had been swirling around about a dragon living in its depths. True or not, who could say?

It's around 7 p.m., I guessed.

Winter meant biting cold and an early sunset. Though I huddled close to my campfire for warmth, the thick canopy above smothered even the moonlight, plunging the forest into total darkness.

That's when I heard it: a wolf's howl, distant but unmistakable.

A chill ran down my spine as I turned to Cordelia, my voice tight with unease.

"Hey, Cordelia? Are we seriously gonna be okay out here? I mean… there *are* monsters in this forest, you know?"

Her waist-length crimson hair caught the firelight, casting a faint, ethereal glow. Her flawless, almost divine countenance blended delicate beauty with an indomitable strength—it was hard to believe she belonged to this world at all.

And yet, there she was, a warrior beyond compare, worth a thousand men if not more.

If you handed her a sword and dropped her into any battlefield, she would defeat even the most experienced fighters with a single, decisive stroke.

The girl, clad in a lightweight azure cuirass that seemed almost too magnificent for her delicate frame—so impossibly slender it begged the question of where such immense power resided—tilted her head slightly in response to my question.

"Huh? You're genuinely concerned about monsters when I'm here? They don't call me "Dragon Killer" for nothing. Shouldn't you be worried *for* the monsters instead? The ones around here are all weak anyway… Oh, wait—this is your first encounter with actual monsters, isn't it?"

"Unlike you, I've got the Villager class, remember? The most I can do is set a few traps just outside the village to deal with pests."

"Oh yeah, I remember that one time," she said, nodding as the memory resurfaced. "On the way back from a knights' expedition, I saw you sneaking around outside the village. You were *so* paranoid, jumping at every little sound, glancing around like the trees were gonna eat you."

"That's because I'm a Villager, so give me a break already! And *you're* the one who dragged me all the way out— Wait, what the hell?!"

It was massive—a wild boar.

The creature burst out from behind the trees, charging directly at us. It had to weigh well over a ton. Its eyes gleamed with an unnatural violet light—the telltale mark of corruption. Thick strands of drool dripped steadily from its gaping maw.

"Ryuto! Don't move!" Cordelia shouted.

That was all she said before bolting toward the beast like a gale unleashed.

In a single, fluid motion, she dropped into a sliding tackle, diving beneath the charging boar's belly. While skimming across the ground, she unleashed a swift upward slash with her sword.

A torrent of entrails spilled out onto the forest floor. At the same time, she rolled free from beneath the beast and sprang to her feet.

The boar, its gut torn open, crashed heavily to its side. Cordelia leapt onto its now motionless flank, raised her longsword once more, and brought it down cleanly across its neck.

The head separated from the body in that one stroke, a crimson mist spraying across Cordelia's cheek like battle paint.

"Job's done. Let's have boar hotpot for breakfast!" she chirped, grinning with childlike glee.

You've got to be kidding me… I winced at the vivid splash of blood on her face, striving to maintain a neutral expression.

Sensing my evident shock, I forced my features into something resembling a smile.

"Meat is rather… excessive, for so early in the morning, wouldn't you agree? And I mean… you're seriously insane, in more ways than

one…" I muttered, still shaken.

Cordelia seemed to notice the flicker of emotion on my face. She sat down on a rock and let out a long, weary sigh.

"Earlier, you asked about my reason for bringing you here, didn't you?"

As she spoke, she pulled out a cloth and began carefully wiping the blood from her cheek.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"The truth is… I wanted you to know," she said, her gaze fixed distantly upon the sky.

"Know what?"

"My real self. The part of me I never show in the village. Since I was ten, I've been mixed up in things like this, with knights and adventurers. Performing all the dirty work…"

A moment of silence followed her words.

So, my reaction to the blood—yeah, that was definitely a mistake. I regretted it instantly.

Possibly sensing my internal turmoil, Cordelia continued speaking.

"Soon, I'll be formally joining the Knights' Order. I'll go through a year of rigorous training, and then when I turn sixteen, I'll be enrolled as a scholarship student in the Royal Academy of Magic. It's all part of the strengthening regimen that the Divine Prophecy has laid out for me. All to prepare for the impending Great Calamity."

"Yeah, I've heard."

"That's why I wanted *you* to see the real me. Just you."

"Huh? Isn't Moses always seeing the real you?"

Like Cordelia and me, he too was a childhood friend—but unlike me, he'd been granted the class of Sage. Another absurd cheat of a class.

Seriously, what were the odds? In this tiny village, how did two individuals born in the same year come to possess such extraordinarily rare and powerful roles?

To be blunt, a Hero constituted a veritable weapon of war, capable of altering a nation's destiny. A Sage, moreover, represented a tactical asset capable of reshaping entire battles.

Most kingdoms would be lucky to have even one person like them. That's why I was in such an awkward position here.

Putting all that aside, Cordelia was trembling, not from fear or cold, but from pure frustration. Her slender shoulders quivered with every breath as she glared at me, her voice rising with an unusual sharpness.

"Moses and I might always be together because of our training schedule," she yelled, fists clenched at her sides, "but I told you, didn't I?! It's *you*! I wanted to make sure you knew! Just *you*!"

The silence echoed with her words. We both remained silent for a moment. Behind us, the fire crackled softly. The forest became quiet, shrouded in a stillness so total that it seemed as though the shadows were listening as well.

"We… We won't be able to see each other like this anymore," Cordelia whispered.

I looked at her, the weight of her voice finally sinking in.

"I had a feeling. Joining the Knights will change everything."

With a sudden, fierce expression, she stepped forward. "And that doesn't bother you? Not even a little? After everything I just said… Don't you have anything to say to *me*?"

Her gaze burned through me, and for a second, I faltered.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "I just… I don't really get what you're trying to say."

Cordelia inhaled sharply, as if to brace herself. Then, she rose to her feet, marched over to where I was sitting, and crouched down in front of me. Her blue eyes locked onto mine—firm, unwavering, and impossibly close.

"I've always… always…" she began, voice quivering, "I've…"

Before she could finish, a voice called out from across the clearing.

"Ryuto-san!" Moses's voice rang from the direction of the river, cheerful and oblivious as ever. "Could I trouble you for some help? Washing things in this cold is… honestly a bit much!"

Cordelia went still. A long, loud *tsk* slipped from her lips, her mood visibly souring. I blinked, caught between confusion and guilt.

"I'll go check on him," I said cautiously, rising to my feet. "You mind keeping the fire going?"

She didn't respond. She just turned her face away with a dramatic huff, her cheeks flushed crimson and her mouth twisted into a stubborn pout.

"What's with the look?" I asked, brow raised.

With a small stomp of her foot, she snapped, "*I don't care anymore!* Go help that idiot already, you moron!"

As I turned to leave, her voice grew softer and she called out to me once more.

"You're a Villager, so if a monster shows up, you *scream*, okay? As loud as you can. I mean it, Ryuto. I'll come running. Well, not that there's anything strong lurking nearby. Most monsters can't even get close when I'm around."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," I said, waving a hand behind me as I started toward the river. "Besides, Moses is there. We'll be fine."

She didn't answer. The fire popped once behind me as I walked away, its glow casting long shadows into the forest.

As I waved a hand behind me toward Cordelia, I let out a long sigh and muttered under my breath, "'You're a Villager,' huh? Even Cordelia sees it that way in the end. I suppose that's how it is… I really am just a Villager."

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Our other childhood friend, Moses, possessed shoulder-length, purple-tinged hair and a pair of glasses. He was a thin boy, always engrossed in solitary reading.

Even at the age of fifteen, he maintained a remarkably formal demeanor, consistently offering a polite smile during conversation. It was a smile that evoked the image of an overly eager insurance salesperson, and frankly, I had never truly felt at ease in his presence.

"My apologies, Ryuto-san… and I appreciate your help," Moses said.

Indeed, I was helping him. We were by the river, washing up the dishes from our earlier meal, along with some of our underclothes.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I mean, honestly, this kind of thing should be a Villager's job anyway, not a Sage's."

"You are correct. However, our *esteemed princess* decreed that Ryuto-san would oversee the cooking and I the washing. We have no choice but to obey," Moses said with a resigned smile.

"She sure does know how to issue orders and never lift a finger herself…"

"Indeed."

At that, we exchanged a glance, followed by a shared, wry chuckle.

"All right, that's the last of it."

Having scrubbed the final plate clean, I straightened up.

"You have my gratitude, Ryuto-san," Moses said.

"Don't sweat it. There are, after all, only three of us of the same age in this village. We're friends, right?"

Suddenly, my vision darkened. An intense wave of dizziness hit me, a sensation far more severe than mere lightheadedness or a passing faintness.

My knees gave way, and I dropped to the ground.

"Friends, you say? Between whom, exactly? A Villager and a Sage? Heh, heh, what a delightful joke."

My head was spinning wildly, the world around me tilting and blurring beyond control. As I descended into sheer panic,

desperately attempting to decipher the unfolding events, Moses's voice descended upon me from above, chilling and composed.

"And it appears the drug is finally taking effect."

"D-Drug? What are you… Why…"

My tongue twisted awkwardly in my mouth, failing to articulate words. A shiver ran down my spine, and a chilling sweat poured from my back.

"'Why?'" Moses repeated, as if the answer were obvious. "Isn't it simple? You, Cordelia, and I—we were all born in the same year and grew up together. And yet… for some inexplicable reason, *you* are the object of her affection."

He inhaled deeply, then proceeded, his voice edged with a palpable abhorrence.

"My vocational aptitude is that of a Sage. A rare talent born once in tens of thousands—perhaps even hundreds of thousands. I am one of the chosen few."

Yeah. I know that already.

We were all born in the same tiny village—yet two of us possessed cheat-level aptitudes.

I know that! It's a truth so profound that it makes me sick with how pathetic it feels.

"And I am, furthermore, a reincarnated soul. Ah, though you likely wouldn't understand what that means… No matter. It's enough for you to know that I am not merely a Sage; I am something far more special."

What? What the hell are you talking about?

My vision blurred, consciousness dissolving into mist.

Moses's words reached my ears, but they registered as hollow, devoid of meaning, as if my mind could no longer construct coherent images.

"I was truly amazed, you know. To think a girl so blessed by the gods—a creature of such angelic beauty—could exist in this world. The prospect of her future in but a few years… it fills me with anticipation."

I tried to shout—to call for Cordelia, to scream for help—but it was already too late.

No sound escaped my throat.

Collapsed on all fours, my muscles gave out completely, trembling weakly. All I could do was desperately maintain what little balance I had to avoid crumpling onto the ground.

"She deserves to have *me* by her side. If you want an answer to why this is happening to you, that's it."

Moses then positioned himself behind me. Without a moment's hesitation, he forcefully drove his foot into my back.

The impact sent me hurtling forward into the river with a resounding splash.

The river's current proved swift, and under the debilitating influence of the drug, I found myself virtually immobilized, much less capable of resistance. Yet, through sheer instinct, I managed to twist my body enough to remain afloat on my back.

I surrendered myself to the rushing water, as darkness slowly swallowed what little consciousness I had left.

The last thing that echoed in my mind was Moses's parting statement, seared deep into my soul.

"Know your place, you filthy Villager. How dare you speak as an *equal* to a Hero?"



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How long have I been drifting?

My limbs still refused to respond. I remained flat on my back, carried helplessly by the current, my eyes fixed upon a star-studded sky.

It's nighttime now, huh…

I couldn't tell how much time had passed, but it didn't seem like it had been that long. Nevertheless, I could feel my strength slipping away.

At that moment, all sensation departed from my arms and legs. But strangely, I felt no cold, no pain, no discomfort.

Only an overwhelming drowsiness…

Isn't this, like, the most dangerous possible state to be in? I mused, as if the whole thing were happening to someone else.

Within that hazy threshold between slumber and wakefulness, where the line distinguishing consciousness from unconsciousness dissolved, a voice reached me.

"… Ryuto! Ryuto! Where are you?! Answer me, please… You *have* to!"

How Cordelia had discovered what happened to me, I couldn't begin to guess.

Moses had probably spun some clever story after I disappeared. Perhaps he had simply reported me as missing or claimed I had been assaulted by a monster.

Regardless, he would've made sure things played out so that *this* wouldn't happen—that Cordelia and I would never cross paths again.

Whether through sheer coincidence or by virtue of her Hero skills—those inhuman instincts, that inconceivable perception—Cordelia had, against all odds, located me adrift downriver.

I saw her then, sprinting at full speed down the gravel bank along the shore, heading straight toward me.

Looks like I might make it, I thought. But as my gaze fell upon what lay just beyond, my head weakly swayed from side to side.

"There you are! I finally found you! Hold on, Ryuto! I'm coming right now—wait… What?!"

Life just isn't fair.

Right in front of me loomed a massive drop—the waterfall infamous throughout this region, a sheer drop exceeding fifty meters.

For someone like Cordelia, who'd long since transcended the bounds of ordinary humanity, such an obstacle would perhaps pose no challenge. But for a mere Villager, surviving such a fall was utterly beyond the realm of hope.

Cordelia grasped the situation instantly. Without a moment's hesitation, she made her decision: she would dive into the freezing winter river.

Yet, even with her inhuman reflexes and monstrous physical ability, she was too far away.

"Sorry, Cordelia. Guess this is goodbye…"

The words, barely more than a whisper, emerged hoarse and fragile, yet I compelled them from my lips. And judging by the way her expression twisted into a crumpled mess in that instant, I knew she'd heard me.

My apology was for two things. One was for the inevitable—my impending demise. The other… was for my inability to reciprocate her feelings.

I had known for some time how Cordelia felt about me.

Even with the memories from my past life, it was hard to ignore. Still… she was too young. Too earnest. And in a few years, she was destined to blossom into a woman of unparalleled beauty—an individual utterly beyond the aspirations of someone like me.

As I thought that, memories of our time together flashed through my mind like a reel of film, playing out in the seconds

before the end.

Until the age of six, she was my constant shadow, always clinging to my back. However, once she turned seven—the age her vocational aptitude began to truly mold her—things changed. I found myself receding into the shadow of *her* back.

Even so, the bond between us never broke. Our positions changed, but we stayed close. Always together.

And then, not so long ago, arrived that crucial moment—the moment she chose me.

To her, it must have felt completely natural. She perceived me as her destined partner and chose me without hesitation.

Yet, despite this… I found myself burdened by a nagging thought:

A protector of none. Someone who must always be protected… That's me. Maybe Moses was right. Maybe I don't deserve to stand by her side—as an equal—in any sense.

God… It's pathetic… I want to be strong. I want to be strong enough… Just once… Please…

Then, just as I heard the distant splash of Cordelia diving into the river…

… I plunged into the abyss.

I found myself in a dimly lit cavern.

Countless stalactites hung from its ceiling. Water droplets descended from their tips—*drip, drip*—echoing faintly through the darkness.

The sudden, cold splash of one such drop stirred me awake, leaving me speechless the instant I opened my eyes.

"This is the underground cave beneath the forest—the very path leading to the dragon's lair."

The voice came from above me, its calm, resonant tone addressing my prone body.

And its speaker… was a dragon. A massive one, cloaked in deep crimson scales. Fifteen meters long, at the very least. Its

overwhelming mass left me utterly paralyzed, incapable of formulating a response.

"Creatures that fall from the waterfall," the dragon rumbled, "usually wander the riverbed until death claims them. Only much later does the current carry their husks away. Fortunate or unfortunate, I cannot say. But by peculiar fate, you were swept into a channel that led here."

Apparently, I'd been washed ashore onto a bed of rock.

Yet, whether due to the residual effects of the drug or the severe trauma from the descent, I still couldn't move. My limbs remained useless.

Only my mouth responded, and through it, I managed to whisper a plea.

"I have… a request."

The dragon paused, its colossal head lowering as it contemplated my presence.

"A capricious twist of fate, perhaps. Should it lie within the confines of my power, I shall heed your words."

Surprised by the unexpected composure of its tone, I drew a breath and continued.

"I-I've heard the stories. They say that those who reside within a dragon's lair become stronger…"

The dragon's eyes narrowed slightly, as if recalling distant memories.

"It is true. Long ago, there were a few such humans. They built bonds with us, lived among us, and shared in our time. Upon their departure, many rose to fame. Some even became heroes of great renown."

Famous legends, all of them. The details differed from one tale to the other, but the core was always the same: an ordinary person, by some strange chance, forges a bond with a dragon.

So the stories went: these individuals coexisted with dragons, acquired a peculiar and wondrous power, and subsequently returned

to the human realm, wielding that newfound strength to ascend as heroes.

"Take me with you… I want to become strong…"

"I cannot grant that wish."

"But you just said you'd listen."

The dragon gave a solemn nod.

"I said I would hear any request within my power. I did not lie. The dragon race is one of noble blood, and we do not lie unless truly forced. Or rather, we *cannot* lie. A dragon can't sustain both its form and power while speaking falsehoods. We are bound by the Power of Words."

"Then why can't you grant my wish?"

"There are two reasons. Firstly, a matter of age. To bring someone into the Dragons' Domain is to accept them as kin. However, any person already molded by human customs and social norms would become a disruptive element in that world. The humans previously admitted by us were invariably abandoned children or slaves, under the age of twelve, picked up on a Young Dragon's whim."

"And the second?"

"You… are already dead."

The dragon's gaze shifted toward my abdomen. Then, a claw gently grazed my forehead, subtly tilting my head upward.

And in that moment, I saw it—*really* saw it.

Ah… yeah. This is bad, I thought, strangely calm.

My very insides had been grotesquely torn open, spilling forth from my gut. Blood continued to gush in thick, rhythmic bursts.

Most damning of all… I felt almost no pain.

Hypothermia, blood loss, nerve damage—whatever the cause, my body's systems had already started shutting down.

In other words, I was done for.

It was then that a chilling realization dawned upon me.

My situation explained the dragon's gentle demeanor, its perplexing kindness. It had merely been overseeing my final

moments, and nothing more.

My time was short. If I was going to bargain, I had to be now.

"Then… what if I *meet* those conditions?" I asked the dragon, grinning defiantly.

"Ah, yes. Should that indeed be the case, then I may not speak, and I will grant your wish to the best of my ability," the dragon responded with a solemn nod. "However, your demise is imminent, and your age cannot be reversed. Such occurrences are simply beyond the realm of possibility."

"Got you to promise, didn't I?"

"You've secured my word?"

"What I want… is the *Dragon's Blessing* skill… and access to the Dragon King's Grand Archive."

At that, suspicion tinged the dragon's voice.

"How do you know of that? No—rather than waste time questioning a dying man, it would be faster for me to read your heart and memories directly."

The dragon closed its eyes. A few moments later, it erupted in laughter—soft at first, then expanding into great, resonant peals that filled the cavern.

"I see now! You are… a reincarnator. And more than that… he he he. Ha ha ha ha! Fascinating! You are plotting something most amusing indeed. And this is not our initial encounter, is it? You… You were present on that fateful day, at that specific time, in that particular place. When the village of the prophesied Hero was attacked, and on a whim, I chose to save a few human children."

The dragon squinted its massive eyes, its laughter conveying genuine amusement.

It was getting harder and harder for me to speak. My body felt unbearably heavy.

"That day… you saved me—a mere twelve-year-old boy—from the goblins' incursion and returned me to my mother. You even read my heart back then, and said, 'You walk a most curious and fateful path.'"

The dragon's deep voice rumbled with amusement.

"Should events unfold as you hope from here… then, indeed, that prophecy shall be altered."

I could feel the end approaching.

Just as my vision blurred and faded, the dragon's voice resonated once more, tinged with unconcealed mirth.

"How troublesome, to be bound by such a promise. Now I have no choice but to bring you back to the Dragons' Domain."

"Those words… I'll take them to mean… you're granting my request. From here on out… it's a gamble… but…"

The dragon opened its jaws wide. Inside that monstrous maw, I saw rows of enormous, wickedly sharp fangs, each one as thick as a grown man's arm.

"Then die, Ryuto Maclaine."

With that, the dragon seized me in its massive claws and flung me straight into its mouth.

I heard it clearly: the sickening *crunch* of my skull being crushed between its teeth.

And so, Ryuto Maclaine's second life came to an end.

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"It seems I won that bet, after all."

Upon regaining consciousness, I found myself standing in a vast white void. And before me stood the golden-haired goddess.

Indeed, this was the place where I had first encountered her, after the end of my life in Japan. And in this precise instant, a mere five minutes had passed since I was struck by a truck… or at least, that's how the timeline should align.

If I had to explain this situation as simply as possible:

Skill

【*Return by Death*】

This was not merely the skill bestowed upon me; rather, it was the skill I *personally* selected during my reincarnation.

My greatest fear had always been whether this skill would indeed activate when I needed it most. Fortunately, at this moment, I could say the first stage of my gamble had succeeded.

"You've been through quite a lot, haven't you?" With her question, the goddess radiated a brilliant, beaming smile.

"Yeah, a hell of a lot. So… can I choose *Return by Death* again?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied, still smiling sweetly. "We can't just hand out such an overpowered skill multiple times. You'll have to pick two different skills instead."

"That's a shame, but hardly a surprise."

With that, the second stage of my gamble was confirmed a success as well.

Perceiving the understanding in my heart, the goddess giggled and said, "Sooner or later, most people do come to realize the true meaning behind that option… the hidden *tutorial function*."

"But not many people actually choose it, do they?" I asked.

"Most would naturally doubt whether they could truly return after death," the goddess said with a shrug. "After all, a skill that requires you to die first is not exactly easy to understand."

"Yeah, even I wasn't completely sure I'd really come back here," I admitted.

"Plus, prior to selection, I can only explain that you may select one skill, and up to two skills at most. I am prohibited from divulging any additional information," she added. "If you *do* end up returning by death, there's no guarantee you'll get to pick skills again."

With an exaggerated sigh, she lifted her shoulders, looking exasperated.

"Choosing *Return by Death* meant potentially sacrificing one of your two available skill slots for the sake of a 'tutorial experience.' Very few would accept that risk without hesitation. You're one of the rare ones who picked it right away."

"Well, when your reincarnation class turns out to be Villager, you don't have any choice *but* to gamble, do you?"

Hearing this, the goddess afforded me a benevolent smile.

"I rather like people like you," she said with a soft chuckle.

"Yeah, well, thanks," I said dryly.

"Now then, what skills would you like to choose?" she continued, still giggling.

"My vocation is still Villager, right?" I asked.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Your birthplace and the environment will also be the same. It's a repeat of your previous tutorial."

"For the first skill, I'll take *Indomitable Will*," I said firmly. "Since I'm still a Villager and possess the disposition of a typical Japanese person, there's no way I can endure the harshness ahead without something like that. I need to toughen up."

"And the second skill?" she prompted. "You chose *Wisdom* last time, which allowed you to mentally access the contents of any publicly available book in the world. Would you like that again?"

"No," I replied. "I've already mapped out a highly efficient plan for the first ten years of my new life. From there, I'll build the rest based on the Dragon King's Grand Archive."

"Then, what would you like instead?" she asked.

I paused for a moment, considering my options, then gave a wry smile.

"Is there something available that has to do with gardening?"

The goddess looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"There is a skill called *Crop Cultivation*, but… are you serious?" the goddess asked, tilting her head in disbelief.

"Crop Cultivation, huh… There's nothing more 'villager-like' than that," I said, grinning. "Perfect… absolutely perfect… Ha ha ha!"

I found myself unable to suppress my laughter at the sheer absurdity of the situation.

"Ha ha! Ha ha ha! HA HA HA HA HA!"

The laughter wouldn't stop. It was too fitting—too absurd—and somehow, that made it all the more hilarious.

The goddess watched me, puzzled, before asking quietly, "But really, why? Why choose something like *Crop Cultivation*? You're pretty much wasting one of your precious skill slots…"

I nodded firmly and answered, "She loves flowers. Even amidst a harsh and brutal existence… at least there, I want to make sure that flowers and smiles never disappear."

The goddess considered my words for a moment… then smiled warmly and nodded in return.

"I see. I like people like you," she said gently.

"Well, thanks for that," I said with a wry grin.

She chuckled softly again, then declared brightly, "Understood. Then, I shall bestow upon you *Skill: Indomitable Will* and *Skill: Crop Cultivation*."

A pervasive whiteness engulfed everything around me.

In that rushing torrent of light, I heard the goddess's cheerful voice.

"I know it will be difficult, but do your best. And may you have a good journey…"

Soon, I would be born again, in that same little shack, into the arms of my mother.

Yes, once again, I would begin life with nothing—no strength, no wealth, only the status of a Villager. But this time, I was walking the path to a promised victory.

My name is Iijima Ryuto.

There could be no better name for someone destined to be raised among dragons.

Thanks to everything I had learned beforehand—knowledge no ordinary child could conceivably possess—I would be ready.

Whatever insane challenges awaited me, *Indomitable Will* would see me through.

The first time around, I didn't have any cheats. But hey, if you're getting reincarnated, you might as well have a cheat, right?

Bathed in the searing light, my consciousness once again began to dissolve into the void.

"All right… time to rise to the top."

With those final words, I was granted my third life.

Chapter 1: Knowledge Cheat Activated — Time to Power Up, Smooth and Fast!

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Chapter 1: Knowledge Cheat Activated — Time to Power Up, Smooth and Fast!

Good, I thought to myself, grinning inwardly.

Just as planned, my third life had started under identical circumstances, even in the very same location as before.

"Ryuto-chan!"

The one who scooped me up in her arms inside the shabby little house was a woman with golden hair and bright blue eyes.

Man, she looks young… I thought as soon as I saw her. *Well, of course she does.*

Simple math explained it—this was the same mother I had seen just recently, but now she was fifteen years younger.

As I stared at her openly, I couldn't help but think, *Late twenties, with a full, voluptuous figure… Honestly, she was gorgeous.*

It amazed me that she'd somehow lived her life without catching the eye of some noble, without being forced into becoming a mistress. That she'd managed to marry for love, just like any ordinary woman, seemed almost miraculous.

"Happy second birthday!"

This day marked my second birthday.

Inside the crumbling log house, the table had been prepared with what they considered a feast. In truth, it was just the usual black bread, now accompanied by a simple bacon soup. But the effort was there, loud and clear. This was a celebration meticulously fashioned from their every available resource.

Neighbors had also been invited; among them, naturally, was Cordelia's family, who lived next door.

Observing the red-haired woman tenderly cradling a tiny Cordelia, I mused, *Man, she looks so young, too.*

Like my mother, she was absurdly beautiful. Considering that even baby Cordelia looked so perfectly sculpted that it was hard to believe she was human, it made perfect sense that her mother would be stunning too. But even so, the reality was almost overwhelming.

Setting that thought aside, I reached out toward the black bread on the table while cradled in my mother's arms.

"Now, now, Ryuto. It's a little too soon for you to have solid food," she said sweetly.

With that, still holding me, my mother began to move toward the corner of the room. As impoverished farmers, our house was predictably tiny, having only a single room. The area she headed for was separated by a curtain—a makeshift attempt to divide the room into two. In essence, it was a multipurpose space, but today it was being used as a nursing area.

My mother then took out her breast.

"Here you go, Ryuto. Time for some milk," she murmured.

From beyond the curtain came the surprised voice of Cordelia's mother.

"Oh my, Mrs. Maclaine? Are you still breastfeeding?"

Her question was only natural. After all, my mother was nursing a two-year-old. Typically, infants would be weaned from breast milk by their first year. I still remembered how stunned I was the first time it happened. Perhaps it had been even more of a shock before that. Being thrust into a situation where I was expected to nurse from the breast of a beautiful stranger had been overwhelming from the start.

"Yes, I am. Is there… something wrong with that?" my mother asked, her tone calm but firm.

"Well… if you put it that way, it's strange… but not totally so, I suppose…" Cordelia's mother mumbled, her words trailing off.

At that moment, the cries of a baby reached us. It was Cordelia's younger brother, merely a few months old, held securely by her father.

"Oh dear," Cordelia's mother said. "It sounds like my little one is hungry, too."

With that, she stepped through the curtain, exposed her breast just like my mother had, and began nursing her son.

As I nursed at my mother's breast, I glanced over at the other woman. Catching my gaze, she chuckled playfully and said, "Oh? Ryuto, are you perhaps desiring my milk too?"

Despite her jocular tone, she exhibited no genuine seriousness. But my mother snapped back at lightning speed. "He's not," she declared, in a voice so forceful it left no room for argument.

"Huh?" the woman faltered, and for a moment, an awkward silence filled the air.

Still suckling, I continued to watch the scene unfold, peeking at her from the corner of my eye.

Once again, the woman smiled and, keeping her tone light, tried to joke, "So Ryuto *does* want—"

"He's not interested," my mother cut her off before she could finish, her voice sharp and final.

"Huh?"

"Ryuto only needs *my* milk," she said firmly.

"Huh?"

"Ryuto… only needs… *my* milk," she repeated, her words dripping with conviction.

"Huh?"

"Ryuto loves his mama. He adores me!" my mother insisted, her voice escalating in fervor. "If you don't believe me, we can test it!"

"'Test it?'" the woman echoed, clearly bewildered.

"He hates being held by anyone but me," my mother continued triumphantly. "Want to try? The moment someone else picks him up, he starts crying. He can't help it—he loves his mama too much!"

"Huh?"

Ignoring the woman's palpable reluctance, my mother thrust me toward her.

Reflexively, the woman opened her arms and caught me in an awkward embrace.

"He'll cry right away," my mother said confidently.

But I didn't cry.

Apparently, before my memories from Earth resurfaced, I had been an extremely clingy, mama-loving, stranger-shy little boy. But now, I was managing to hold it together just fine.

"He's… not crying?" the woman said, sounding puzzled.

The moment she spoke, my mother's face drained of all color.

"Wh-Why not?! Ryuto? Ryuto! You love Mama more than some strange woman, don't you? You want Mama to hold you, right? So then… why?! Why aren't you crying?! Why aren't you screaming for Mama to come save you?!"

"*Some strange woman*?" the other woman repeated, blinking in confusion.

Her bewildered expression conveyed everything. Just as before, she had realized something was amiss about my mother. Still, despite everything, Cordelia's family continued to get along with us, maintaining a neighborly relationship. They had to be quite something themselves to tolerate such eccentricities.

By now, it should be obvious: my mother harbored an unhealthy —verging on pathological—affection for me.

Without warning, she snatched me back into her arms and dashed toward the front door.

"Hey, where are you going?!" my father shouted after her.

My mother ignored him completely, bolting from the house like a startled rabbit.

"I *have* to take Ryuto… I have to take him to the doctor!" she cried desperately.

Just like that, she tore down the path, making a beeline for the village's only apothecary at breakneck speed.

Honestly, witnessing her persistent, unchanging behavior was strangely reassuring.

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Time passed, and the hour grew late.

I didn't know the exact time, but judging by the heavy silence, it must have been around the dead of night. Maybe even later.

Lying in the crib, I glanced around cautiously. Fortunately, both my mother and father were deeply asleep.

I could have been a little bolder if I'd had my own room, but for now, I had to settle for less. Lying on my back, I stretched a hand toward the ceiling and focused on my objective…

It worked.

Right now, I was using magic.

This particular form of magic was universally known as Life Magic. As long as you understood the basic concept and got the knack of it, even a baby could use it with ease.

Of course, for a normal infant, grasping the concept itself would be impossible. Only a prodigy born with an inherent, high-level proficiency in magical control could conceivably accomplish such a feat. One had to be the kind of genius who could do everything by pure instinct.

In my particular circumstance, however, my consciousness was that of an adult confined within an infant's form, not unlike some pint-sized detective. So, I cleared that hurdle without trouble.

As a result of my magic, a faint breeze stirred through the room. It was so imperceptible, it lacked even the force of a draft from an open window. A baby's magical capacity was inherently limited. At this level, there was no risk of waking my parents or attracting any unwanted attention.

Still, staying awake at such a late hour and invoking Life Magic merely to generate a minuscule breeze—what precisely is the

objective?

The answer was simple: the breeze itself meant nothing.

I had chosen wind magic because it was the least noticeable. I could have just as easily created a spark no bigger than a match flame or conjured a spoonful of water. It didn't matter what the effect was.

My real objective was something else entirely; using magic would consume my magic power—my MP.

Once again, I stretched my palm toward the ceiling. Another faint breeze whispered through the room.

One cast. Two casts. Three. Four… With the final attempt, nothing happened.

It seemed my MP reserves had at last run dry.

Why had I gone out of my way to deplete my MP like this?

The answer was obvious: to get stronger.

Now, it was time to address the core issue. How could an individual of my Villager class attain greater power? This was only the first step.

Before that, there was something I had to explain—a skill known as *Sage's Wisdom* on my status window.

Skill

【*Sage's Wisdom***】**

In this world, all written works were assigned a rank from S to E.

The skill *Sage's Wisdom* allowed me to search and read any book ranked B or below, entirely within my mind. It had been one of my cheat skills during my second life, though I didn't possess it in this one—until now.

The ranking system operated on two main criteria. One was the secrecy of the information itself—how deeply it was hidden or protected. The other was the danger inherent in the knowledge.

The part about secrecy was probably self-explanatory. But when it came to "danger," that was a bit more complicated. It wasn't like in a spy movie, where illicit knowledge made you the target of an assassin. With this skill, the act of *knowing* was itself physically hazardous.

For example, certain grimoires were imbued with spells that could mentally corrupt the reader. That was the kind of risk we were talking about.

The skill *Sage's Wisdom* allowed me to browse B-rank books safely, bypassing any such hazards entirely.

During the "tutorial" phase of my previous life, I had spent my early childhood years doing little else but reading, assimilating countless volumes, and meticulously absorbing every scrap of knowledge I could.

This time, the reference text I intended to use was classified as a banned book, forbidden on moral grounds, and ranked B.

Its contents were highly controversial, and its origins even more so. One wouldn't find it on the shelves of an ordinary magical academy's library—not without special authorization and access to the most heavily restricted sections.

Before diving into the content itself, it was important to understand the background. To put it bluntly, the book was a detailed record of human experimentation conducted by a certain organization of mages. This group, from what little was known, had strong ties to a cult and seemed to have been made up of some truly "lovely" individuals.

As for the contents… Well, even the most polished and dignified PTA president would likely grimace and toss it aside after a few lines.

It chronicled, without restraint, the experiments carried out by deranged mages who operated devoid of any ethical constraints. Setting aside its obvious moral depravity, the sheer academic value of the information contained within was undeniable.

The reason that the organization had conducted human experimentation in the first place was, apparently, their earnest

pursuit of world domination.

World domination. It was almost laughable.

To create the ultimate soldiers for their cause, they experimented relentlessly with diverse methods of human modification. And the book I was consulting represented the culmination of their efforts.

That said, the methodologies documented inside were almost entirely disheartening: human-monster fusions, doping that came with crippling side effects, and other grotesque procedures. While one might indeed attain greater power using those methods, the inherent cost would scarcely justify the gain.

Temporary enhancements resulting in shredded organs? No thanks. I had other, far more effective and sustainable plans for boosting my strength later on, so there was no need to resort to the reckless methods described in that book.

Most of it was the kind of material you could skip without missing much… but one particular entry caught my eye.

Magic Power Growth in Early Childhood.

Explaining this topic properly would require diving into the intricate concepts of the soul, the cosmic will, and primordial life energy… In essence, a substantial amount of material would need to be covered.

Giving a full, detailed explanation would take forever, so to put it as briefly as possible: babies had incredible potential.

Truly phenomenal potential.

That was the gist of it.

Of course, if I were to conclude my explanation there, it would probably spark a riot, so let me dig a little deeper.

Even back on modern Earth, people often said that children had strong spiritual sensitivity, or an innate capacity to perceive phenomena imperceptible to adults. That provides a good image to work with.

Children also absorb information at an astonishing rate when you teach them something new.

In this world, where magic constitutes a genuine, tangible force, these very characteristics were amplified to an even greater degree.

Now, what happened when a baby used up all their magic power until they were completely drained?

Let me put it in simple, native-sounding words:

Baby… Magic Power… Growth Rate… Crazy Awesome.

That was the fundamental summation of the matter.

In that regard, I had one overwhelming advantage. After all, ordinary babies didn't even know how to use magic in the first place.

Sure, there were cases where a baby might be born with a genius-tier aptitude, enabling instinctive magic manipulation. Yet, even in such cases, no infant would ever intentionally cast spells until their MP was completely drained.

Forcing one's MP to absolute zero was, frankly, extremely dangerous.

On Earth, should one put their body through extreme exercise without proper nutrition, they might experience a phenomenon called "hitting the wall," where their body ceases to function due to lack of energy. MP depletion was a similarly dangerous critical condition.

The human body was remarkably well-designed. Even adults who rarely used certain muscles would experience soreness after exertion. But the repercussions of complete mana depletion transcended mere muscular discomfort; it caused a brutal headache of unimaginable intensity.

At this very moment, I was enduring that agony firsthand.

Imagine receiving a full-force blow across the skull with a metal bat every few seconds. That might offer a faint approximation of my suffering.

The only reason I could even bear it was because the skill *Indomitable Will* had automatically activated. Without its intervention, this agony would have been completely unbearable.

That's why, during my "tutorial" life, even though I had known about this method, I hadn't been able to use it. Well, technically, I

had tried it on a few occasions, but without the protection of a skill, it was simply impossible to endure.

No matter how much it promised future strength, what kind of masochist would voluntarily submit to what amounted to a daily ritual of self-annihilation?

In short, this training method was absolute madness.

But… I chuckled to myself. *That's exactly why only I could use it.*

Not a single soul across this wide world would prove capable of enduring this.

An infant, regardless of its innate talent, would find itself utterly incapable of gritting its teeth through such searing, corporeal agony and silently persisting in its regimen. It simply wasn't possible.

Even as my vision blurred, overwhelmed by the ceaseless, throbbing headache, my smile remained. The agony pervading my cranium served as undeniable evidence of my limitless magical growth.

Sure, I might have been born a mere Villager. But that didn't mean I'd stay one.

When it came to the growth rate of MP during early childhood, I had already reached a realm hundreds of times beyond that of an ordinary person. Heroes, Sages, Saints, Demon Lords—none of them could match the growth rate of my MP right now. I was, unequivocally, in a league of my own.

Beyond a doubt, I was on the cusp of becoming a two-year-old possessing the most formidable magical capacity in the world.

Still… Against a whole bunch of classes like Heroes, Sages, Sword Saints, Master Thieves, and Holy Knights… As decreed by the laws of this world, those blessed with innate genius will soon catch up.

No matter how much effort I poured in, there was still that despairing, insurmountable gap granted by birth. No amount of hard work could change that reality. It was often dismissed with phrases like "limits of talent" or simply called what it was: unfair.

No matter how much blood, sweat, and tears I shed, certain pinnacles remained eternally beyond the grasp of a mere mortal. I understood that all too well.

Even so, I'll just have to widen the gap before they can catch up. If a Villager like me can't reach those peaks through conventional means… then I'll climb them by extraordinary ones. I will reach them—no matter what.

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Two years passed.

On my fourth birthday, I received my status plate from the city's priest.

During my previous life in Japan, I'd often read web novels where reincarnated protagonists would get their status plates from guilds. In this world, however, it appeared that everyone was issued a plate at the church upon turning four years old.

The numbers displayed on the plate were visible only to the individual. Still, it was naturally expected that children would report their stats to their parents. And so, I lied.

Of course I did.

If anyone were to find out about this… well, even I had to admit, they'd probably be more than a little freaked out.

No—were this to become public knowledge, it would be an absolute disaster.

Because my status looked like *this*:

Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 4 years old
Level: 1
HP: 3 / 3
MP: 6,852 / 6,852

Attack: 1
Defense: 1
Magic: 1,250
Evasion: 1

Enhancement Skills
【*??????: Level 4*】

Defense Skills
【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills
【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】

Magic Skills
【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Limit Reached)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Limit Reached)*】

Yeah. It seemed I had grown far beyond even my expectations.

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"I'm off," I called out as I stepped out of the house.

My home was deep in the countryside. A mountain sloped sharply behind it, and rice fields surrounded us in all other directions. Even our closest neighbors—Cordelia's family—lived nearly five hundred meters away.

Now that I was four years old, I could walk around on my own to a reasonable extent. Our family was poor—naturally, since we were nothing but humble villagers.

At the moment, I was supposedly off playing by myself, gathering wild plants on the mountainside. In fact, around here, I was known as a "genius of the mountains." It wasn't just that I could find edible wild vegetables with ease; I also had an uncanny knack for bringing back valuable medicinal herbs that sold for a high price. Thanks to that, my parents had adopted a rather permissive stance toward me, allowing me to wander the mountains from dawn until dusk without much worry.

Of course, in reality, I was not genuinely devoting my time to collecting wild flora or herbs. The greens, herbs, and occasional rabbit carcass I sometimes brought home were all things I had bought in town. My foraging was merely a pretense. What I was actually doing was leaving the village to earn money.

How could a four-year-old possibly make money? And for what purpose? With my MP and skills, earning cash was quite easy. As for *why* I needed it, the answer couldn't be simpler.

To get stronger, obviously.

It was precisely then, as I traversed the narrow dirt path bisecting the rice fields toward the mountains, that I encountered her—the future Hero, Cordelia.

Her red hair shimmered like silk, and she wore a simple white dress. Her blue eyes sparkled, and her skin was so pale it almost seemed to glow. She was, without exaggeration, a beauty so extraordinary that she could only be described as angelic—a living being who seemed to defy the very rules of the world.

It wasn't hard to imagine that Cordelia would grow into a stunning beauty someday. I knew for a fact she would.

Puffing her cheeks in frustration, she turned toward me and declared, "I'm going to the mountain with you, Ryuto! I'm going to pick wild veggies too!"

Sorry, Cordelia. I'm not heading for the mountain—I'm going to town.

"I'm not taking you with me," I said flatly.

"Ugh… guh…" she whimpered. Cordelia's face immediately crumpled, her eyes brimming with tears. "Ryuto… you never play with me anymore. Why? I'm lonely…"

If she wanted an answer, it was simple: *It's your fault.*

Even though she hadn't yet received her Divine Prophecy, she was already on her way to becoming a Hero. Her stats were blowing up, soaring into realms ordinary people could never hope to reach.

That was exactly why I had to widen the gap now, before it was too late.

I placed my hand gently on top of Cordelia's head.

"I'll play with you next time. I'm sorry," I said.

Tears streamed down her cheeks in large, heavy drops.

"Idiot… Ryuto's… Ryuto's a big idiot!" she cried, then spun around and took off running, her voice breaking with sobs. "I'm never speaking to you again!"

Watching her tiny figure totter away down the path, I couldn't help but think, *Man, what a pain…*

Partway down the road, Cordelia stumbled and fell with a dull *thud*.

"Uwaaah! U… Ugh… Uuuh! Aah… you idiot! Ryuto, you big idiot!" she wailed.

Seriously, what a pain…

Only after she tripped into her own front door, still sobbing, did I finally start walking again.

"All right…" I muttered.

Upon entering the mountain's foothills, I unleashed the power of my skills. With the speed of a raging wind, I dashed into the forest's depths.

I weaved through the forest, clearing this hundred-meter sprint in around fourteen seconds. It was a ridiculously high speed for a child my age.

The skill I was using was *Physical Enhancement: Level 4.*

The principle behind this ability was quite straightforward: using magic power to reinforce muscle fibers, thereby enabling the body to exert strength far exceeding its inherent limitations.

At my age, while not entirely unprecedented, its use was exceedingly rare. This skill was deemed indispensable for any individual aspiring to close-quarters combat roles. For example, noble children who trained in martial disciplines from the moment they could walk might manage to learn it when so young. Maybe.

Incidentally, Cordelia would receive her Divine Blessing at six years old and, if I remembered correctly, wouldn't pick up this skill until she was seven. Not that it mattered.

More importantly, *this* was a skill I'd fought tooth and nail to master during my last life's tutorial phase, grinding it all the way to Level 4 through sheer stubborn effort.

Thanks to it, I could unleash incredible bursts of strength in an instant. But naturally, it came with a cost. Since the muscles were being reinforced with magic, it naturally consumed MP. And among close-combat classes, MP pools were almost universally small.

This skill was usually implemented in short, explosive bursts—during battle, for example, or just long enough to lift something heavy.

Me? Even compared to grown adults, my MP was absurd—practically cheat-level. If I wanted, I could maintain *Physical Enhancement* all day long without a problem. In fact, even when I wasn't consciously activating it, I was constantly running a low-level version in the background, suppressing it just enough to avoid attracting attention.

These days, draining my MP had become such a chore that I had to find little ways like this to steadily burn through it. Honestly, in a lot of ways… I had probably gone a bit overboard.

Leaving the mountain behind, I pushed into the flatlands and entered a wider stretch of forest. I ran, weaving through the trees for another thirty minutes.

Eventually, I reached a roadside post town.

At the edge of the road, tucked away where nobody would bother me, I spread out my usual mat and set up the price list, just like always.

It hadn’t even been a few minutes before a traveler approached, slipping off his shoes and sitting down on the mat.

“You’re awfully young. A novice from the church, maybe? Well, whatever. Two copper coins, right?” he said.

That was roughly equivalent to about two thousand yen in Japanese currency.

I nodded silently, and the traveler extended his feet toward me.

"I've been walking nonstop. Ended up with some popped blisters, and honestly, my feet are just exhausted," he explained.

Without a word, I cast a basic healing spell on his feet. Right before his eyes, the burst blisters healed seamlessly, the skin stitching itself back together in an instant.

"Thanks," he said, satisfied, as he dropped the copper coins and stood up to leave.

My little setup here was simple: an impromptu healing stand. In a bustling post town like this one, my most frequent clients were tired couriers and worn-out traveling merchants. This highway was always buzzing, and business never ran dry—there was always someone in need of help. Demand was constant, especially since I charged less than half the usual price, so I barely had a moment's rest between customers.

My feverish MP growth was still going strong, but simply spamming spells until I ran dry felt pointless and dull. Plus, it wasn't completely unheard of for a kid my age to be capable of basic healing spells, if they happened to be a professional mage.

Of course, no one else could cast as many healing spells in a row as I. That was why I made a habit of roaming from one town to the next, healing just enough people to avoid drawing suspicion, all while steadily burning through my MP and earning some pocket money on the side. Incidentally, the money I had saved over the past six months—which I'd stashed safely back in the mountains—amounted to the equivalent of about ten million yen.

That alone should give a clear picture of just how off-the-charts my MP reserves truly were. The market price for healing magic wasn't random; it was determined by real supply and demand. And since I was working way outside the usual boundaries, I could pull in money at a crazy fast rate.

Even with all that, I was still pretty far from hitting my financial goal. But there was no need to rush. I simply kept at it, steadily getting stronger day by day while my MP kept growing.

As I made my rounds through various post towns, evening finally fell.

When I glanced at my status plate, I noticed that all the running around had boosted my *Physical Enhancement* skill up to Level 5.

Pumping my fist with a silent "All right," I packed up my mat and started the journey home. I cut through the great forest from its far side, retracing my path back to the mountain behind our home. Once there, I dug up the buried jar where I stashed my earnings and tossed in the coins I had made today.

After that, I crossed the back mountain and came out onto the dirt road between the rice fields.

That's when I bumped into Cordelia again.

She stood there, cheeks puffed out, giving me the silent treatment.

"What's wrong, Cordelia?" I asked.

She said nothing and just kept glaring.

"I said: What's wrong, Cordelia?" I tried again.

In response, she dramatically turned her head away with a *huff*.

"… mon," she muttered under her breath.

"You're mumbling. I can't hear you," I said, narrowing my eyes.

"Th-This morning… you said you'd never talk to me again…" she finally spat out, her voice tiny and trembling.

Oh boy… What a pain… I thought, suppressing a sigh.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a small package and held it out to her.

"Here. A souvenir."

"Huh?" Cordelia blinked, confused.

She slowly unwrapped the package. Inside was a white bread sandwich stuffed with bacon, lettuce, and cheese.

"It's a sandwich," I explained. "It's made with white bread. You like this kind of stuff, right?"

For poor farming families like ours, our usual bread was the dark, dense, and barely edible kind. Soft, fluffy, white bread felt like a rare luxury we hardly ever tasted.

That black bread we usually ate was so tough it needed to be soaked in soup just to be edible. It was completely unlike the bread I knew from Japan. That soft and fluffy kind, white bread, was something I'd had regularly. But it was a true luxury here, enjoyed only on special occasions.

Funnily enough, white bread was also one of Cordelia's absolute favorite treats. After a brief silence, she finally broke into a wide, delighted smile.

"Eat it. Right here, right now," I said, a little worried about the fallout. If she took something like this back home and mentioned I gave it to her, it could stir up all sorts of awkward questions. My parents, after all, still thought I was just a regular four-year-old.

Cordelia nodded eagerly, then started devouring the sandwich with remarkable speed. Once she'd finished, she faced me and offered her right hand, showing that she wanted to hold hands.

Man, what a hassle, I thought, yet I still extended my hand and took hers. Side by side, we began walking back toward the village.

"Hey, hey, Ryuto?" she chirped.

"Hm?"

"Today, right? Today, my mom said—"

"Hey," I interrupted.

"What?"

"Weren't you just saying you'd never speak to me again?" I pointed out.

Cordelia answered with the brightest, most innocent smile one could imagine, as she declared, "You know what that's called?"

"Huh?"

"It's called a tactical retreat!"

I couldn't help but chuckle at that one.

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say."

Just like that, the two of us, hand in hand, made our way home.

The gentle warmth of spring filled the air. In the endlessly blue sky, puffs of cottony clouds drifted here and there. Cordelia and I were walking along the grassy paths that bordered the lush, fragrant fields.

"Hey, hey, Ryuto? You excited?" Cordelia chirped, her voice buzzing with endless energy.

She was already five years old now, on the verge of receiving the Hero's Divine Prophecy. Her silky red hair cascaded down her back, and her translucent white skin gave her an almost ethereal beauty. Her features were so perfectly carved, she looked like a living Western doll. But five years old was still five years old. No matter how stunning her looks, an undeniable innocence clung to her—plus that hint of silliness from the gap where her baby tooth had fallen out.

"Hey, hey? I asked if you're excited!" she pressed, tugging at my sleeve.

"Yeah, I am," I replied, offering a smile. "I'm looking forward to it."

Today was the day the traveling merchants would come. They would set up in the village square, selling rare goods from distant lands. Though it would probably be unfair to say they were gouging their prices, they traveled far and wide to collect valuable items and sold them with a modest markup to make a living.

Naturally, living in the absolute middle of nowhere—and I mean nowhere—the merchants' arrival was a huge deal for our village.

On a slightly different note, my reputation in the mountains bordered on the prodigious. I'd often bring back rare medicinal herbs and wild vegetables, and I'd receive a modest allowance in exchange for selling them. Compared to other kids my age, I had quite a bit more spending money. Truth be told, with my basic healing magic generating small but consistent profits, I was technically wealthier than many grown-ups, but that's a tale for another time.

This was why Cordelia would pester me for sweets every time the merchants rolled into town. She adored honey-sugar candies—

though, to my dismay, they were absurdly pricey. In fact, just one candy could easily eat up more than half my entire allowance.

From an outsider's perspective, I likely appeared to be some poor kid getting ripped off by his demanding childhood friend. The old traveling merchant certainly seemed to share that opinion; he'd always give me the same knowing half-smirk when he saw me.

"Hey, hey, Ryuto? Isn't your family coming today?" Cordelia asked, tilting her head curiously.

"They're still dealing with the fallout from last year's bad harvest. We're living frugally now," I explained.

"Fru… Frugally?"

"It means living cheaply, without any luxuries. Carefully watching our money."

"Ohh, I see!"

Our family primarily cultivated beans, but the previous year's weather had been truly awful. Other bean farmers, in their desperation, had resorted to selling their children into slavery just to endure. Luckily for us, we had a sort of secret advantage—or rather, a certain genius at finding herbs.

Okay, calling myself that feels a bit much, but it gets the point across. Because of me, we were just able to get by. Even my parents were growing suspicious about how unbelievable my knack for medicinal herbs was.

Just then, Cordelia turned to me with another one of her schemes.

"Hey, hey, Ryuto? Say 'tricks' ten times fast!"

"Tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks, tricks."

"Okay, now… What do chickens lay?"

Cordelia gave a triumphant, sly little grin. She was convinced her prank would succeed. However…

"Eggs."

I crushed her little mischief on the spot.

The whole point of that dumb trick was to get me to reflexively say "chicks," so she could pounce in with a smug "Wrong! It's *eggs*!" A childish little trap.

After surviving Japanese elementary school, those kinds of games were nothing new to me. Better luck next time, future Hero. You'll need to step up your game.

"Grrrgh…"

"You're ten years too early to be pulling tricks on me," I said, a small, victorious shrug accompanying my smirk.

Cordelia looked like she might burst into tears. "But, but! I bet you won't be able to answer the *next* quiz!"

"Oh? All right then, let's hear it. What kind of impossible riddle do you have this time?"

"Okay… Try saying 'love you' ten times."

Trying to trip me up again? I thought, suspecting another wordplay trap. Still, I humored her and repeated it as instructed.

"Love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you, love you."

With each repetition, Cordelia's cheeks steadily grew redder. By the time I finished, she had lowered her long lashes and was blushing as deeply as a ripened apple. She stared down at the ground, shifting her knees bashfully as she came to a stop beside me.

"So?" I asked.

Cordelia fell into silence for a long moment. Then, looking completely flustered, she mumbled, almost inaudibly, "You kept saying 'love you,' and… it made me happy, so I forgot what quiz I was gonna do."

Goddamn, this girl is cute.

Even I had to admit defeat in the face of that one.

As I gently patted Cordelia's head, I took a moment to process my feelings for her. She was my childhood friend, sure, but also like a little sister—maybe even a daughter or niece. I'd known her all the way up until she turned fifteen, though that wasn't exactly the point.

If someone asked me whether I saw her as a romantic interest, I was pretty sure the answer was no. And yet, there was no doubt that I cared about her deeply.

I'd replayed this dilemma in my head countless times, but the truth was, I still didn't have a clear answer.

Just then, Cordelia and I reached our destination: the village square. At the same moment, a radiant smile bloomed on her face, bright and open like a sunflower turning to the sun.

"The usual? Honey sugar candy?" I asked.

"Ryuto, wait here for just a bit, okay?"

Without waiting for my reply, she took off running toward the row of merchant stalls.

"Hey, Cordelia?" I called after her.

It was still early, and the square felt mostly empty. Cordelia approached one of the merchants and began speaking to him. After a brief exchange, she handed something over and received a small pouch in return. Then, with hurried steps, she returned to me.

"Huh?" I muttered.

Without uttering a sound, Cordelia extended the small pouch toward me.

"Today, *I'm* buying *you* a treat!" she announced proudly.

"What?"

"Um, well… I've been saving up my allowance for a long time."

That candy wasn't cheap. I didn't know exactly how much she got in allowance each month, but for her, this undoubtedly represented a significant purchase.

"Why?" I inquired, genuinely puzzled.

"Because… Um… Today's your birthday, right?"

"Oh…"

A realization dawned on me. I had completely overlooked it.

Normally, my mother's unusual enthusiasm around this time served as my annual reminder. But this year, that familiar seasonal tradition hadn't materialized at all.

Now that I thought about it… *Why hadn't she thrown me her usual modest birthday celebration? Why hadn't she even mentioned it?*

Then it struck me: the meager harvest from the previous year had impacted our household finances far more severely than I'd initially grasped.

I would need to devise a method to subtly inject funds into our family's reserves without drawing attention to myself. A new burden settled on my shoulders, and I almost let out a sigh, but managed to suppress it.

After all, making a sullen expression immediately after receiving a gift would have been incredibly ill-mannered.

"Are you happy, Ryuto? Did you like it?" Cordelia asked, her eyes shimmering.

"I did. Thanks, Cordelia," I replied, offering a gentle smile as I softly patted her head.

"Hee hee."

She flashed a brilliant, radiant smile so brimming with innocent joy, it quite nearly took my breath away.

Cordelia's smile possessed a unique quality that made it simply impossible not to relax in its presence. No matter what, the moment she beamed at me like that, I couldn't help but smile back. It was a troublesome effect, really.

"Now, shall we head home?" I suggested.

Cordelia paused, taken aback. Then, her head tilted in genuine confusion. Finally, she puffed out her cheeks, a clear display of displeasure.

"Huh? Why are we going home *already*?" she asked.

"What do you mean? We bought what we came for, didn't we? Isn't that everything?"

"My treat…"

"What?"

On the verge of tears, Cordelia muttered, "I didn't get my honey candy…"

Ah. So, the first one was for me, and this one is for her.

She's definitely going to grow up to be the type who says "dessert goes to a completely separate stomach," no doubt about it.

I let out a long, weary sigh and offered a helpless shrug before turning back toward the merchant, wallet in hand.

For the record, I ended up buying her *way* more than usual… But really, how could I not?

※※※

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 6
Level: 1
HP: 3/3 ➞ 12/12
MP: 6852/6852 ➞ 10420/10420
Attack: 1 ➞ 15
Defense: 1 ➞ 15
Magic: 1250 ➞ 1923
Evasion: 1 ➞ 35

Enhanced Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 4 ➞ 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

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Hey, it's me again.

To be honest… I've progressed far beyond my wildest expectations. This MP cheat is absolutely insane.

That said, I'm still a Villager. No matter how much magic power I have, I can't learn any new spells, so high-level magic is out of the question. And sure enough, no matter how much I use magic, my levels for both offensive and healing spells are stuck at 1.

All that extra MP is pretty much useless to me for now. If the Dragons' Domain agrees to take me in, that might finally give me a use for all this overflowing power.

Technically, I'm already strong enough to hunt monsters. But I haven't started farming experience or trying to level up yet, and there's a reason for that.

Today, I made my way out to a canyon area beyond the forested hills behind my house. There's a huge waterfall there, and beside it stands a small shack. A filthy old man lives there, holed up like a hermit. Everyone in my village just sees him as a vagrant and an oddball—nothing more than a wandering lunatic.

Back in the day, whenever that old man came down to the village, the shops would gouge him with ridiculous prices, and the other villagers would whisper behind his back, keeping their distance. It wasn't an exaggeration to say they treated him horribly.

Based on the timeline, Cordelia was just a few months away from receiving her Divine Prophecy. When that happens, officials from the royal capital will come rushing to our little village… and that's when everyone will discover that the shabby old man was actually someone incredible all along: Bernard Alabaster, once hailed as the strongest swordsman in the Royal Capital's Knights' Order.

Because he lived nearby, the village chief had gone to him, hat in hand, hoping to convince him to become Cordelia's sword instructor. But Bernard had turned him down without hesitation.

Honestly, who could blame him?

They'd spent years calling him a madman, treating him like an outcast. But the moment his real identity came out, they expected him to just forgive and forget? Anyone would be disgusted.

I couldn't care less that he was supposedly the strongest knight in some backwater corner of the kingdom. What mattered was his *story*.

He was born a Villager. He grew up a Villager. He married as a Villager. While working the land, he raised three daughters and built a humble but happy home.

Then it happened.

Three years following the birth of his youngest daughter, tragedy struck. His village suffered an assault by a horde of orcs.

The disparity in power was overwhelming. The men gave up fighting almost immediately, and the village was overrun. The women were subjected to rape, abducted for breeding, and every last grain from the storehouses was stolen.

His wife and daughters were taken as well.

Stripped of all, Bernard disappeared from the village.

Then…

Ten years passed, and out of nowhere, he appeared in the Royal Capital's swordsmanship tournament. Pushing past the fiercest competition, he seized victory and earned a place in the Knights' Order.

A few more years passed, and Bernard inherited the title of Knight Commander. From then on, he poured his entire soul into the annihilation of orc settlements. His moniker "Orc Killer" had become far more well-known than his actual name.

Finally, after he'd chased every last orc out of the kingdom, he left the Knights' Order and chose to live in isolation in the wild canyon.

For him, this current life probably feels like nothing more than the postgame. But for me, there's only one thing that matters.

He was a Villager. Even with that class from the countryside, he managed to win the royal swordsmanship tournament.

That's why I'm here now, standing at his doorstep.

I reached for the doorknob of the worn-out hut tucked deep in the canyon.

"Go home," Bernard grumbled.

That was the first thing he said, not even looking my way, as he tipped a bottle of strong liquor straight into his mouth.

He seemed just under fifty, his hair entirely white. His body was all muscle, and his scruffy beard made him look like a rough, tough guy.

The room he lived in was barely the size of ten tatami mats. The place reeked of alcohol and was pitifully filthy, with empty bottles and trash scattered everywhere.

"Yeah, well, I didn't come all this way just to turn around empty-handed," I replied.

I grabbed one of the many still half-full bottles, poured some of the raw liquor into a chipped cup that lay on the floor, and chugged it all down in one go.

Gross. Even the cheap seven-hundred-yen whiskey from convenience stores is better than this.

"You got a strong stomach, kid?" Bernard muttered, raising an eyebrow.

"Don't you have anything better? I mean, this stuff's just *nasty*."

At that, Bernard cracked a grin.

"You're a strange brat. So… this is about becoming my disciple, is it?"

"Yeah, that's precisely why I came," I said, calm as ever, not backing down from his stare.

Bernard fell silent for a moment, then slowly shook his head, a tired look spreading across his face.

"When I told you to leave, I meant it. I can't teach anyone right now. The thing is—"

I raised a hand, cutting him off mid-sentence.

"It's because of your illness, isn't it?" I stated, my voice low but steady.

His expression shifted immediately. The color drained from his face, and his eyes sharpened with clear suspicion.

"I've never told anyone about that," he said, narrowing his eyes.

"Yeah, I figured," I replied with a fearless grin, allowing just a hint of arrogance to seep into my tone.

A year from now, Bernard Alabaster would *die* of liver failure. The fact that I knew that… well, I had to admit, it was pretty much cheating.

Before he could even react, I reached inside my coat and pulled out a small vial, extending it between us.

"Hey… kid… what's that supposed to be?" Bernard asked, eyeing it warily, his voice rough and low.

"It's an elixir," I stated plainly.

A potion of mythic rarity, potent enough to cure cirrhosis and other terminal internal illnesses. If something like this existed in modern Japan and came in limited supply, not even billions of yen would cover the cost. Because it required rare ingredients like water and had an incredibly low production rate, it fetched utterly outrageous prices even in this world.

Bernard stared at the vial, the brilliant blue liquid catching the light. His eyes widened slightly. Then, all at once, he threw his head back and let out a booming laugh.

"Aha ha ha ha! Hah! Ha ha ha ha!" he roared, clutching his stomach. "Kid, how in the world did you get the money for something like *this*?!"

"I earned it little by little," I replied, placing the vial on the table. "By using healing magic."

"You can use healing magic?" Bernard muttered, blinking slowly. "Even so, to pull in enough cash for an elixir… that's not something just any *kid* can manage."

I fell silent for a moment, pressing my lips together.

Should I tell him?

I hesitated, then decided to just come clean.

"My MP's over 10,000," I said quietly.

"Hah?" he gasped, staring at me as if I'd just claimed to be a god.

I held out my status plate and presented it to him.

"Status open. Permission granted for third-party viewing," I said clearly.

Bernard's eyes snapped wide—a sharp, visible shock.

And then… a long, long silence followed.

A mysterious young boy had accurately identified a disease he'd never disclosed to anyone, then produced an elixir capable of curing it. What's more, he commanded magical power and control far exceeding human boundaries.

If the roles were reversed, I'd have found the whole thing downright creepy.

"Are you some kind of monster… or maybe a demon?" Bernard asked, his voice low and cautious. "Over 10,000 MP… That's B-rank, easy. Might even be A-rank mage territory."

"Nah. I'm just a regular human," I said with a shrug.

That answer must have struck a chord, because Bernard let out a quiet chuckle.

"So then, tell me: Why would a freak with over 10,000 MP come crawling to *me* for training? If it's magic you wish to master, you could just head to the Royal Capital—hell, even the Imperial Capital—and enroll in a magic academy."

"I'm a Villager," I clarified. "No matter how diligently I train, all I can utilize is basic magic. Nothing beyond that."

Bernard went quiet again, pondering my words. Then, he offered a slow nod.

"So… you've got some complicated circumstances. I understand now. That's why you came to me, huh?" he surmised.

"Yeah. That's why I saved up the money. If you were to perish on me, I'd be the one left in trouble," I admitted, my voice resolute.

Bernard let out a short laugh, more amused than annoyed.

"Hah… You are a creepy little brat, aren'tcha? Mind telling me the full story?"

"I *have* to get stronger," I said. "That's all I can say. I'm sorry, but I can't reveal more than that."

"Fair enough… I figured as much," he said with a grunt. "What you're after is *Steel Body Technique*, isn't it?"

I gave a nod.

Steel Body Technique—a skill that enhanced the body itself.

It was fundamentally different from the *Physical Enhancement* I currently had. That skill merely amplified one's existing strength based on latent potential. However, for a Villager with a weak, untrained body, there wasn't much to amplify. The results would always be limited.

That's where *Steel Body Technique* came in.

Unlike temporary boosts, it strengthened the *base* physical form itself, raising the body's capabilities at a foundational level. However, it came with a major drawback: it consumed a *huge* amount of MP.

This is precisely why no sane person, especially among common folk, ever bothered to attempt learning it. Bernard, too, must have pushed himself to the limit with early-stage MP enhancement, driven by the need to stand against the orcs.

He had even done it all as a *Villager*.

His liver condition wasn't caused by alcohol alone. I could tell, because I knew the logic behind doping and enhancement techniques. He had forced his body beyond its natural limits through illicit means, twisting every rule he could exploit for the sake of vengeance. He had forged himself into a weapon, despite being born a simple Villager.

Even with the elixir healing his internal damage, his body had already begun to deteriorate in countless unseen ways. The potion might buy him time, but it wasn't a cure-all. It wouldn't be enough for him to live out a full lifespan.

"Listen, kid," Bernard began, his brow furrowed. "*Steel Body Technique* is a derivative skill. You need to master *Physical Enhancement* first before you can even *think* about it."

"I've already got that one down," I said casually.

Then, I stepped forward and, with a hand under each arm, effortlessly lifted him off the ground.

"Well, I'll be damned. Looks like you really *can* use it," he muttered, blinking down at me from midair.

"My skill level's maxed out, for the record," I added as I lowered him.

Bernard let out a long, weary sigh and shook his head.

"What *are* you, kid? Still, that MP of yours… it's just not natural. Tell me, how the hell did you push your stats up this far?"

"If you're not afraid of pain, anyone can get this far," I said quietly. "And… the *Kimon Technique* is the same."

Bernard's expression instantly stiffened. The tension in the air turned razor-sharp.

"*Steel Body Technique* is one thing, but… where did you hear about that forbidden technique?!" he demanded.

I hesitated, just for a second. But I decided to tell him the truth.

"I know… most things," I said carefully.

It wasn't an acceptable answer. Not really. But Bernard gave a strange little nod, as though it somehow made perfect sense to him.

"You must be some kind of spirit, or worse. But I owe you my life. So, about this forbidden technique—this *Kimon Technique*. You know what it does?"

"To have your human form consumed by a desire for battle or power," I said quietly. "In short, to force a massive surge in base stats. It's a method that turns a man into a demon."

"Exactly. It's a method that opens the gates of hell inside you," Bernard said quietly. "Do you know *why* it's considered a forbidden technique?"

"Because the MP cost is insane," I replied. "And if the user doesn't notice they've run out, the ritual keeps going—starts burning through the soul instead. That's why people kept dying, right?"

"With *Steel Body Technique* or *Physical Enhancement*, running out of mana deactivates the skill automatically. But the *Kimon Technique*…" Bernard's tone grew grim. "It doesn't stop unless the user shuts it off themselves. It'll devour the soul until there's nothing left."

He fell silent for a moment, then looked me dead in the eyes.

"Mana depletion means death. This technique walks hand in hand with the grave. Even knowing that… you *still* want to learn it?"

I let out a soft chuckle, cocking my head slightly.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" With a quiet smile, I continued. "My MP's over 10,000. Remember?"

Bernard blinked… then erupted in laughter as if the realization had just struck him anew.

"Ahh… that's right. You're so far off the scale I forgot. I was imparting cautionary advice as if you were merely a typical child… But yeah, for someone like *you*, mastering the *Kimon Technique* might be possible."

Then he suddenly reached out and grabbed me by the head, roughly ruffling my hair with a heavy hand.

"You've got what it takes to become strong, kid."

"I've been saying that from the start, haven't I?" I shot back, grinning as I raised my right hand toward him.

Bernard grinned back and gripped my hand firmly.

"It's not enough to just *be able* to get strong," I said. "I have to *become* strong. There's no other option."

"Hah! Got some guts on you, too, huh!" he said, laughing with open delight.

He looked genuinely happy. He kept rubbing my head until my hair was an absolute mess—rough, wild, and full of warmth.

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And thus, six years passed.

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12
Level: 1
HP: 12 ➞ 50
MP: 10,420 ➞ 12,050
Attack: 15 ➞ 35
Defense: 15 ➞ 35
Magic: 1,923 ➞ 2,154
Evasion: 35 ➞ 55

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 0 ➞ 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*
(This skill strengthens the body's base stats continuously, unlike temporary boosts.) 【*Kimon Technique: Level 0 ➞ 5*】
Effect: Adds +250 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.
(Warning: Consumes massive MP, and upon depletion, begins consuming the user's soul until manually deactivated.)

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 0 ➞ 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 0 ➞ 6*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

The chirping of sparrows filled the morning air, soft and soothing.

Yesterday, Bernard—that iron-blooded drill sergeant—had given me another brutal beating. My entire body throbbed with muscle pain, and every joint ached. Naturally, I had little desire to leave the comfort of my fluffy bed.

Unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury of sleeping in.

I had, at last, reached my twelfth year. And this particular day was March 27th. To put it plainly, only seven days remained until the fated goblin raid upon our village.

In the original timeline, Cordelia had stood against the goblin horde. She'd fought bravely and held her ground—for a while. But in the end, she was overwhelmed by sheer numbers and suffered defeat. After that, a passing dragon had wiped out the goblins and saved the village.

That was how things played out *before*. This time, however, the story would change. Now, I was the one the dragon would take with it—to the Dragons' Domain.

I would soon be leaving this place behind, at least for a while. That meant I had things to do—unfinished business that needed to be handled before I left.

Yes… There are still things I have to take care of.

Groaning as I compelled my aching physique to stir, I managed to crack open a single eye. Simultaneously, a sigh escaped my lips.

Item number one on the list of things to deal with: the beautiful, slightly-over-thirty woman trying to steal a kiss from me while I slept. In other words, my mother.

“Good morning, Ryuto-chan! Time for your wake-up kiss,” she said sweetly, puckering her lips.

Still leaning in, she brought her face closer to mine. I quickly tilted my head out of the way and sat up in bed, dodging the incoming maternal strike.

“Mom?”

“Hmm?” she replied innocently.

Taking a breath to steel myself, I spoke in a low, serious tone. “Can we stop doing that kind of thing?”

“What kind of thing… exactly is it that you want to stop, Ryuto-chan?” she asked, tilting her head with a pout that made her look like one of those traditional Japanese demon masks trying to be coy.

“The… wake-up kiss,” I said flatly. “Let’s stop doing that.”

Irritated, I glared at her, but she just stared back at me, lips slightly parted, as if she genuinely couldn’t comprehend what I was saying.

“Why?” she questioned.

A prolonged sigh slipped from me, deeper than usual. Then, gathering my resolve, I told her plainly, “I’m already twelve, you know. That particular form of wake-up kiss… it’s something you stop at, like, six. Tops.”

“Eh?”

The moment the words left my mouth, Mom froze in place. We gazed at each other in perfect silence; neither of us spoke.

Then, my mom started to tremble. Little by little, her complexion drained of all color—so quickly it was actually kind of alarming. She went past pale… all the way to that dull, ashen tone that looked like dry soil.

Seriously, how devastating can it be?

An interminably protracted silence extended between us—drawn-out and ponderous as stone.

Gradually, my mom’s trembling began to subside. Bit by bit, the color returned to her face.

Looks like the direct, face-to-face talk with her son has finally worked.

Then again, this was my mom—someone who loved her son a bit too much for anyone's comfort. She must've gone into temporary shock, causing all that shaking and everything.

Now that the worst had passed, it seemed like she understood. The trembling stopped, her complexion had improved, and she was even wearing a calm, reflective smile, like she'd sorted through everything in her head and come to terms with it.

Honestly, a morning kiss for a twelve-year-old son was far beyond weird. I nodded to myself repeatedly. Yeah. Took twelve years in this life—and if I counted my last run, it was twenty-seven years total—of putting up with this mother.

From that perspective, I had just witnessed the first real step in her "cutting the cord."

It was… surprisingly moving.

And then, still smiling gently, she said:

"Good morning, Ryuto-chan! Time for your wake-up kiss!"

She puckered her lips *again* and leaned in toward mine.

She's going for a second take?!

This woman had the gall to nullify *everything* and just start the scene over from scratch.

My skin prickled as a chill of uneasiness crept over me.

She didn't recover from the shock. She just bailed on reality entirely!

At that point, I wasn't just exasperated—I was borderline stunned.

No, I couldn't let her get away with this. Steeling myself, I smoothly slipped out of range as her face came in again.

"What's wrong, Ryuto-chan?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"Let's not do that anymore, okay? I *am* twelve now," I said, firm and serious.

So, I hit her with my retake, matching her nonsense step by step.

She trembled slightly, and the color drained from her face once more—visibly, rapidly.

Then, all at once, she screamed.

"FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!"

What the hell? Is she some kind of pervert superhero?! I sighed inwardly, not even surprised anymore, as I inserted a calm mental jab.

"Ryuto-chan! Ryuto-chaaaaaan!" she continued. "RYUTO-CHAAAN! AHHH! AHHH! AHHH! SHYAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

Wailing like an unhinged spirit, my mom bolted for the front door. She tore outside at full speed, howling incomprehensibly as she vanished down the farm path.

I let out a long, tired sigh.

It's not like I hate her or anything. She's still young, still beautiful. But seriously… it's time she started letting go.

Today was March 27th. It was *already* March 27th.

Only seven days remained until the goblins were fated to attack the village.

That would be when the dragon intervened—when I would be taken to the Dragons' Domain. In short, I was going to leave this place.

"One more week…" I muttered to myself, then pushed off the bed and stood.

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I—Cordelia Allston—sat at the breakfast table, surrounded by my family.

There was white bread, scrambled eggs, a cheese salad topped with bacon, and a hearty soup made from smoked venison.

Whose table is this, some upper-ranked official's? I couldn't help but chuckle to myself.

Ever since I'd received the Divine Prophecy six years ago, meals in our house had looked like this every single day.

The house had been expanded and renovated, and our family's farmland had grown to ten times its original size. We had mobilized every relative we could—cousins, second cousins, even distant ones—to work the vast fields, but even with all that help, we were still short on hands. There was even talk of purchasing serfs or hiring live-in servants.

Where had the money come from? That much was obvious: it was all part of the financial support I received as the appointed Hero.

I reached into the basket and picked up a piece of white bread, spread butter over it, and popped it into my mouth. Despite the richness of the food, something about it didn't sit right.

I just can't shake this uneasy feeling.

Part of it was the fact that my favorite event—the Spring Flower Festival held every April 1st—had been canceled this year. But that wasn't the only reason.

"Starting next month, you'll be under the care of the Knights' Order," said my father, his tone calm but resolute.

I nodded silently.

For now, I was still undergoing basic combat training here in the village. I commuted to a swordsmanship dojo in a town an hour's walk away, and from time to time, I stayed in the Royal Capital for a couple of weeks to attend introductory lectures on magic.

Since I was still considered quite young, my training hadn't been especially intense. But that couldn't last forever. Now that I had turned twelve—the age where stat growth significantly accelerated—I was expected to begin walking the true path of a Hero.

The first step on that path was to be entrusted to the Knights' Order.

My position would be that of an apprentice, which was a somewhat ambiguous rank, but I would still be considered a provisional member. After a month of recruit training, I'd be assigned to a monster or beast subjugation squad and sent into live combat.

Live combat. That's right… it won't just be training anymore—it will be war.

"Yeah," I murmured, letting out a faint sigh.

My mother didn't seem to notice my mood as she chimed in cheerfully, "Two years with the Knights' Order… You'll get some basic combat experience, and then once you turn fifteen, you'll become a full-fledged knight."

Basic combat experience, huh?

She said it so easily, as if it were no more than a school internship.

The reality is that as soon as you swing a sword at someone, their blood, guts, and brain matter will burst into the air in a grotesque spectacle.

Of course, the reverse was also true.

Despite their class, a Hero could bleed… and even die.

That thought gave me pause, and I quickly tried to suppress it. I couldn't blame my parents. In the eyes of the world, a Hero wasn't just physically perfect—they were expected to be flawless in spirit as well. Something beyond human.

That's how people saw it. That's how *I* had seen it too, right up until the moment I received the Divine Prophecy.

A Hero afraid of the battlefield? Such a thing shouldn't exist. But even so… I'm afraid.

This was no playground scuffle. What awaited me was war—a life-or-death struggle, pitting humans against monsters. A battle in which only one side could survive.

Oblivious to the storm brewing in my heart, my mother continued speaking with bright enthusiasm.

"After that, you'll enroll in the Magic Academy. You'll graduate in three years."

"Then, it's off to the Royal Officer Academy. Three more years to be trained as a military leader," my father chimed in, smiling with satisfaction.

My mother took my hand gently in hers, nodded with a beaming smile, and added, "And after that… well, depending on your achievements, fame and position will be yours for the taking. You're beautiful, Cordelia. If things go well, you might even catch the eye of royalty. You could become the wife of the Crown Prince himself—"

I couldn't speak.

As I lowered my eyelashes, a wave of nausea rose in my chest.

I wish I had never received the Divine Prophecy.

I didn't need money—just enough to live. I didn't want status—I would be happy staying a simple villager forever.

The Divine Prophecy had already marked me. And that meant, whether I wanted it or not, certain things had already been decided.

"Um… Father?"

"Hm? What is it, Cordelia?"

"What's the battlefield like?" I asked, my voice low.

My mother's face suddenly tensed, her bright expression vanishing in an instant.

"Cordelia… Could it be that you're afraid?" she asked softly, her voice careful, hesitant. "Afraid of fighting? Of becoming a Hero?"

Of course, she can see it. After twelve years of raising me, how could she not? But… no. That's not it.

I had never once voiced my fears. I had never let them show. For as long as I could remember, I had acted brave, even when I was trembling inside. I had hidden it all behind a quiet, unshakable smile.

Now… with only a month left before I'd be sent to the battlefield…

This is low. I know that. Selfish, even. But still…

In this moment, at the last possible hour, I was sending my very first and last plea for help. A silent cry of despair, expressed not in

words but rather in the trembling of my voice, the paleness of my face, the way I lowered my eyes beneath heavy lashes.

It wasn't an act. I knew better than to put something like this on display. I wasn't so foolish as to not understand the consequences of revealing weakness.

"That can't be right, can it?" my father said, frowning, his tone sharp. "You were chosen by the Divine Prophecy. A Hero doesn't say such foolish things."

You're wrong, Father. I am *scared.*

"Isn't that right, Cordelia?" he added.

I turned to my mother, searching her face, desperate for rescue. But she wore a strained, unreadable expression—and then she quietly looked away.

Of course.

They'd already accepted the Hero's stipend. They had birthed a Hero, and with that came a duty to deliver me to the kingdom. They had an obligation, and it was too late to turn back.

I… I knew this was selfish. I knew I was asking for something impossible.

I let out a slow breath and gave a small nod, forcing my voice to steady.

"Right…. Of course I'm not afraid."

But I am. I'm terrified.

Still, I had no choice. There had never been a path that let me say no.

"Do your best, Cordelia," my father said softly as he stood from the table and approached me with slow, deliberate steps, his arms beginning to rise, clearly meaning to draw me into an embrace.

Reflexively, I stepped back. Something within me pulled away, instinctively, like a reaction to something hot. The weight in my chest tightened.

"I'm sorry, Father. I-I think I'll go back to my room," I murmured, managing a brittle smile as I rose. I lifted both hands

slightly—not to push him away, just to keep him from getting any closer.

Suddenly… the world snapped.

A violent crash ripped through the room. In an instant, my father was flung backward, his body launched through the air as if weightless. He struck the wall with a hollow thud five meters away, then crumpled into a motionless heap. His limbs splayed out awkwardly. Time seemed to hang.

My breath caught. I bit down hard on my lip as I stood frozen, the color draining from my face.

No… this isn't…

It was a mana surge, a magical backlash triggered by emotional instability. Mild, perhaps, but just as dangerous. These surges were common in children born with high-tier combat potential—Heroes, Sages, and the like—when raw, untrained power escaped its vessel. The body lost control, and the mana erupted outward, detached from will or intention.

Mine had answered the tremor in my heart. The moment I pulled back from my father's warmth, from his affection, something deep inside had lashed out without warning.

Even as my mind tried to piece it all together—mechanically, rationally—my eyes landed on the thin stream of white foam trickling from the corner of my father's mouth.

Panic surged, sharp and cold.

"Father? Father!" I dropped to my knees beside him, my voice shaking, cracking under the weight of fear building in my throat.

He didn't respond. His chest rose faintly, but he remained unconscious. My hands hovered uselessly over him. I had no idea what to do.

Mother stood nearby, her expression vacant. Her hands wrung the air, reaching for something intangible. Her mouth moved, but no words came. Her eyes mirrored my dread, empty and overwhelmed.

Then, I saw him. My younger brother, two years my junior, sat motionless at the table. His fork hung loosely from his fingers. He

hadn’t touched his food. He hadn’t even blinked.

He was just staring… at me.

Not at my father.

At me.

His gaze wasn’t filled with concern, nor with confusion—only *fear.*

That look struck harder than the blast. My throat tightened. A chill ran through my body. Slowly, I turned my gaze downward toward my own hands, which were still trembling and suspended in front of me, as if holding onto something that had vanished.

What I saw wasn’t just my hands.

It was the aftermath of something I couldn’t take back.

What have I done?

What is this? This power—what is it? What does it even mean to be a Hero? What does any of this mean anymore? I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything!

The way my brother was looking at me was unbearable—the silence in his eyes, the stillness.

I turned and ran.

One hour passed. Then another. Then a third.

I’d stormed out sometime in the morning, but when I finally looked up, the sky was already streaked with the burnished red of dusk. The day had slipped past me without a sound.

I now sat alone on a bench in the empty village square. No voices. No music. No scent of flowers in the wind. Just the stillness, settling like dust around my shoulders.

“April 1st… the Flower Festival,” I murmured into the silence.

It should’ve been today. A day when the village celebrated the arrival of spring. The square would have been wrapped in petals—white, pink, yellow. Food and drink from the communal stores would’ve overflowed into the streets. The adults would be half-drunk before noon, laughing too loudly. Children would’ve run wild until lanterns flickered late into the night.

This year, the festival had been canceled.

Some blamed the unusual weather; others the spread of magical corruption. Maybe it was both. Whatever the reason, spring had arrived, but the flowers hadn't. Nothing had bloomed.

The crops were fine, they said. The adults, relieved that the grain would survive, went back to their routines with practiced resolve.

For me…

This festival had been a whole new experience for someone who had loved flowers for as long as I could remember. There was more to it than food and petals. It was a promise—a gentle reminder that, no matter how hard the winter, spring would come.

I wasn't prepared for the void left by its silent removal from the calendar this year. A kind of ache that settled deeper than expected.

The sun continued its slow descent, its red glow sharpening along the rooftops.

I found myself wandering through the village without aim. No thought. No destination. My feet moved on their own, trailing through the fading light. And before I knew it… I was standing in front of Ryuto's house.

I didn't know why. Maybe, beneath the storm of fear and confusion, some quiet part of me still saw him as a brother.

We'd grown up side by side. He'd always seemed a little older than the rest of us—not just in years, but in the way he carried himself. When I cried, he didn't scold me or panic. He simply kneeled down, his voice gentle, his presence calm. Somehow, it had always made me feel safe.

I stood there in silence, adrift in memories, until the door to Ryuto's house creaked open. And just like that, he stepped out.

"Oh, Cordelia," he said casually, his tone light and familiar, as if finding me there were the most natural thing in the world. "Perfect timing. I was just about to head out and look for you."

"Look for me?" I asked, brows knitting together.

He approached without hesitation and reached out, tousling my hair with both hands in that rough, brotherly way he always had. His

touch was warm—painfully comforting, gratingly familiar.

"The Flower Festival," he said. "Shame they canceled it, huh? You've always liked flowers."

"Yeah. Of course I do, but…"

"So, come with me," he said, flashing a wide, easy smile. "Just for a little while."

"Sure," I answered, the word leaving my lips before I could think to stop it. I hadn't expected to say yes so easily.

He turned and started walking. Without thinking, I followed, just like I always had. After a few steps, he reached back and took my hand, gently tugging me along. Guiding me. Leading me.

Like always, I found myself staring at his back.

We were the same age, yet Ryuto had always seemed a little older. Calmer. Steadier. He had a way of grounding the world around him—like a big brother, though we shared no blood. When I cried, he was the one who kneeled beside me, who whispered gently until the tears stopped. His back had always seemed so strong. So reassuring.

Lately, I'd noticed that things had started to change. I couldn't pretend otherwise.

I was a Hero. He was a Villager. And I finally understood what that meant.

The paths before us no longer ran side by side. They had split. Quietly. Inevitably.

Now, watching him from behind—watching that once-familiar back grow smaller with each step—I felt it. A soft ache, like waking from a dream I hadn't wanted to end.

"Hey… Ryuto?" I asked, hesitant.

"What?"

I paused. Then, without pretending, without softening the edges, I asked.

"What's it really like? You know, fighting monsters."

He didn't even blink when he answered, "It's a world of blood and blades. You swing. You get hit. It hurts. People die. Blood

sprays. Guts spill. There's nothing glorious about it."

I took a slow breath, steadying myself before speaking again.

With Ryuto, I never had to pretend. I could say anything, even the parts I didn't fully understand myself, and he'd listen—not with urgency or judgment, but with that quiet, grounding presence that had always been his. If I was wrong, he'd correct me—not with harshness, but with the kind of calm that made me want to believe him.

It didn't matter that I was a Hero now and he was a Villager. That dynamic had never changed the way he looked at me.

Somehow, without ever needing proof, I knew—I *knew*—that Ryuto would always be someone I could lean on. Regardless of how much the world changed.

"Is it strange to be afraid of that?" I asked softly. "Is it wrong?"

"Of course not," he answered without pause.

His certainty caught me off guard. It was so simple. So absolute.

At some point, we had wandered into the woods on the outskirts of the village. As if the world had slowed down to accommodate our conversation, the trees surrounding us grew denser, and the path became quieter.

"But I'm a Hero," I said, my eyes tracing the narrow trail ahead. "Shouldn't this be something I can get through?"

Ryuto shrugged. "Why?"

"Huh?"

"If you hate it," he said, his voice casual, "then don't do it. You don't have to carry this alone."

"What?"

"You're way too serious," he added with a small sigh—less frustration than affection, like an older brother lightly scolding a sibling for overthinking something simple.

"I don't get it," I whispered.

"One day, the gods decide to drop some divine message on you: 'Starting today, you're the Hero.' And you're just supposed to accept

it? They tell you to risk your life, and you nod along like it's normal? That's insane."

His words broke something loose in me. I opened my mouth to argue, but faltered.

"But I *am* a Hero…"

Ryuto sighed again, deeper this time.

"If it bothers you that much… why don't we just run away?"

"Run away?" I asked, blinking at the sudden words.

"Yeah. Just the two of us. Somewhere far, where no one knows you. Somewhere that doesn't care about Heroes, prophecies, or fate."

I stared at him.

Are you serious?

We were twelve. Just kids. If we left the village, where could we possibly go? How would we live?

And yet…

The way he said it—so casually, so unshaken—made it feel real. Like the world *would* bend to make space for us, if only I followed him. Like, maybe if I grabbed his hand right now, everything would be all right.

To release the weight of being a Hero… to lay down my weapon forever, and live a quiet life next to someone—not as a chosen one, but simply as a girl. Caring for the land, experiencing the seasons together, and creating something ordinary and real. I could see it. Not as a fantasy or fragile hope, but as something solid. Tangible. Like a memory of the future, already waiting to be lived.

Even if we failed—if it all fell apart—we could always come back. The village would still be there. That door would never be locked behind us.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe we really can run away. Just the two of us…

I drew in a breath and opened my mouth, ready to speak that thought aloud. But the forest moved first.

The trees didn’t vanish—they receded, parting like a curtain drawn back by unseen hands. The thick forest gave way to open air, and we found ourselves in a clearing filled with golden light.

Ryuto stopped ahead of me and looked back with a quiet nod.

“All right, we’re here,” he said.

The space was modest—maybe ten meters across. A square of red-brick ground, framed by raised planters that spilled color. Anemones, tulips, daisies, marguerites—bright blooms overflowed from every edge, bursting into the silence like laughter too long held in.

It wasn’t just the flowers that caught me. It was the trees surrounding them. Tall, still, ancient—they encircled the clearing like sentinels, branches arched above us like a vaulted ceiling. A cathedral of green. A sanctuary.

No… more than that. It felt sacred. Secret. Like a place meant only for us.

For a moment, I was speechless.



“What are these flowers?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off it.

Soft pink petals drifted through the air—slow, unhurried, like they didn’t want to fall. The tree stood cloaked in full bloom, its branches heavy with color and quiet vitality. There was something about it that felt so *alive*. That sensation pressed faintly against my chest.

“Sakura,” Ryuto said, stepping beside me. “I bought the sapling six years ago from a merchant who had come from the Eastern lands.”

“Sakura…” I repeated under my breath.

It was a flower I’d never seen before. I stood rooted to the spot, watching. Thought slipped away. Time dissolved. That tree—so delicate, so persistent—held me like a spell.

Eventually, I blinked and turned toward Ryuto.

“What is this place?” I inquired, voice barely audible.

“I made it,” he said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

“You *made* it?” I echoed.

“Yeah. You like flowers, don’t you?”

I stared at him. His words were straightforward, so it wasn’t that I didn’t understand them; rather, it was that the weight they carried felt too heavy for me to handle at once. This place, this garden, all of it…

“But… isn’t this year supposed to be flowerless?” I asked slowly. “That’s why the festival was canceled, wasn’t it?”

A flicker of something passed through Ryuto’s eyes.

“Maybe,” he said. “Could be a sign… that the Great Calamity is coming.”

“The Great Calamity?” I tilted my head slightly.

“You remember that bad harvest not long ago? I’ve got this feeling… like the land itself is being drained. Twisted. And subtly too. Not all at once—just a little at a time.”

“And how would *you* know something like that?” I asked, my brow furrowed.

He smirked, tapping a finger against his chest.

"Because I'm a genius when it comes to the earth. I've got the *Crop Cultivation* skill, you know."

"I see," I murmured. A soft laugh escaped me—dry, quiet.

He said it like a plain fact. Calm, unshakable. And because it was him, I believed it.

"Then… how did you make them bloom?" I asked, eyes still fixed on the impossible scene before me. "If the land around here is drained of spirit energy, isn't that why nothing's blooming this year?"

"The land's spirit isn't irreplaceable," Ryuto said. "You can substitute it with magic."

"Would you mind explaining that in a way I can understand?" I scowled as I turned to face him.

He scratched his head, thoughtful.

"Okay, think of it like this: the earth needs nourishment to grow things—like fertilizer, right? If you feed it mana every day, little by little… this is what you get," he said, sweeping a hand toward the garden.

"I see," I murmured.

My gaze drifted back to the flowers—no, to the *garden*, this world he'd carved out in secret. A quiet breath slipped from my lips. Not a sigh of weariness, but of awe and wonder.

After a while, I spoke again.

"This place is huge… How long did it take you?"

"Seven years," he replied without pause. "Since the day I started wandering the mountains. I came here every day. I pulled weeds, cut trees, turned the soil, planted… A little at a time."

"Seven years?" I blinked at him. "You mean… *you*…"

He just shrugged and smiled.

"Slow and steady. That kind of stuff matters more than people think."

I didn't have an answer for that. I wasn't just surprised—I was floored. A twelve-year-old boy—a Villager, no less—had been

building this without anyone knowing for all this time. He'd been growing it for *years*.

"H-Hey," I said slowly, my voice searching. "Did you… truly make this just for me?"

"Didn't I already say that?" Ryuto smirked. "It's for you."

"I see," I whispered.

He shook his head—softly, with a quiet kind of certainty.

"No. Not 'just' for you. It's *only* for you."

I didn't know why, but something in my chest tightened, like a string being gently plucked, vibrating deep inside. A soft warmth spread through me, low and unfamiliar, like something blooming where nothing had before.

What is this? This feeling… what is it?

Everything fell into place.

Ah… The thought came softly, rising within me like the first breath after a long silence. A strange clarity swept through my chest, and all at once, the weight I'd been dragging behind me—doubts, fears, confusion—was gone. Like wind clearing away a storm, quiet yet absolute.

That's right.

I had been given power; that much was true. But Ryuto had power too. Not the kind bestowed by fate or sharpened for battle, but something quieter. Rooted. He embodied the earth's strength, which allowed him to create, nurture, and bring beauty into the world without ever seeking recognition. It was the power of a Villager, of someone who'd spent years turning soil and planting seeds in secret until one day, a forgotten corner of the forest bloomed into color. With that quiet, unnoticed strength, he'd cleared the storm in my heart more gently than I ever could have imagined.

That, too, was power.

For the first time, I understood how I was meant to use mine.

This strength I carried—the burden of being called Hero—wasn't something to obey blindly. It wasn't meant to serve as a title. It

wasn’t meant to follow orders without question. It had been given to me, yes, but not to weigh me down or control me.

It was mine to wield. To protect the fragile. To shield what mattered. To stand between the people I love and the things that would harm them.

Ryuto could make people happy in his way. And I… I could do the same in mine.

I must.

This power wasn’t something to endure; it was something to choose.

“Thank you, Ryuto,” I said, turning toward him, my voice softer now. Calmer.

He blinked, caught off guard. “Huh? What’s with that all of a sudden?”

“I’m okay now,” I said with a small smile. “I’ve let go of a lot. Cleared my head.”

“Cleared your head, huh?” He raised an eyebrow, giving me that half-skeptical, half-familiar look I’d seen so many times before.

I laughed, quiet and short. And I smiled, the expression small but certain.

“It’s hard to explain… but I’ve decided. I’m going to give it everything I’ve got.”

“You’re seriously weird, you know that?” Ryuto muttered, shaking his head.

I just nodded, firm and calm, and made a fist. With my right hand, I tapped it lightly against my chest.

That was it. That was the moment I, *Cordelia Allston*, made a vow—not out loud, not to anyone else, but to myself. A silent, unshakable promise etched deep within me.

This boy… the village that raised us… this land, this country, these people—no matter what happens, I will protect them.

My resolve had finally taken shape.

Yes. This is the path I choose to walk.

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Two days later, they came.

The goblin horde reached the edge of our village.

Today was the day. I remembered it clearly from my "tutorial." The one where I stood frozen, powerless, helpless to do anything but watch Cordelia fight alone, injured, and outmatched.

The goblins hadn't come out of cruelty. They were most likely desperate, driven by hunger or the slow collapse of whatever resources they once had. It was a brutal, instinctive raid for food.

But desperation didn't make them any less deadly.

Back then, Cordelia had already received the Divine Prophecy. She had been marked by the gods. The world had chosen her. But she was still only twelve.

Her potential was frightening. Her aptitude far exceeded that of any common adventurer, and even as a child, her stats dwarfed those of most adults. But she hadn't yet grown into that power physically, mentally, or emotionally. She was still standing at the threshold of what she could become.

In truth, a retired adventurer slurring his way through stories at a tavern might've handled the situation better.

The goblin horde likely exceeded a thousand in number. We were vastly outnumbered—too many foes for too few of us defenders. And in the face of that overwhelming threat, the adults of our village did the unthinkable.

They pushed her—Cordelia, a twelve-year-old girl—out to the front lines. The Hero. The child chosen by Divine Prophecy. They gave her the title, and with it, the burden. While she faced the horde alone, they barricaded themselves inside the church, clutching their families, trembling like children.

The goblins were, by classification, a low-tier monster species. They were far from invincible. If the adults had banded together, even with nothing but hoes and spades, even if only to stand beside her, we might have had a chance. Maybe not to win, but at least to hold the line. To survive long enough for help to arrive.

They made no such choice.

They left everything—*everything*—to a single girl with a sword and a prophecy, then turned their backs and locked themselves away behind holy walls.

Cordelia… she fought.

She was a fierce fighter. Surrounded by corpses, her blade chipped and streaked with blood, she refused to back down. She had the option to flee. She could have disappeared into the mountains, slipped into the woods, or escaped before the goblins realized she was gone, thanks to her physical strength.

But she didn't.

Cornered in a narrow alley, her back against stone, she stayed. Because behind her was a boy—just one—too slow to escape.

I had frozen and been abandoned. No one came when I cried. I didn't know how to fight, and there was no time to learn. I stood there, useless, as Cordelia's blood painted the cobblestones in front of me. She staggered, her body cut open again and again—and even then, even through the pain, she turned to me and shouted: "Ryuto?! Are you alive?! Don't worry—I'm here! I'll take care of all of them! Just stay back! If anything happens, scream as loud as you can and I'll come for you—*I promise!*"

She was soaked in blood. Pale as a ghost.

There wasn't even a scratch on me.

That—*that* was what broke me. Not the fear, not the chaos, but the unbearable shame of being untouched. Of watching her bleed and scream and fight while I couldn't even step into the same battle.

I hadn't just failed to save her; I hadn't even been *worthy* of trying.

That was the first time I understood what it meant to be powerless. What it meant to *watch* someone protect you with everything they had while you stood there, empty-handed.

Even as the goblins kept coming, her sword never stopped.

Again. And again. And again.

Then came the tragedy.

Cordelia's crimson hair was stained ever darker with blood, both her own and the goblins'. The alley was streaked with violence, her blade the brush, the goblins her unwilling canvas. But no matter how fiercely she fought, the truth remained: she was one against many.

Eventually, sheer numbers wore her down. Her stamina gave out. She dropped to one knee, panting, her sword trembling in her hand. The goblins sensed their moment and began to close in, step by step, their circle tightening like a noose.

She fought to the edge of her limits, swinging until her arms could no longer move. And then—like the world cracked open—one of their spears struck clean through the hand that held her sword. It was a wound that would never fully heal. She collapsed, blood soaking the ground beneath her.

I thought it was over. That they'd tear her apart right there, right in front of me.

Then… a shadow passed over the sky.

The dragon came.

It descended like a force of nature, scattering the goblin horde as if they were nothing but dry leaves in a storm. Power beyond comprehension fell from the heavens, and with it, salvation.

Cordelia and I were saved.

※※※

That was how it happened last time. That was the history I remembered.

This time, the dragon wasn't just coming to save her. It would take *me* with it to the hidden land of dragons.

Which meant I had to be careful. If I stepped in too soon—if I interfered before Cordelia reached her breaking point—the dragon might not appear. And without that, everything I needed would be lost. That would be catastrophic.

So, I did what I had to.

When the goblins attacked, I hung back, pretending to be among the last to evacuate. I wandered deliberately into that same narrow alley, boxed in by buildings, surrounded and *seemingly* helpless. And just like before, right on cue, Cordelia arrived. Her red hair whipped like fire in the wind. Her eyes burned. Her blade gleamed.

It was exactly the same.

She tore into the goblins with overwhelming force. They fell by the dozens, cleaved apart before they could react. However, she lacked tempo and rhythm, just like the last time. She gave everything from the start—and now, I could see it clearly.

Her stamina was slipping, and her MP was nearly gone.

This time, I understood every sign.

Too wasteful, I thought, grinding my teeth. *Her movements are too wild. She's overusing* Body Enhancement—*dumping mana into it without restraint. Cordelia's MP is limited in contrast to mine. In a fight this drawn out, she should be conserving every drop…*

I couldn't intervene. No matter how much I wanted to help, I held myself back. Because I knew—*absolutely knew*—that she wouldn't die. She'd get hurt, yes, and badly. But she would survive. That was certain. The true danger wasn't in her injuries but in my interference. If I changed the outcome too much, the dragon might not appear. And that risk was far greater than a few wounds.

Cordelia cried out as the tip of a goblin's spear grazed her cheek, slicing a thin red line across her skin. Her face twisted—not from pain, but surprise. And then, her expression shifted into something fierce and furious.

“YOU BASTARDS!!!”

Her scream echoed through the alley as she drove her blade through a goblin’s gut. Blood and entrails hit the ground in a sickening splash. Another swing, another kill. She slashed again, and yet another fell. Her blade rose and fell like a machine—steady, brutal, relentless. But then came an arrow. It whistled past from behind. She dodged just in time, though it clipped her side, drawing another streak of blood.

How long had it been since the fight began? I couldn’t say.

Just like before, she was nearing collapse. Her body was shredded, her breath ragged and shallow. Now she acted out of instinct, out of willpower. Each breath was a gasp, each swing a test of endurance. And still, even in that state, she turned toward me, her voice cracking as she called out: “Ryuto?! Are you alive?! It’s okay—I’m here! I’ll take care of them all, I swear! If anything happens, scream for me—I’ll be there in a second!”

She was soaked in blood. Her face had gone pale as paper. And just like last time, I was untouched.

Then came the storm. Her sword moved in a blur of red and steel, like rage manifested. Goblins fell around her like stalks of wheat, their blood mixing with hers until her once-vibrant hair had turned nearly black. Her wounds deepened, her balance wavered, her form faltered—but still, she fought. One girl against hundreds.

Too many. Far too many.

Her stamina was gone—or rather, she was out of MP. She had burned through every last drop, and now the mana exhaustion backlash had begun. Cordelia staggered, her sword arm limp, her breathing shallow, and slowly dropped to one knee as the goblins crept in, blades and claws glinting, tightening the circle around her inch by inch.

If I did nothing—if I just let the scene play out—she’d be injured. Badly. But she wouldn’t die. I knew that. Within minutes, the dragon would come. So, I stood there, teeth clenched so hard my jaw ached, and watched.

This is fine, I told myself. *This is how it has to happen.*

If I changed too much now, there was no telling what might be lost. The dragon might never appear. And without it, everything that followed—everything I needed—would fall apart. The wound she was about to suffer wouldn't kill her. It would bleed and it would scar, but her life was never in danger.

So, this is fine.

That was when one goblin broke from the pack, lunging from her front-right flank. I recognized it immediately. *That bastard.* Even now, I couldn't forget him. He was the one who left that deep, permanent scar on her right arm, the one that made her wear long sleeves even in the middle of summer, too self-conscious to let anyone see. The taste of blood filled my mouth as I bit down on my lip.

This is fine, I told myself again. *She won't die.*

Still, she was twelve. On her knees. Alone. Abandoned by the adults who should have protected her. She'd been made a Hero without her say, thrown into the fire, celebrated and sacrificed in the same breath. And now, drained of strength, unable even to lift her sword, bleeding out where she kneeled, she looked so small. So heartbreakingly small. Not the Hero. Not the savior. Just a twelve-year-old girl.

What had I become strong for? What was even the point, if not for *this*?

To become a hero? Sure, that was part of it. To join Cordelia's party, to walk beside the Hero as her comrade? Yeah, that too. But that wasn't the real reason. Not the *true* one.

What I really wanted—what I had *always* wanted—was to stand beside her as her equal. To look her in the eye, not from below or from behind, but shoulder to shoulder. To protect her, not because she was weak, but because I was strong enough to do so.

Before I realized it, my body had already moved.

【*Skill: Physical Enhancement activated.*】

【*Skill: Steel Body Technique activated.*】
【*Skill: Kimon Technique activated.*】

What had all that training been for? The drills. The repetition. The quiet, joyless hours spent grinding my body and instincts into something sharper. It was for this. For this exact moment.

Wasn't it?

Wasn't it, Ryuto Ma— No… Iijima Ryuto?

I let out a breath, and with it, a quiet laugh.

"Yeah… It was, no doubt about it."

Suddenly, I was there. My hand was already around the skull of the goblin that had been seconds from finishing her off. I tightened my grip.

"Hey," I growled, my voice low and cold. "You seriously think you're gonna lay a hand on *her*?"

There was no time for answers. I slammed my fist into its gut—low, deep, deliberate. The goblin shrieked in a high and reedy voice, bile spilling from its mouth as its twitching body collapsed into the dirt.

I'd messed up. I'd changed history. If I wiped out the goblin horde myself, the dragon might never come.

However, letting Cordelia break again… letting her cry, bleed, suffer like that one more time…

That would be the real failure.

So, this was the right call.

"This far on your own… You did well, Cordelia," I said without turning. "But from here on out, leave it to me."

"Ryuto? Are you—are you seriously planning to fight the goblins? *You*, a Villager kid?"

I turned to her and met her stunned eyes. Then, gently, I took the sword from her trembling hand.



"Yeah, I *am* a Villager," I said flatly.

"Then run!" Cordelia shouted, her voice cracking in panic. "Please! Leave me if you have to, but you have to escape!"

"I'll be fine."

"But you're… You're just a Villager!"

"I am," I said with a nod. "But I'm not just any Villager."

Her breath caught. "What?"

"I'm the strongest Villager alive."

With that, I turned my eyes to the goblins—hundreds of them, watching, waiting. I glared at every single one, my gaze sharp, my intent murderous.

"Now that I've started," I said, my voice low and steady, "none of you is getting out of here alive. Not one. And while we're at it, let me ask again: who the hell gave you bastards permission to lay a finger on Cordelia?!"

I raised the sword. Ahead of me stretched a swarm, maybe five hundred strong. Once, that number would have broken me—made me freeze, tremble, collapse before the first swing.

That person was dead.

This was my second round. I had lived twelve more years. Twelve years of training. Twelve years of regret. Twelve years of sharpening myself for this moment.

I wasn't afraid anymore.

I couldn't lose. Not here.

Behind me, unable to move, was Cordelia. The one who had once stood while I collapsed. Now our roles were reversed, and I was the one standing.

I clenched the sword tighter and roared with everything I had.

"Come on, then—all of you at once!"

As if the slaughter had been waiting for my call, I cut down the first goblin in a single, fluid stroke. Its torso split open like soft cake beneath a knife—flesh parting, entrails spilling.

【*Kimon Technique: Output Increase unleashed.*】

Crimson aura exploded from beneath my skin, heat and force bursting from every pore. And then, acceleration. The world blurred past like it was running in slow motion.

I swung my sword. A goblin's guts spilled across the ground.

Faster now, my body accelerating on instinct, I swung again. Goblins dropped like ragged sacks of meat, torn open and discarded. Slash. Dodge. Tear. Cut. Rip. Tear. Again, and again. In every exchange, I chose the optimal move—no hesitation, no delay. The sheer numbers would crush me if I made even one mistake.

Then, I caught a glimpse of it—one of them lunging at Cordelia from the side.

Damn it.

I dashed toward her, breaking focus. That moment of panic—that single lapse—was enough. An arrow struck my shoulder, and a goblin behind me lunged with a spear, aiming for my head.

I didn't even turn. I just twisted my neck—just enough. The spear grazed my cheek, slicing a shallow line across my skin. I felt the sting, the warmth of blood, and without looking, I slashed behind me.

A body collapsed with a thud.

"Shit," I hissed, yanking the arrow free. Fighting while protecting someone was a nightmare. Then again… Cordelia had always been protecting *me*, hadn't she?

Acceleration. More. Full release.

Cut. Dodge. Tear. Cut. Rip. Tear.

At some point, I stopped thinking.

There were still more than four hundred left. Far too many. Hopelessly outnumbered.

There was no time to calculate. No time to process. So, I didn't.

I didn't move after thinking; I moved because my body remembered. Because reflex alone was faster than thought.

For years, I had trained under Bernard. Tens of thousands—no, *hundreds* of thousands of repetitions burned the foundational sword forms into my bones. Now I passed through them instinctively,

without conscious thought. Even as the battlefield erupted around me, my body performed each technique with mechanical precision.

Blood coated me from head to toe, hot and sticky. There was so much of it I couldn't even fully open my eyes or wipe it away. Everything was red. Cordelia's sword, dulled and chipped, slick with fat and gore, was barely holding together. It had done its job, but now it was useless. I discarded it without hesitation and tore a spear from the cold, limp hands of a dead goblin.

Accelerate. Again. Push past the limit—*accelerate.* My thoughts, my muscles, every last cell—*accelerate.*

My arms burned. Lactic acid surged through my muscles like poison. My legs turned heavy and unresponsive, dragging beneath me like weights. And when my knees finally buckled, when my steps faltered for good, I exhaled sharply—a long, shaking breath that brought no relief.

This wasn't mana depletion from enhancement skills. No—it was simple, brutal stamina loss.

My chest tightened. I gasped, lungs pulling in air like a drowning man.

So, this… this is what real combat feels like.

I couldn't laugh at Cordelia anymore. I had driven my body just as far as she had—and now, it screamed for rest.

My heart pounded like a war drum in my chest—*thud, thud, thud*—each beat louder than the last. On two occasions, I took deep, ragged breaths. They call it "hysterical strength," the power your body summons when it has nothing else left to give. Somehow, mine still moved. My legs, though unsteady, still carried me forward.

Barely.

If I were a machine, the fuel gauge would already be flashing red. Empty. Nothing left. Not much time.

Thrust. Dodge. Tear. Thrust. Split. Tear. Thrust. Dodge. Tear. Thrust. Split. Tear.

At some point, the world around me vanished. I no longer felt the wind. I didn't hear the screams. The battlefield disappeared,

replaced by nothing but movement—rhythm, blood, survival.

Thrust. Dodge. Tear. Thrust. Split. Tear. Thrust. Dodge. Tear. Thrust. Split. Tear.

And then—

Silence.

No snarling. No heavy steps. No malice pressing in on my skin.

I blinked. The haze cleared. My breath was ragged. My body was broken.

It was over.

The hatred that had surrounded us like a living storm… was gone.

Keeping myself propped up solely with the blood-slicked spear I'd taken from one of the fallen goblins, I tilted my head back and drew in ragged breaths. My chest burned. Every muscle screamed in protest. But I was still standing.

Then, behind me, a soft, trembling voice reached my ears.

"Ryuto? Is that really you?" Cordelia asked.

I didn't turn right away.

"Who else would it be?" I replied, forcing a dry, breathless chuckle.

"But… you're a Villager," she whispered.

Her eyes weren't on me. They were on the alley around us—on the piles of mangled corpses stacked like refuse. Half of them had fallen to her blade; the rest were mine.

"I told you," I said, glancing over my shoulder with a crooked smile. "When it comes to Villagers, I'm pretty much the strongest there is."

Cordelia puffed her cheeks, clearly displeased by the answer.

"You probably could've taken out a hundred more, couldn't you?" she said.

I thought for a moment, then nodded. My body was bruised, my joints aching, my clothes torn and soaked in blood—but I could still move somewhat. And I hadn't even used a tenth of my MP.

“A Villager stronger than a Hero,” she muttered. “Just what kind of trick are you pulling?”

I gave a lopsided shrug.

“A trick, huh? I guess you could call it that. It does have a setup and a reveal, after all.”

She tilted her head in bewilderment. I was about to explain when I sensed it—a tremendous pressure from behind that was oppressive and suffocating, like the weight of a mountain.

Cordelia’s face suddenly lost its color. She stared past me, her mouth moving, unable to speak.

Then, she pointed, finger trembling.

“A-a-a-a… d-d-drag…”

I turned.

There it was.

“Hey,” I muttered with a grin. “Took you long enough. I already cleaned the place up.”

The creature towering behind me was awe given form—fifteen meters of armored scale, sinuous movement, and smoldering scarlet flame. A dragon, grim and colossal. Even now, seeing it again, I felt the air catch in my throat.

Just like before, it was terrifying. And beautiful.

“A divine crisis… concerning the one chosen by prophecy. I came to observe the Hero’s peril, and yet…” The dragon’s voice rumbled low as it tilted its massive head, golden eyes narrowing as they fixed on me. “What exactly is this?”

It studied me, puzzled.

“Read my mind,” I said flatly. “It’ll be faster.”

Its gaze deepened. Then, slowly, its eyes widened. Surprise flickered across its regal, ancient face.

“What troublesome consent I’ve just been bound to,” it muttered. “Now I have no choice but to take you back to the Dragons’ Domain.”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“Word for word, exactly the same as last time!”

The dragon rumbled a dry, rasping chuckle of its own.

"A dragon cannot lie," it said.

"Well then," I replied, stepping forward. "Take me with you."

We exchanged a nod—wordless, mutual, final. And I began to walk.

Then, behind me, faint and unsteady, Cordelia's voice reached out.

"Ryuto?" she called, barely above a whisper. "Where are you going?"

"To the Dragons' Domain," I said, not turning around. "I won't be back for a few years."

"The Dragons' Domain?"

I shrugged, keeping my tone as light as I could.

"There's a secret to my strength. It's not luck or magic—it's method. There's a system, a trick. And more than anything, it's the result of a hell of a lot of work."

"But… Why?" she asked, and this time, her voice cracked.

"Because you're the Hero," I said. "I might be stronger than you now, but give it a year, maybe less, and you'll catch up. You might even surpass me. That's why."

Her lashes lowered like shutters, her gaze falling to the ground, her lips pressed tight.

"So that's it, huh?" she murmured. "I finally understand why you've become something so far beyond reason. Seeing all these goblin corpses, how could I not? You went off somewhere on your own… trained in secret… turned yourself into some monster… and now you're just going to leave?"

I didn't answer.

"You're just a Villager," she continued, her voice beginning to tremble, her eyes still fixed on the dirt. "But you saved a Hero. You fought like something *inhuman*. And now you're leaving the village for *years*—without even asking…"

"It's what I have to do," I said softly. "If a nobody like me wants to stand beside someone like you… then yeah, I *need* to do this."

Her shoulders were shaking, but I didn't stop.

"Of course!" she shouted, tears rising fast in her eyes. "Of course, you used some insane method—pushed yourself harder than anyone should. How else could a *Villager* end up stronger than a *Hero*? And you did it all on your own, didn't you? In secret. In silence. Without ever telling *me*. That's what pisses me off the most!"

I raised my hands in half-hearted defense.

"I mean… You say it like I had a choice—"

"And what's this about needing to 'stand beside me,' anyway?" she snapped, her voice climbing. "You didn't have to do *any* of this! I'm the Hero! You could've just let *me* protect *you*! There was no need to go off and nearly kill yourself trying to match me!"

"But, Cordelia—"

She stomped the ground, fists clenched at her sides, her whole body trembling.

"Don't make me say it… Are you honestly gonna make me say it?"

"Say what?" I asked, carefully.

"I *hate* this," she whispered, voice cracking.

"Hate what?"

"I *hate* it, Ryuto! The idea that you'll be gone for years—that I won't get to see you, won't get to *talk* to you—that you'd just go and decide this all on your own!" Her voice broke completely now, eyes shining with emotion. "Where am *I* in that decision?! Did you even *think* about how I'd feel?!"

I looked at her—at the raw, unfiltered emotion in her voice, the frustration in every shaking line of her frame—and all I could think was, *God, she's always been like this. Complicated. Loud. Ridiculously honest.*

Exhausting.

I let out a long sigh and rubbed the back of my neck.

"I won't say goodbye," I murmured.

Then, I stepped forward.

"Because I'll come back. No matter what, I *will* come back to you."

Before she could answer, I pulled her into a gentle embrace.

Her small, shaking frame folded into mine, her arms awkward between us at first. Then slowly, hesitantly, they wrapped around my back.

I held her tightly, like I was anchoring her to this moment.

For a long while, neither of us said a word.



“Huh?”

Cordelia blinked up at me, wide-eyed, her expression softening into something dazed and unguarded. Her lips parted in confusion, and then, as if her knees had finally given out, she slumped to the ground, landing in a clumsy kneeling heap.

I smiled.

“Good,” I murmured, and reached out to pat her head twice. A little rough, a little fond.

Then I stepped back and called out the same words I’d once said, standing at the edge of a cliff, just before vanishing from her world the first time.

“See you around!”

A thousand things swelled in my chest: memories, regrets, promises. But I didn’t stop. I turned and broke into a sprint, activating *Physical Enhancement* one last time. With a single leap, I launched myself onto the back of the crimson dragon.

My boots struck warm scales as I landed atop its spine. The beast turned its head slightly toward me.

“That’s all the farewell she gets?” it asked, voice low and rumbling.

I grimaced, running a hand through my hair.

“I told her I’d come back. That’s enough. This isn’t goodbye—not really.”

“You won’t return for years,” the dragon said.

“Doesn’t matter,” I replied. “I’ll be back eventually. I *will*. So, this is fine.”

The dragon said nothing more. It crouched low and spread its wings wide.

… Flight.

A single powerful beat of those immense wings hurled us into the sky. The ground fell away beneath us, the village shrinking rapidly. Rooftops turned to specks. Fields blurred into patchworks of green and brown.

From somewhere below—distant but fierce, her voice reached me, carried on the wind, shaking with tears and fury.

"*Idioooot!* You absolute IDIOT, Ryuto! Who gave you the right to decide everything by yourself?! You STUPID VILLAGER! Even if you come back, I'm never speaking to you again, you hear me?! NEVER!"

I laughed.

She hasn't changed at all… Not since we were kids. Always loud, stubborn, and honest in the most ridiculous, roundabout way.

Her figure grew smaller—first a person, then a dot, and finally, just another part of the village below.

Still, she was *there*. Just like she always had been.

"I'll become stronger," I whispered. Then said it louder, firmer, until the words etched themselves into the wind. "Stronger than anyone. I *will* come back. And when I do… I'll be strong enough to carry it all."

My hands clenched tightly around the warm, ridged scales beneath me.

"You, and the world you've been forced to bear alone… I'll shoulder that burden too. Every last piece of it."

Then, with every ounce of fire I had left in my lungs, I shouted it into the open sky: "I don't care who the enemy is, or what awaits me. I'll overcome it all!"

As if in answer to my cry, the crimson dragon beneath me surged forward, its massive wings beating with a force like thunder ripping through the heavens.

The wind screamed past. The world below blurred—shrinking, retreating, swallowed by distance and speed. The village, Cordelia, and everything I had ever known fell away beneath us as the sky opened up, vast and boundless.

With that, I vanished into the clouds—leaving behind the only home I'd ever known.

Thus began the legend.

The legend of the strongest Villager the world had ever known.

Chapter 2: Leveling Up Fast in the Dragons' Domain

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Chapter 2: Leveling Up Fast in the Dragons' Domain

"You should've come the day before yesterday."

Her voice was flat—expressionless, almost mechanical. The girl in front of me had pale, watery blue hair cut in a neat bob that just brushed past her shoulders. Her jade-green eyes, cool and unreadable, peeked out from beneath the hood of her pristine white robe. If I had to name the color, I'd call it "water blue." And the first words out of her mouth weren't a greeting; they were a blunt, bureaucratic dismissal.

"I *have* to meet with the King," I said, trying not to let my irritation show.

We were standing in the heart of the Dragon King's Grand Archive, a sprawling, impossibly vast library that dwarfed any I'd ever seen. The girl behind the reception desk, all of twelve years old at most, was apparently the head librarian.

A librarian at twelve. Go figure.

This was the Dragons' Domain, an ancient, secret community nestled in the middle of the continent's massive forest. Shrouded in myth and mist, it lay beyond the ragged peaks of the Killra Highlands. The city itself was carved into the mountainside; a breathtaking lattice of stone architecture cut from living rock. It reminded me of something from Earth's history—like Machu Picchu, that ruined mountaintop city of the Inca Empire.

Honestly, when I'd first heard the name "Dragons' Domain," I'd imagined everything here would be built to dragon scale: massive doors, towering walls, sky-scraping statues. I'd pictured a fantasy epic brought to life.

Apparently, I'd been wrong.

It seemed that every dragon in this area shrank to human proportions using transformation magic. And the reason was… economics. Maintaining a city built for full-sized dragons was just too expensive and inconvenient. That was the explanation I got. Mundane, practical, and completely unromantic.

Still, the Grand Archive was the one exception. This place was *huge*. So huge that I couldn't even begin to guess its true size. The interior was a labyrinth of bookcases and corridors, so complex and winding that I couldn't see more than a few meters ahead in any direction. It was impossible to judge its scope from the inside. And trying to estimate from the outside didn't help either, because the Archive was part of the Dragon King's castle. No one knew where the library ended and the palace began.

In the end, there was only one word for it: big. Ridiculously, overwhelmingly, *unfathomably* big.

"That's the Dragon King, boy! Show some respect, you ignorant whelp!"

The booming rebuke came from the sharp-eyed man beside me—a grizzled, tough-looking noble type with a neatly trimmed chin beard and patches of deep red scales across his forearms and cheeks. Definitely not human. He was also the one who'd escorted me here in the first place.

"Ah, right, right. The Dragon King," I said quickly, correcting myself before he started blowing steam out of his ears.

That seemed to satisfy him. He gave a curt nod and folded his arms.

"Please hand over your status plate," came a flat voice from behind the reception desk. "I have other work to do."

The girl hadn't moved an inch since I arrived. Pale blue hair, jade-colored eyes, draped in pristine white robes—twelve years old at most, at least by appearance—and apparently the head librarian of the Grand Archive.

She hadn't shown a hint of emotion since we met. No warmth, no curiosity; just that same dry, level tone and the mechanical

rhythm of someone checking boxes. Talking to her was like trying to hold a conversation with an enchanted bookshelf.

Still, at least she got straight to the point.



"I'm telling you, I need to meet with the Dragon King. This *is* the reception desk, right?" I asked.

The girl—still expressionless—gave a small nod.

"This is the Grand Archive, yes. But it also serves as the first point of contact for royal affairs," she said, her tone as flat as ever. "The Dragon King, ruler of the Naga Divine Clan, is extremely busy. Only those deemed worthy may meet him."

"You're not making this easy," I muttered. "I'm *asking* you to make something happen here. I don't have time to wait around, girl."

"Don't call me that."

"Huh?"

"My name, the one my parents gave to me, is *Lilith*," she said sharply—sharp enough that, for the first time since we met, her brow furrowed ever so slightly in irritation.

"Ah… sorry about that," I replied a little sheepishly.

To be fair, I had been pushing hard. I should've taken a breath before barking orders at the first person I saw. Still, I couldn't afford to waste time. Without an audience with the Dragon King, I wouldn't be able to receive his blessing—and without that, I wouldn't be leveling up anytime soon.

Even after massacring that goblin horde, my level was still stuck at 1. Not because I didn't have the experience, but because I'd *refused* to accept it.

"Hm."

Lilith's expression slid back into her usual unreadable calm as she held out her palm. I handed her my status plate without a word.

She gave a short nod, then reached under the desk and produced a crystal orb. Placing it between us, she spoke again in that same dispassionate tone: "Registering you as a resident. Provisional stay in the Dragons' Domain… under the sponsorship of the Naga Divine Clan… namely, the Red Dragon."

In order to live in the Dragons' Domain, you needed someone to vouch for you—a sponsor. Dragons, by nature, didn't care for

humans. It wasn't exactly hatred, but instead something colder, older. A kind of indifference born of pride. To them, the powerless who crawled beneath their wings were little more than background noise.

Make no mistake: dragons weren't inherently violent. They didn't slaughter the weak for sport or pleasure. The nature of dragonkin was better defined as "solitary."

They were either reclusive, solitary beings who dwelled deep within hidden lands, or living only among peers they deemed worthy of mutual respect. The Dragons' Domain had been built for the latter, a haven for arrogant dragons who had recognized one another's power and assembled in this unique solidarity.

Naturally, humans weren't meant to live in this place. It simply wasn't allowed.

Fortunately, exceptions existed.

If a dragon personally declared a human trustworthy—someone they deemed respectable and reliable—that dragon's authority served as collateral. Their word, backed by the weight of their existence, allowed the human in question to remain… under strict conditions.

In my case, that exception had a name: the Red Dragon. The silver-bearded, scale-clad man who had dragged me here in the first place. Gruff, noble, and just kind enough to sponsor me.

"Are you saying I really *can't* meet the Dragon King?" I asked again, still unwilling to give up.

Lilith didn't even blink.

"You're persistent… But enough. The Naga Divine Clan is a proud race. The very fact that even humans like us are permitted to remain here is already a miracle."

"Wait… *You're* human?"

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed that the skin visible beneath her sleeve showed no trace of scales or shimmer. She looked, well… completely human.

"Yes," she said, as if the confirmation carried no meaning at all.

"Then, let me ask you this: How *can* I meet the Dragon King?"

She sighed, long and weary, like someone who regretted getting out of bed that morning.

"Why do you think I'm registering your stats through your status plate right now?"

"You've lost me."

"The dragons value order, pride, and structure. Even with a sponsor's approval, humans are subject to restrictions. That's unavoidable."

"What kind of restrictions?"

"Your presence here will be limited based on your measured rank," she said, lifting her left wrist to show me a slim white band.

"What's that bracelet?"

"It's issued based on your classification," Lilith replied, tapping the golden line that circled the device. "One to five gold lines, depending on your rank. With five, you're granted full rights—complete parity with dragons. With one…"

She paused.

"… You're barely a person at all."

For the record, Lilith's bracelet bore three golden lines.

She continued dispassionately. "The weaker you are, the harsher the restrictions. If you have only one line, even speaking to a dragon would be considered an offense. They could kill you on the spot, and you'd have no grounds to complain. Depending on your rank, you may also face restrictions on where you can go or how late you can be out."

"I see…"

"That's why you're not allowed to meet the Dragon King. That's one of the restrictions. The stronger your abilities, the higher the rank of dragon you're permitted to approach."

I rubbed my chin and nodded slowly. A strict hierarchy built entirely on power… Prideful didn't even begin to describe them. Dragons weren't just solitary—they were selective, tribal, and steeped in a culture where worth was measured only through

strength. I'd heard as much before, but seeing it laid out so bluntly brought it into focus.

"So… what kind of stats do you need to get an audience with the Dragon King?"

Lilith didn't blink. "The requirements are strict: five golden lines. Either your HP or MP must exceed ten thousand. For a human, that would place you at the level of an A-rank adventurer, which is extremely rare."

"I see," I said, nodding again. "Would've helped if you'd led with that."

She tilted her head slightly, a trace of curiosity surfacing for the first time. She then lowered her gaze to my status plate.

"This is…" Her voice wavered, almost imperceptibly. "What an irregular… No, a *warped* configuration. And yet…"

Her eyes narrowed as she reached for the crystal orb, her hands suddenly far more deliberate. Her fingers moved swiftly across its surface, recalibrating something I couldn't see. Then she looked up at me, her voice quiet but firm.

"You have an appointment with the Dragon King. In two hours, head to the Hall of Audience."

"Huh?" came someone else's voice.

This time, it wasn't me who reacted; it was the Red Dragon.

"Librarian, what nonsense are you spouting?" he rumbled, disbelief coiling around each word. "An appointment with the Dragon King? Are you serious?"

Lilith answered without a word, silently handing him my status plate.

He took it… and froze.

For a being covered in red scales and older than most kingdoms, that stillness was louder than any roar.

His face paled.

"I-I… I can't believe this! Just who—*what*—are you?"

No, no, no, hold on. If anyone should be shocked here, it's me.

"What are *you* freaking out for?" I shot back, eyebrows raised. "Didn't you already read my mind and memories?"

Seriously… Of all people, why was the old Red Dragon losing his cool when the librarian girl was still calm as a statue?

He gave a slow shrug, brushing off the absurdity of the moment.

"I only read what I was permitted. I understood enough of your situation to bring you here, but… as for what occurred during your *third life*, and how you obtained this current status, I know nothing."

"Come again?"

"There was a magical barrier around your mind. I suspected something was off."

"A magic barrier?"

He sighed deeply and shook his head.

"Your Magic attribute exceeds two thousand. Honestly, it's unbelievable. Even the Dragon King himself may find it difficult to peer into your memories."

So that's what's going on. I'd had my suspicions, but… Yeah. Sounds like I've grown a bit too much.

"In other words," he continued, his tone heavier now, "illusions, mind control, charm spells, petrification—any form of mental interference would struggle to work on you. You're functionally immune to them."

Well, that's a relief. I'd been planning to invest in a bunch of status resistance skills just to be safe, but it sounds like that won't be necessary. One less headache to worry about.

"A human granted an audience with the Dragon King…" the old dragon murmured, seemingly to himself. "How long has it been since we've seen something like this?"

He was reeling, clearly dredging up old memories no one had dared to invoke in centuries. A day like today hadn't come in a very long time.

As for me, I could already feel the grin spreading across my face.

Looks like I'll be powering up at record speed, even here in the Dragons' Domain.

A floor of pristine white marble stretched out beneath us, a long, luxurious crimson carpet laid out like a river of velvet. The walls were adorned with masterfully rendered paintings, and an enormous chandelier loomed overhead, sparkling with a wealth that loudly declared its value the moment you looked at it. The room was vast—so vast it looked like it could host a banquet for hundreds without feeling crowded.

In the middle of all that opulence, the old Red Dragon and I were kneeling in respectful silence. Several meters ahead of our bowed heads, the Dragon King sat upon his throne.

I had caught a glimpse of him when we first entered—a flash of an unexpected figure. The man on the throne looked barely older than his early twenties. Hardly what I imagined when I heard "Dragon King."

His youth wasn't what threw me the most.

"You may raise your heads," the man said, his voice oddly high and casual. "When people act so stiffly formal, it puts a strain on my shoulders, you know?"

I lifted my gaze.

Yeah—he was exactly what I'd thought. He was drop-dead handsome.

Wearing a sleek black suit with a deep violet dress shirt underneath, the man had an air of effortless confidence. His long silver-blond hair flowed past his shoulders in an asymmetrical cut, spiked into place like something out of a video game. His right eye shimmered green while the left glowed a smoldering red. The faint scent of rose perfume lingered in the air around him.

The impression he gave off was somewhere between *visual kei idol* and *host club kingpin*.



"That outfit," I said slowly. "You got that from—"

"I skimmed the memories you haven't magically locked away," he said, flashing a charming grin. "I figured you, of all people, would appreciate my sense of style."

"Yeah," I muttered. "That's straight out of Kabukichō, Shinjuku. Looks like host club royalty. But… it suits you."

Unfortunately, it did. It was the kind of fashion that would look ridiculous on a plain-looking guy, and even worse on someone ugly. But this bastard had the face, the posture, and the *presence* to pull it off like he owned the damn world.

The Dragon King nodded, clearly pleased with my reaction.

"It's such a shame," he said, gesturing toward himself with both pride and resignation, "that this fashion sense of mine is just too advanced for this world. Nobody here gets it. You wouldn't believe how often I've been called bizarre or flamboyant."

I shrugged and said, "No, honestly, I think I'd believe any number. Where *did* you get these clothes, though?"

He smirked, and I had the sinking feeling the answer was going to be *very* on-brand.

"Drifted flotsam," the Dragon King mused, twirling a silver strand of hair between his fingers. "I suppose you could call your arrival here the same—a soul adrift, carried to this world by the tides of fate."

"And?" I prompted, arms crossed.

"Now and then, strange things do wash ashore," he continued, a mischievous glint in his mismatched eyes. "And I was lucky enough to find something remarkable once: five full-size travel suitcases, all intact."

I snorted.

"Must've been a group vacation. A bunch of hosts headed off somewhere fancy."

He gave a pleased nod, then motioned for me to stand. Beside me, the Old Red Dragon remained bowed low, dutiful to the last.

"Let's see your status plate, then," the Dragon King said.

I handed it over. For the first time, I saw a subtle shift behind that smug host-club mask of his. His brow furrowed, slightly but unmistakably. Even he couldn't hide the surprise.

"Your MP exceeds ten thousand… I see." His voice dropped an octave, growing thoughtful. "I've lived for millennia, but to see a human child reach this level… It's not something that happens unless they're a reincarnated soul."

"You know the method?" I asked, more softly now.

He nodded, his tone gentle, tinged with memory.

"Once, a friend of mine—a human, like you—attempted the same path. He was not a villager, but he similarly pushed the limits. And this… Level 1 status of yours… it's deliberate, isn't it? You're aiming for…"

"The *Divine Dragon's Blessing*," I confirmed. "Specifically yours, the most powerful one."

He sighed, half amused, half exasperated.

"*Sage's Wisdom*: the ability to read even the forbidden tomes of knowledge. You really do plan things thoroughly."

"I spent nearly all of my first life in this world buried in books. That skill gave me everything I needed."

"In your second life, you gave up the skill," the Dragon King said with a nod. "But you kept only what mattered—what you couldn't afford to forget."

"And now I'm here," I added. "And for more than just your blessing."

He raised a hand, halting me with a knowing smile.

"Say no more. You want access to the Grand Archive, don't you? Fine. I'll grant you unrestricted reading privileges."

Just then, the old Red Dragon—still pressed to the floor beside me—cried out in shock.

It seemed I wasn't the only one who had surprised a few dragons today. The Red Dragon choked back what was nearly a gasp, his voice cracking with disbelief.

"Y-Your Highness?! I'm the one responsible for this human's sponsorship. If he causes any trouble within the Grand Library, I… I won't be able to handle—"

"Oh, that?" The Dragon King's lips curled into a sharp smile—wide, toothy, and gleaming with amusement. "About this human's sponsorship," he continued, his voice calm and almost lazy, "I'll be taking it over. From you, Red… to me."

The words left the old dragon wide-eyed; his breath caught somewhere between shock and panic. His jaw worked uselessly, but no sound came out—only a strangled, breathless noise, closer to a whimper than speech.

"And one more thing," the Dragon King added, turning toward me with a glint in his eye. "This human will receive a dragon's wristband, yes, but in addition, I'm officially inducting him into the Young Dragon Circle."

The Red Dragon's head snapped up. He stared in mute horror, his mouth flapping like a fish gasping on land. His already pale face turned a ghastly shade of gray-blue.

I couldn't help but ask, "Okay, what the hell does that mean?"

His response came like a shout torn from deep within his chest.

"It means… an unprecedented honor! Not just permission to stay here, but full and unconditional acceptance—as kin! The Dragon King is calling you one of us!"

Ah. That big of a deal, huh?

The moment wasn't over. Not yet.

The Dragon King's eyes narrowed as he turned back to the Red Dragon. His voice softened, silk wrapping around steel.

"By the way," he said, still smiling, "did I give you permission to raise your head? Are you so eager to die for high treason? Or have you grown strong enough to speak to me as an equal?"

He said it all with that same cheerful, almost charming, grin—the kind that somehow made it ten times more terrifying.

The Red Dragon hit the ground so fast it made a thud, prostrating in earnest without hesitation.

Okay, that answers a lot.

I'd been misled by the Dragon King's easy tone and fashionable getup. Despite the host-club exterior and chill vibes, this guy carried real weight—regal authority and deadly pride, wrapped in perfume and purple silk.

Lesson learned: don't judge a dragon by its manicure.

With the way things stood now, if I pissed him off, I'd be turned to ash in a heartbeat.

Still, even knowing that, I wasn't planning on dropping the casual tone anytime soon.

"So… sounds like I'm getting some kind of special treatment here," I said, "Mind telling me why?"

The Dragon King smiled thinly, as though he'd been expecting the question.

"One reason is simple," he said. "Your stats, unbalanced as they are, surpass even mine in one category: MP. That alone demands my respect."

"That's all it takes?"

He nodded.

"That's what it means to honor strength. Though my specialization is in close-quarters combat, if someone exceeds me in any aspect, I must acknowledge that superiority. It's as it should be."

This reminds me of school, like when the kid who bombs every subject except math still gets a nod of respect from the top of the class. Something like that.

"By the way," the Dragon King said suddenly, his tone light but probing, "this is your second life in this world, isn't it?"

"Yeah… What about it?" I asked, my brow furrowed.

"See, that's the other reason for your special treatment," he said, folding his arms and leaning forward slightly, his eyes sharpening. "Your existence has already shifted the course of fate in this world—toward ruin."

I stilled.

"What did you just say?"

There was a tension in my voice now. Subtle, but growing.

"You didn't know?" he said, sighing, as if disappointed but not surprised. "But of course you wouldn't."

"Hey," I repeated, sharper this time, "What the hell do you mean by that?"

The Dragon King raised a placating hand, but his tone had grown heavy, deliberate.

"Your 'princess.' The one you've sworn to protect—she's no ordinary girl. She's one of only four in this entire era to receive the Divine Prophecy of a Hero. A chosen hand of salvation, meant to rise against the coming Calamity and save this world."

Yeah, I thought bitterly. *That much, I already know.*

Something in his voice told me this conversation was about to veer into territory I hadn't prepared for.

Cordelia was the Hero of the North. Along with the others—Heroes of the East, West, and South—they were each chosen by Divine Prophecy, meant to unite and stand together against the coming Calamity.

Anyone who wasn't a hermit buried in some remote mountain would have heard this story. It was common knowledge.

"Yeah. That's right," I muttered.

"A Hero is a blade of hope that cleaves through darkness and banishes the Calamity," the Dragon King said smoothly.

I responded with a sharper edge in my voice. "Yeah, I get it."

"Heroes save the weak. They drive back monsters. They're absolute power made flesh. Wouldn't you agree?"

The irritation began to curdle into something hotter—anger. He was repeating what I already knew, dragging it out like a sermon, and it was starting to grate.

"What the hell are you getting at?" I exclaimed.

He tilted his head slightly, calm and maddening.

"The weak—in other words, Villagers—are the ones Heroes are meant to protect."

He shook his head and sighed, long and deliberate.

“And yet… what happens when a Villager ends up protecting a Hero? That’s backward, don’t you think?”

“What?”

“I’m not just a reader of minds,” he said. “I can read pieces of the world’s structure—its governing truths.”

“And what the hell is *that* supposed to mean?” I asked, looking a little annoyed.

“The moment you drove off the goblin horde,” the Dragon King said, his voice gaining weight, “you derailed history.”

“‘Derail history?’ What are you talking about?”

He nodded, slowly and solemnly.

“In that moment, she was supposed to protect you, suffering a grievous injury in the process.”

I froze.

“I know,” I said quietly. “Don’t bother explaining. I know what happened in the original timeline. I know what that wound did to her. How she stopped wearing short sleeves, even in the middle of summer, because she didn’t want anyone to see the scar.”

“Yes. Exactly that. That wound… it was supposed to be the seed of her determination, the moment that pushed her beyond relying on talent alone. She would’ve resolved to grow stronger not just because she was chosen, but because she *had* to be. Because she wanted to protect you. To stand on her own feet, by her own will.”

“Wait,” I murmured, the chill in my chest deepening. “What are you saying?”

Come to think of it, after that incident in my previous life, Cordelia had suddenly secluded herself in the mountains and began actively volunteering for subjugation missions with the knights. She used to seem reluctant about her divine calling, even uncomfortable with it. And yet, after that day, she changed. That much was clear.

“She changed because she realized, in her own way, that she needed to become stronger,” the Dragon King said softly.

“Why?” I asked, though the answer was already beginning to form in my chest.

"For the same reason you feel that pull now," he said. "To protect what's important to her. That desire to defend something precious… It's stronger than anything."

My breath caught.

"A fifteen-year-old girl becoming known as a Dragon Killer… Do you think that's something she achieved on a whim, even as a Hero?"

"No… That's not something you get just by being chosen."

"Exactly. That goblin attack was supposed to be her moment of awakening, the turning point that would drive her to push herself beyond her natural gifts. But you took that from her. You resolved it yourself and saved the one meant to be the savior."

His words cut like a blade.

"That moment, that pain… it was meant to be hers. A scar that would shape her future. But you changed it. You saved her—*you*, the one who was supposed to be protected."

I couldn't argue. I wanted to, but no words came.

"That battle wasn't just a test. It was a fork in fate's path—one she was meant to walk alone. Now we're on an uncertain road, one that no longer follows the map that was laid out."

I swallowed hard.

"The title of Dragon Killer isn't granted for talent alone. It's earned by someone who refuses to rest on the laurels of being a Hero. Someone who pours everything into training, into battle, into risking their life with no guarantee of reward."

I said nothing. There was nothing I *could* say.

"Even I can't read every thread of what's to come," the Dragon King murmured. "I don't know what form the Great Calamity will take, or when. But this much is certain—the world has begun to lean, ever so slightly, toward ruin."

His lips curled into a wry, cutting smile as I stood there in silence, unable to refute him.

"I see… So, in the end, you're just a child of man," the Dragon King murmured, his voice tinged with something like

disappointment. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. After all, we’re talking about distorting a Hero’s Divine Prophecy—the fate of the entire world. On a scale like that, it’s no wonder your resolve wavers.”

There was silence as we stared at each other for what must have been thirty seconds. Neither of us spoke. The tension sat heavy between us, unmoving.

Then finally, I opened my mouth.

“So, what? You’re saying she’s no longer useful as a Hero? Is that it?”

The Dragon King’s expression shifted. “According to your memories… at age fifteen, she earns the Dragon Killer title, doesn’t she?”

“Yeah. It was during the Black Dragon hunt,” I replied without hesitation. That moment was seared into my mind.

I remembered it vividly. Cordelia, only fifteen, had accompanied the Knights’ Order on a high-risk monster subjugation. They’d encountered a beast far beyond expectations, a true monster. The knights were annihilated. Only she’d returned—broken, bleeding, and barely alive.

After healing, like vengeance incarnate, she went back… and cleanly separated the beast’s head from its body.

The Dragon King’s voice dropped low.

“In this timeline, she will not defeat the Black Dragon. She will die. Without question.”

I fell silent. For a long moment, nothing passed between us. Then, without warning, a dry chuckle escaped me. I laughed quietly… then a little louder.

“Why do you laugh?” he asked, tilting his head.

“Isn’t it obvious?” I said, my voice steady now. “If the problem is that she won’t be strong enough… then I just need to become stronger. Strong enough to kill the Black Dragon myself. No—stronger than she ever was.”

The Dragon King blinked, momentarily stunned. Then, with growing amusement, he burst into laughter.

"To think… a mere Villager, casually speaking of slaying a Black Dragon. As if it were the most natural thing in the world."

"I have to. If I don't, she will be the one to suffer."

Still laughing, the Dragon King clutched his sides.

"Incredible, truly. Perhaps that's why I find myself so fond of you."

I shrugged.

"I've already decided, haven't I? I'll carry the burden she was meant to bear. So, let her stay weak, if that's what it takes. I'll carry it all for her."

A sly grin tugged at the Dragon King's lips.

"So that's it. You see yourself not as the Hero, but as the Hero's… guardian?"

"That's right," I said, standing tall. "So, hurry up and grant me your blessing already."

The Dragon King let out a thoughtful hum, then placed his hand atop my head. With the slightest pressure, he could've crushed my skull like overripe fruit.

"To demand a blessing from the Dragon King…" he said, his voice low and carrying danger. "Perhaps you're getting a bit too full of yourself, hmm? You, a mere human."

I stayed silent for a moment. Then, without flinching, I met his gaze with quiet intensity.

"The most efficient path was through the dragonkin," I said evenly. "But if it had come to it, I would've considered the demonkin. Hell, even selling my soul to the devils wasn't off the table."

For the first time, a flicker of surprise crossed the Dragon King's face.

"To the devils?" he echoed. "You do realize that if you had chosen that path, your soul would be forever denied reincarnation. Torment would be your eternity."

"No doubt. I'd rather avoid that, if I can help it. That's why I'm here, lowering my head to *you*."

The Dragon King let out a low chuckle, clearly amused.

"You call this lowering your head? With that tone?"

I smirked.

"You strike me as the type who likes this kind of back-and-forth. Am I wrong?"

He gave a sharp nod, grin widening.

"Oh, not at all. I love your kind of insolence."

I extended my right hand toward him. He responded with a wide, wolfish grin, reaching out his own. The moment our hands met in a firm shake, a searing warmth surged through my chest, straight into my heart.

"This is… your blessing?" I asked, my breath catching.

"That's right," he said lightly.

"Which means…"

"Your growth limitations as a Villager—the penalties tied to your class—are effectively nullified."

"So… I can finally level up? I don't have to suppress the experience points I've earned just because of a broken system?"

The Dragon King tilted his head.

"Do you need me to explain it in more detail?"

"Let's just say it'd be nice to hear it straight from the source."

He paused for a beat, then began to explain, his tone shifting—serious now, firm and absolute.

"You do understand the concept of experience points and leveling, don't you?" the Dragon King asked.

"Sure. It's a kind of ritual that absorbs the life force of defeated enemies to enhance your physical and magical abilities," I replied.

The Dragon King nodded, satisfied.

"Exactly. Now, with that in mind, what is a class?"

"It's a Divine Blessing, isn't it?" I answered without hesitation.

"Precisely. And to be more specific?"

“It determines how fast you grow. Say you gain a level. If you’re a Hero, your Attack stat might jump by twenty points. But if you’re a Villager?” I snorted. “You’re lucky to see a three-point increase.”

The numbers weren’t exact, but the disparity was real.

“That’s where my blessing comes into play,” the Dragon King said. “Your growth as a Villager is now rewritten—at least partially—with the same parameters granted to the dragonkin. You’re not quite a Hero, but you’re now on par with advanced classes like Sages or Holy Knights.”

I gave a firm nod.

“That’s why I stayed at Level 1 until now. There was no point in leveling up with those garbage modifiers.”

“I figured as much,” he said, glancing down at the watch on his wrist.

“Fancy piece,” I remarked.

“Isn’t it?” he said, grinning. “Just so we’re clear—don’t even think about asking for it.”

It was an Omega. Expensive, stylish, and totally out of place in this fantasy setting. I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Well then,” he continued, brushing silver-blond hair from his face. “Time’s up. Anything else?”

“No,” I said. “For now, that’s everything.”

He tilted his head.

“So, what’s next for you?”

I smirked and rolled my shoulders.

“I think it’s about time I start leveling up.”

Chapter 3: Quick Power-Up Through Dungeon Delving!

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"
Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Chapter 3: Quick Power-Up Through Dungeon Delving!

A few days later…

"An exit permit?"

As always, her voice was flat, weary, and utterly devoid of inflection. The speaker was Lilith—the pale, blue-haired girl draped in a white robe, her short hair brushing her shoulders, and her expression as unreadable as ever. Though she looked no older than twelve, she served as the librarian of the Grand Archive, and apparently handled nearly every piece of bureaucratic task in the Dragons' Domain—everything from resident registration to entry and exit permits.

"Yeah," I answered, casually leaning against the counter. "I'm heading out to hunt some monsters. Shouldn't be long."

Lilith paused, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

"If memory serves, you arrived here just two days ago. And you're requesting permission to leave the city already?" Her tone didn't waver, but her disapproval was palpable. "You came here to grow stronger. To gain the knowledge of the dragons, the wisdom of the Grand Archive… or to master some unique dragonkin skills. That was your goal, was it not?"

"No contradiction there," I replied with a grin. "I *did* get an exclusive dragonkin skill: the *Dragon King's Blessing*. And now that I've got it, it's time to start grinding levels. I've got a whole lot of power to catch up on."

Her eyes flicked toward me.

"You're still Level 1, and your class is Villager. You're saying you've spent twelve years intentionally avoiding leveling up?"

"That's right," I said with a wink.

Lilith stared at me a moment longer, then let out a long, quiet sigh.

"To choose delayed growth, despite understanding the importance of level-based advancement… To wait until conditions were optimal before even beginning to grow… It's not something most could do."

She folded her hands over the counter and, in her usual monotone, continued.

"An unshakable will, and a ruthless eye for efficiency. I understand now."

"Understand what?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Someone like you would be called a prodigy," she said, nodding slightly. "I have no doubt you'll become a Hero."

I blinked.

"A Hero? Me? I'm just a Villager."

Lilith shook her head slowly.

"Your class may be Villager, but you possess true talent."

"Talent? What talent could I possibly have?"

Lilith met my gaze with unwavering calm.

"An unbreakable will. You possess the gift of hunger for strength. Or perhaps, more accurately, you're a prodigy of perseverance."

Well… I do have the Indomitable Will skill, so she isn't wrong. If we're talking about talent for endurance—or masochism—I've got that in spades.

"A prodigy of perseverance, huh?" I muttered with a crooked smile. "Doesn't feel like it most of the time."

She gave the faintest huff, more a shift in breath than a laugh.

"Coming from someone who's earned the Dragon King's favor, that just sounds like false modesty."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" I said, half-laughing, half-exasperated.

But then… something changed.

Tears welled up at the corners of her eyes. Quiet, glistening droplets spilled down her cheeks, yet her expression didn't change. No trembling lip, no contorted brow. Just that same mask of calm detachment.

"Wait, hey… Are you crying?" I asked, blinking.

The tears slid silently down her face, staining the pristine sleeve of her white robe as she wiped them away.

"What's going on? You were fine a second ago."

Even now, her face remained perfectly composed. The tears were the only betrayal of what she felt inside.

"I'm not saying," she whispered.

"But you're *clearly* crying," I pointed out. "Just tell me already."

"I'm not saying," she repeated, sounding faint and distant.

"Come on. You can't expect me to ignore this."

"I said *no*." Her tone sharpened just slightly. "Your permit's approved. If you want to leave, then go out into the wild, or wherever else it is you people go."

Gods… This again? Stubborn girls were becoming a running theme in my life. Cordelia had been the same way, always digging in her heels when it mattered most.

"I can't just leave you like this, can I?"

"I'm not a dragon. I'm not a warrior. I'm nothing like you," she said flatly. "Someone like me has no value—no reason to be alive."

I let out a long breath, my frustration melting into something more tired… and concerned.

"If you're gonna say crap like that," I said gently, "then I really *can't* walk away, now can I?"

"I can't burden a genius like you with this sort of thing," she said softly. "After all… I don't have a guardian anymore."

"A guardian?" I repeated, raising an eyebrow.

She fell silent for a moment, as if weighing the consequences of continuing. But then, without looking at me, she spoke.

"I'm going to be exiled from the Dragons' Domain soon."

She paused again, this time glancing in my direction to gauge my reaction.

"Go on," I prompted.

"I was brought here when I was five," she began in a low, almost detached tone. "Before that—at least as far back as I can remember—I was already a slave. I'd been treated… horribly."

I nodded quietly, not wanting to interrupt her rhythm.

"Then one day, the caravan transporting us was attacked by bandits. A large-scale battle broke out. I think it ended in a bloodbath, with both sides nearly wiped out. Only a few could still stand. And that's when they came… the predators, the scavengers. Beasts drawn by the smell of blood. Monsters."

So, the slavers' hired mercenaries and the attacking bandits slaughtered each other… and into the chaos came the literal monsters, drawn by the stench of death. I could picture the scene.

"And then a dragon appeared, right?"

She gave a slow nod.

"The Earth Dragon who rescued me was strong… and kind. So very kind."

She gazed up at the ceiling, her eyes glassy with memory. Then, as if something inside her cracked open, tears began to spill freely from the corners of her eyes even as her expression remained eerily blank.

"It was he who gave me the name 'Lilith.' That is the name my *father* gave me."

I understood. She wasn't just grateful—she revered him. That dragon was her savior, her only family. No wonder she'd gotten so upset the first time I'd addressed her without a name. That name mattered.

"And now you have no guardian? That's what you mean?"

She gave the faintest of nods.

"Even dragons age. He passed from old age."

I exhaled, rolling my shoulders as if shaking off a weight.

"I see. So, Lilith-chan… Actually, forget the honorifics. We're the same age, after all, right?"

Though if you count both of my lifetimes, I'm more than a little older.

Well, that was enough background.

"So, let me get this straight. You lost your guardian, which means you've lost your standing in the Dragons' Domain. And now, they're about to kick you out. That about sums it up?"

"That's correct."

"And… is the slave sigil still active?"

Lilith nodded silently, her face as unreadable as ever. Without a word, she slipped her white robe off her shoulder, baring the skin near her collarbone. There, etched into her pale flesh, was a glowing magic sigil.

"Gods… that's a sex slave mark."

"Before Father found me, I was still a child, so… nothing ever happened. But if I'm cast out now…"

A wandering slave branded with a sigil was like a fugitive. They would be pursued by guards and reported by citizens, ultimately caught and returned as if they were stolen goods. Slave sigils served not only as identifiers but also as bonds that constrained behavior, inscribed into the spirit through a form of magic akin to psychological conditioning.

Once branded, a slave could never disobey the commands embedded in the sigil unless it was explicitly dispelled. Commands like "Your master's will is absolute," or "You must never resist arrest." Or even "You may not refuse nighttime service."

"When did your guardian… pass away?" I asked.

"A month ago."

"And when are they throwing you out?"

She extended her right hand and raised a single finger.

"I one day. Tomorrow."

Ah… no wonder she cried.

Frankly, it was a miracle she'd kept up that emotionless mask this long. With odds that cruel and time that tight, most would've already crumbled. Hell, I was impressed she was still standing.

What a pain in the ass… I sighed, scratching the back of my neck.

"Well then, cancel the travel permit. And one more thing…"

I reached into my coat and pulled out a burlap sack. It landed on the reception desk with a heavy thud.

"What's this?" Lilith asked, tilting her head slightly.

She untied the string, and for the first time, a flicker of surprise touched her otherwise impassive face.

"Five hundred gold coins," I said simply. "Courtesy of the Dragon King. His exact words were, 'I'm curious to see how you'll use it. Do as you like.' So, I'm doing just that."

"And you're offering it to me? Why?" she asked.

"Start packing. We're heading into a dungeon."

Her voice stayed flat as ever, but the question came all the same.

"A dungeon? For what purpose?"

"Where there's a dungeon, there are monsters. And where there are monsters, there's experience. You see where this is going, right? We're going in so *I* can get stronger."

"I still don't understand," she replied, more puzzled than defiant.

I squared my shoulders, speaking more to myself than her.

"Just shut up and come with me. If I can't even save one girl who's right in front of me, how the hell am I supposed to save a Hero?"

Lilith shook her head slowly, her pale blue hair swaying with the motion.

"I really don't get it. Please explain in detail."

"Fine," I said, crossing my arms. "I've been recognized as a dragon—an honorary member of the Young Dragons. You know that, yeah?"

"Yes."

"The condition for acting as a guarantor is achieving Dragon Ascension, right?"

"Correct…"

"So, I'm going to take the Dragon Ascension trial. I'm going to conquer the Trial of the Labyrinth. And when I do, *I'll* become your official guarantor."

Lilith blinked.

"You intend to challenge *that* labyrinth? The one they call the Altar of Madness? The dungeon teeming with vicious monsters, where even dragons may never return from?"

"That's the one," I said, grinning. "And look, I'll admit it sounds crazy, but let's not forget. I'm the strongest Level 1 Villager in the world."

She didn't even blink. No hint of disbelief or emotion flickered across her face. She simply shrugged, as if accepting the absurdity was easier than questioning it.

On the outskirts of the Dragons' Domain, buried deep within a forest cloaked in silence, lay the entrance to the Altar of Madness, an underground labyrinth that served as the proving ground for Dragon Ascension.

Pushing through dense underbrush, I came upon the mouth of a cave yawning open in the forest floor. I stepped inside, descending along a gentle slope. The air changed almost immediately, becoming damp, thick, and unnervingly warm. As the light dimmed, the moss-covered stone walls closed in around me, and the silence grew heavier with each step down the narrow corridor.

Eventually, I came upon a steel door, its knob rusted deep red. I gripped it tightly and gave it a sharp push. With a shriek of metal on metal, the door groaned open… and the creature beyond greeted me.

A Minotaur.

Its head was that of a bull, massive and horned, while its body could have been carved from granite—a towering slab of muscle,

wielding an axe so massive it defied logic.

The chamber was barely four meters across. Cramped, stifling, and lethal.

I locked eyes with the beast. It glared back, its gaze steeped in overwhelming killing intent.

The air itself was charged with a suffocating pressure that prickled against my skin. I held my breath and began activating my skills.

【*Skill: Physical Enhancement activated.*】
【*Skill: Steel Body Technique activated.*】
【*Skill: Kimon Technique activated.*】

With that, I brought forth a level of strength almost equal to that of a seasoned adventurer from the guild. It was enough to outclass a twelve-year-old girl who happened to be a chosen Hero. Enough to carve through hundreds of goblins like wheat.

An extraordinary power for a twelve-year-old human. But in the realm of true monsters, it's barely a foothold.

The air suddenly shifted.

Whoosh!

The Minotaur swung its axe, generating a powerful blast of wind that thundered through the chamber.

This dungeon, after all, wasn't just any labyrinth. It was the proving ground for those who sought Dragon Ascension—the crucible that separated the chosen from the forgotten.

It was said that a significant number of Young Dragons had met their end in this very labyrinth. Their most common cause of death was overconfidence.

They'd let their guard down, overestimating their scale-armored bodies. Then, in a single misstep, they'd draw too close—and the Minotaur's massive axe, forged from Damascus steel and capable of slicing through dragonhide like parchment, would claim its next victim.

I barely dodged the first blow, saved by reflex and raw instinct. It wasn't like I actually saw the slash coming. Hell, I couldn't even see the arc of that cleave—it moved too damn fast. And it didn't stop there. The next strike came immediately after. Before I could even reset my stance, the Minotaur was already in front of me—barely a meter away—and swinging again.

It's just too fast. There's no way I can keep dodging like this.

One strike. Two. Three. Four. Five. Each heavy downward blow forced me back, step by step, until I felt the chill of the stone wall at my back. Six. Seven. Eight—then came a sudden reversal. An upward slash, fast enough to vanish from sight, cut through the air like a blade of light.

Slk—

The sound echoed inside my skull. My right eye filled with red in an instant. I staggered, my breath catching as panic surged through me.

Did it crack my skull?

My body still moved. One eye had gone blind—but not from damage; just blood. A gash across my brow had opened, and the hot trickle ran down into my eye.

Painful, messy… but not fatal.

The Minotaur, however, seemed convinced it had finished me off. Its expression slackened. That arrogant tilt of the head, that heavy snort from its wide bovine nostrils—it thought I was done.

Arrogance. Complacency. It has no idea who it's dealing with.

You think you're some invincible monster? That you get to swing your axe and crush anything smaller than you without consequence?

Let me show you just how wrong you are.

I grinned. With a single swift motion, I drew the knife from my belt and drove it straight toward the Minotaur's snout, aimed dead between its massive nostrils.

For the first time, its eyes widened in shock and disbelief.

Yeah, I thought as the blade met flesh, *you didn't see that coming, did you?*

“Regret always comes too late, bastard!” I shouted. “You picked the wrong human to screw with!”

I drove the knife with everything I had—only to feel it bounce back, dull and useless, like I’d tried stabbing rubber. It hadn’t even scratched the Minotaur’s nose.

“So *this* is the Dragon Ascension trial, huh?”

I didn’t wait to see the beast’s reaction. With a fluid pivot, I turned on my heel and sprinted full-force for the door I’d entered through.

“Nope, nope, nope, nope! No way in hell! That thing is impossible!”

This wasn’t just some high-difficulty encounter. This was the kind of nightmare meant to temper dragonkin into full-fledged warriors. The rumors were true—dozens of Young Dragons died down here every year. It was never meant for a Level 1 human Villager, even if they were the strongest among them.

I slammed through the iron door, nearly tearing it from its hinges, then dropped to my knees just outside. Gasping for air, I leaned against the damp stone wall and fumbled to heal the gash on my forehead with basic healing magic.

“Shit!” I spat, pressing a glowing hand to my brow.

This wasn’t the plan. I wasn’t supposed to be here yet. The idea had always been to spend a few more months grinding, cutting down goblins, orcs, and whatever else came crawling out of the wilds. Level up safely, build margin, *then* challenge this dungeon and face the Minotaur.

Life had other plans.

I looked up and found her standing there. Pale hair. Pale robe. Pale expression.

Lilith, still as unfeeling as ever and weighed down by her heavy backpack, glared at me.

“So, what now?” she asked. “Are we turning back? I mean, a Level 1 Villager, even the *strongest* one, has no business being in this dungeon. It’s suicide.”

I pushed myself up, still panting, and gave a crooked grin.

"That's not happening. Not an option."

Lilith gave a slow nod, her voice a flat monotone even as she said the words.

"The strongest Level 1… Yes, you probably are. You're absurd. And I know you're doing this to help me. And yes, I'm… happy."

Or so she said, but her face didn't even twitch. It was hard to tell whether she was sarcastic, resigned, or just… broken in some way.

Honestly, I didn't care about the delivery. The words were enough.

"There's no need to risk your life," Lilith said quietly, her voice steady despite the weight of her words. "I'll be exiled from the Dragons' Domain, return to the human realm, and eventually be dragged back to my former owner… to live out my days as a sex slave. I've already made peace with that."

The healing spell finally took hold, and the bleeding stopped. I tore a strip of cloth from my pack, wrapping it around my head while wiping the crimson blur from my vision with a damp, cool gauze.

"I'm risking my life because you're worth saving," I replied, voice firm. "You don't get to just fall back into slavery. Screw that."

"You don't have to die for me," she said again. "You're still Level 1. You could go hunt weaker monsters, build experience, and then come back."

I shook my head.

"There's no time for that. I'll never get the chance to become your guarantor before they throw you out."

"You still don't have to risk your life."

At that, a small, crooked smile tugged at my lips.

"This isn't about what I *have* to do. It's about what I refuse to walk away from."

Lilith tilted her head slightly, her expression unreadable as always.

"It's about refusal?"

"Yeah. This is my pride, Lilith."

"Your… pride?"

"Yeah." I exhaled and looked toward the heavy steel door behind which the Minotaur waited. "If I left you here—just gave up and walked away… I think *she* would laugh at me."

"Who?"

"My childhood friend. She's the kind of person who would never abandon someone. If she saw me walk away from this, she'd never let me live it down."

I pushed myself upright, and my eyes settled once again on the iron door guarding the beast's chamber.

I can't beat it head-on. Not yet. But if brute strength won't work… then we play it smart.

Turning to Lilith, I called out, "Hey. I need a favor."

"What is it?"

"Go back out to the woods. Chop some dry branches. I need firewood."

Her brows shifted ever so slightly.

"Firewood? What for?"

I reached into my rucksack and handed her a small hatchet. My pack held all sorts of survival gear like shovels, flint, kindling, oil, and even tar-based accelerants. Hers held the food and water.

Stepping over to the side of the tunnel wall, I drew my knife and jabbed it into the earth near the door.

With a few twists and scrapes, the dirt crumbled apart just enough.

My idea was taking shape.

I nodded deeply, satisfied with what I saw.

Just as predicted—or rather, exactly as recorded in the labyrinth schematics I'd studied through the *Sage's Wisdom* skill—this section of the wall was fragile. The packed earth was loosely reinforced, easy enough to dig through. Because of that, a certain possibility had opened up.

“You’re wondering what I’m thinking,” I said with a smirk. “Isn’t it obvious?”

The Minotaur, after all, wasn’t some naturally occurring dungeon dweller. It was a summoned beast—an artificial construct called forth through draconic summoning magic. A familiar, essentially. Its behavior, movements, and even territory were all restricted by the constraints of its summoning. That beast could not leave its assigned room.

That meant that if I could flood its chamber with the right conditions…

“That damn bull’s going to choke to death.”

※※※

Ten hours later, a narrow ten-centimeter hole in the chamber wall now held a thick bundle of kindling, ignited and burning with a slow, focused flame.

“Are you serious? You honestly believe this will kill a Minotaur?” Lilith’s flat voice echoed beside me, tinged with faint incredulity.

“As serious as I’ve ever been,” I replied without hesitation.

I’d kept that flame lit for ten hours straight, feeding log after log into the small breach, controlling the fire with a basic utility spell. Hundreds of logs—maybe even over a thousand—had been consumed.

As for the chamber inside… it was completely starved of oxygen, choked with soot and smoke.

I kept feeding the fire, forcing combustion with magic. My nearly bottomless mana pool made it possible. And the Minotaur, bound to the room by its summoning, had no way to flee.

In short, it was a nightmare in there.

Lilith, however, still didn’t seem to grasp the chemical—and biological—horror we’d unleashed.

"Do you honestly think you can kill a Minotaur by burning some logs?" she murmured, deadpan.

"Then open the door and see for yourself," I said, shrugging. "If this didn't work, I might as well give up now."

I reached for the handle and shoved the steel door open. A blast of hot air hit us like a physical blow. Acrid, black smoke belched out of the chamber, thick and stifling.

Lilith took a step back, her eyes widening ever so slightly.

"This is… almost unbelievable."

Well, of course, she was shocked; right there on the floor, the mighty Minotaur was twitching, barely clinging to life.

Still alive after all that? Damn… this Altar of Madness isn't playing around.

"Why… Why did this happen?" Lilith asked quietly, staring at the downed beast in disbelief.

I turned toward her with a raised brow.

"Have you ever heard of incomplete combustion?"

"'Incomplete… combustion?'" she repeated slowly, puzzled.

"Let me put it another way. You know what happens when you keep burning stuff in a small, sealed space?"

"No."

"To put it simply, it creates poison. And when your body absorbs too much of that poison, we call it carbon monoxide poisoning."

"'Carbon… monoxide… poisoning?'"

Yeah, trying to explain charcoal suicides in this world isn't going to get me far. But my point still stands.

With a sharp breath, I flashed the twitching Minotaur a good old-fashioned middle finger.

"You muscle-brained slab of steak… Don't ever underestimate the species that conquered Earth, you third-rate livestock."

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager

Age: 12
Level: 1 → 12
HP: 50 *50 → 650* 650
MP: 12,050 *12,050 → 13,400* 13,400
Attack: 35 → 185
Defense: 35 → 170
Magic: 2,154 → 2,350
Evasion: 55 → 225

Enhancement Skills
【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】

Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 5*】
Effect: *Adds +250 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【 *Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 6 ➞ 7*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
All right… That's a solid level-up haul.
An increase of 150 in Attack is not bad. Still, considering my skill buffs already add a flat 400, the raw stat gains don't feel game-breaking yet. It just highlights how absurdly powerful the Steel Body Technique and Kimon Technique are. Even as a mere Level 1

Villager, those two skills alone made me strong enough to steamroll hundreds of goblins.

When I think about it, that's insane.

Still, it'll take a lot more leveling before these stat boosts truly start to translate into real battlefield dominance. Even so, the bump in HP is genuinely reassuring. My chances of dying in a single hit just dropped significantly.

There are plenty of ways to get stronger in this world, but when it comes down to it, there's no substitute for good, old-fashioned leveling up.

This was the subterranean labyrinth beneath the Dragons' Domain—an ancient dungeon inhabited by beings beyond the realm of man. The deeper one delved, the more formidable the monsters became, making it the ideal place for rapid leveling. Frankly speaking, this labyrinth was the biggest reason why humans raised in the land of dragons often returned to the outside world as full-fledged Heroes.

Though being permitted to leave was significant in itself. It meant that one had been deemed ready to fly the nest—a rite of passage that signified completion of the Dragon Ascension. Those who earned that gift not only possessed the strength to clear this dungeon, but were also granted rare skills upon their ascension. But I'll get to that later.

Right now, Lilith and I were deep within one of the many vast corridors of the dungeon, and one of its longer ones at that. Earthen floor, earthen ceiling, and earthen walls. After a long march through the dimly lit tunnel, we finally reached the bend at the far end. I leaned forward, just enough to peek around the corner and get a look at what lay ahead.

There it was, standing sentinel before the door to the next floor: a bronze Golem.

Its entire body was forged of gleaming metal. It stood over two meters tall, clad in full armor and wielding a massive sword. I

already knew that brute force wasn't an option; no blade I had could scratch that thing.

Not that I had a decent weapon anyway. Right now, all I had on me was a dull utility knife. I'd been dragged here by that Red Dragon bastard with nothing but the clothes on my back. In hindsight, maybe I should've just held on to the sword I'd borrowed from Cordelia. But considering it had been chipped to hell and back, it probably wouldn't have fared much better.

Regardless, the bronze Golem was a mid-boss just like the Minotaur from earlier. This gatekeeper guarded the next trial; the labyrinth was mid-boss after mid-boss, gate after gate.

There was a reason for that, of course. Once we cleared this floor, I'd explain it all to Lilith. She'd notice soon enough how strangely familiar I was with the layout of this dungeon, so there was no point in trying to hide it.

In short, I was fully—and shamelessly—exploiting the hell out of my *Sage's Wisdom* skill. Think of it like having read the strategy guide for this dungeon before ever setting foot inside.

I crouched just before the bend in the corridor and dropped my rucksack onto the dirt floor. From it, I pulled a collapsible shovel and began to dig with quiet, single-minded intensity.

"What are you doing?" Lilith asked, voice flat as ever.

"Digging a hole."

"I can see that. I meant, why are you doing it?"

"I told you: I'm digging."

"Yes, but *why*?"

"To get stronger. Why else?"

Lilith fell silent for a moment, frowning in that perpetually disinterested way of hers.

"I don't get it," she muttered.

Fair enough. I hadn't exactly explained myself. Honestly, this wasn't part of my plan either. The truth was, tackling this dungeon now was far from my original plan. Getting my forehead split open

by a Minotaur the moment I stepped inside had thrown me off more than I'd realized.

In short, I was flustered. I hadn't given Lilith a second thought because of that.

Dammit. I needed to do better than that.

With a sigh, I motioned her over. When she approached, I pointed with a nod toward the corridor beyond the bend.

"See that Golem? That thing's standing right in front of the next floor's entrance. I can't get past it."

"I see. It certainly looks strong. You probably can't defeat it," she said without even blinking.

"Exactly. Now, this here, this is a corner, yeah?"

"Yes."

"And from the Golem's side, it can't see past that corner, right?"

"Correct," Lilith answered, giving a small, indifferent nod.

I grinned.

"In that case, wouldn't it make sense to dig a hole right *here*?"

"And again, you've lost me."

"Well, whatever. Just help me dig," I said, handing the shovel to Lilith as fatigue started to settle deep into my arms.

"A hole?" she asked, eyeing the tool with suspicion.

"Yeah, about a meter wide. Let's say three meters deep. We'll take turns digging."

Lilith shook her head in a short, sharp motion. "We already spent too much time fighting the Minotaur, and now you're suggesting we dig a three-meter pit? We won't make it in time."

"Oh, right. You said you're only allowed to stay in the village until tomorrow, didn't you?"

"Yes. And this dungeon is vast. Even if we clear this floor, there's no way we'll reach the bottom level in half a day."

"Huh? Why the hell would I need to get to the bottom floor by *tomorrow*?"

"Hm?"

We both tilted our heads slightly, clearly not on the same page.

"But my stay is only permitted until tomorrow," Lilith repeated flatly.

"Yeah, I heard you the first time."

Then it hit me. I froze for a second, staring at her.

"Hold on. Once I reach the bottom floor and pass the Dragon Ascension trial, *then* I can officially vouch for you, right?"

"Yes."

"And, I mean, sure, if we were still in the village, that deadline might matter. But is anyone seriously going to march *into this dungeon* just to kick you out?"

She paused, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly as she thought it through. Then, in her usual even tone, she responded, "No. I doubt anyone would do that."

"Then, there's no need to stress about tomorrow, is there?"

Without missing a beat, she nodded solemnly and said, completely straight-faced, "Yes, there is. After all, I made a promise to the Dragon King to have my things packed and be out of the village by tomorrow."

Gods, how uptight can someone be?

I couldn't help but chuckle.

I let out a long, weary sigh.

"Look, at the very least, stop worrying about running out of time just because we're in this dungeon. I'm telling you—don't worry about it."

"But still, I cannot in good conscience ignore it. If you continue like this, I might actually… get angry, you know?"

Ugh… I exhaled again, deeper this time.

There was no way I was letting this girl out into the world alone, least of all into some hellish fate as a sex slave. I could tell her foster father had raised her well, but with *this* personality, she wouldn't last a week on her own.

As they say, "Water which is too pure has no fish."

Honesty was a virtue, but it was also a fatal flaw. A little deception and cunning are *necessary* to survive. If she wandered

out there like this, she'd be picked clean to the bone and tossed out with yesterday's trash.

"Also, you keep talking about getting angry, but it really doesn't land when you're just staring at me like that with no expression."

"Words alone don't work for you? Then allow me to show you—through action."

Still completely deadpan, Lilith opened her mouth wide and said in a tiny voice, "Grr…"

I froze. For several seconds, we just stared at each other.

"Wait, what?"

I tilted my head in disbelief. She didn't so much as blink—just opened her mouth again and repeated, still in that soft monotone.

"Grr…"

Frozen again. Our eyes locked in another awkward silence.

"I'm sorry, what is happening right now?"

Lilith finally averted her gaze, clearly flustered.

She knows. She knows *she botched that.*

She has no idea how to express emotion properly, does she?

I mean, it made sense. She hasn't had real interactions with other humans, let alone dragons. Yeah… it all adds up.

Still, this was awkward. What made it worse was that Lilith herself realized she'd messed up. It wasn't even something I could joke about. The silence stretched unbearably long, and I found myself glancing away from her out of sheer discomfort.

We sat in that strained quiet for a good ten seconds or so.

"By the way," she said suddenly, "there's something I want to ask."

"Hm? What is it?"

She pointed at the half-dug hole with a finger and tilted her head.

"What exactly is this hole for?"

"It's a pitfall."

"A pitfall?"

"Yeah, a trap. The classic kind."

"Ridiculous. Do you think something so outdated could work against a fully armored Golem?"

Even as she said that, her face remained unreadable. It made reacting hard—but I let it slide for now.

"Damn right I do. Here's the plan: I'll draw the Golem's attention and lure it right here, into this dead angle where it can't see what's waiting."

I reached into my backpack and pulled out a steel wire.

"Is that wire?"

"Yup. A proper trap's got to have layers. This'll trip it up as it turns the corner, then—*boom*—straight into the pit. That thing's made of solid metal, so once it falls in, it's not climbing out anytime soon. I'm even lining the walls with oil to make damn sure it slips."

"But that doesn't solve the actual problem," Lilith replied flatly. "You're only delaying it. If you can't actually *damage* something with a body made of solid metal, then this won't help you achieve your goal. You won't defeat it. And if you can't defeat it… you won't gain any experience points. You won't get stronger."

I laughed. Quiet, confident. A smirk tugged at my lips as I answered.

"Yeah… that's why I brought explosives. I doubt I can take it down outright, but that's fine. I was never planning to finish this with just a single trick."

Lilith tilted her head slightly, clearly confused. I leaned in closer and whispered the full plan in her ear—step by step, every little detail laid out. When I pulled back, her eyes widened, then she nodded once in understanding.

"I see."

※※※

Fifteen hours later, we were finished. Digging had taken five hours; we'd then grabbed a bite to eat and taken turns getting some rest. I

was still a little groggy, but the nap had done its job better than I expected.

"All right," I muttered, rolling my shoulders. "Let's get this show on the road."

First, I checked to make sure the wire trap was secure.

The pitfall was covered, stable, and perfectly disguised.

Lilith and I exchanged a look and nodded. No words were needed.

I crouched into my starting stance.

"Go!"

Just like that, I was off. My body shot forward, feet pounding the ground as I rounded the corner at full speed.

"UOOOOOOOOOOOH!"

With a roar loud enough to shake the walls, I charged straight at the armored Golem.

Vnnn! A deep metallic hum rang out as a red glow flickered to life in its eyes.

Ten meters: that's its trigger radius. Once something crosses into that range, it switches from standby to combat mode.

Right on cue, the Golem lurched into motion, its heavy frame thundering toward me like a runaway boulder.

Perfect.

Just before we collided, I twisted, pivoting on my heel, and launched into a full sprint back down the corridor.

Time to run. Let's see how smart this thing is.

At the same time, I leapt high. Beneath me, the wire trap and a one-meter-wide pit waited.

The instant I soared past the edge, I heard a loud *thud* behind me.

"Bingo," I muttered. "Well, it's a mindless iron doll; figures it'd fall for something like this."

I glanced back to see the Golem flailing helplessly inside the pit. Without wasting another second, Lilith and I sprinted toward the door it had been guarding.

"Are you sure we're just going to pass it by?" she asked, jogging beside me. "Your whole goal is gaining experience, right? Wouldn't this be the perfect opportunity? There must be *some* way to finish it off while it's trapped."

"I already explained, didn't I?" I said with a grin.

"Your *Sage's Wisdom* skill," she replied, still skeptical. "Supposedly, you can read most of the world's written knowledge just by thinking it."

"Exactly. And if what I've read is accurate, the next floor is a bonus stage."

"Still hard to believe that a dungeon would be structured like that…"

I threw open the heavy steel door to the next floor. And just as I'd predicted, the view beyond stretched out before us, exactly as described.

It was a space the size of Tokyo Dome, filled wall-to-wall with a goblin settlement.

"*Giiiii!*" one of them shrieked.

In an instant, the whole cavern turned into a kicked hornet's nest.

Yup. Just like the notes said: an entire colony of goblins as far as the eye could see.

"From here on, the dungeon continues deeper," I explained. "But this place is a goblin breeding ground. In the food chain of this labyrinth, goblins sit right at the bottom. They're raised here specifically as trash mobs. You know the type—one-on-one, they'd probably lose to a wild dog."

"Yeah," Lilith murmured.

"And this whole thing's set in a forest biome," I continued. "That's why there were two mid-bosses back-to-back at the start. They're not just tests; they're guardians. They keep out any predators, like wolves or bears, that might try to feast on these little guys."

"I see…"

"See, a typical Young Dragon wouldn't even bother with goblins. They'd just walk right through. The difference in level is way too wide to get any experience from those things."

"But not for you," Lilith said flatly.

"Exactly. My level right now is barely above a rookie adventurer's. And what do rookie adventurers love more than anything? Goblins. And now… look at this. A sea of them, easily numbering over a thousand."

【*Skill: Physical Enhancement activated.*】
【*Skill: Steel Body Technique activated.*】
【*Skill: Kimon Technique activated.*】

"All right. Let the bonus stage begin."

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12
Level: 12 → 38
HP: 650 → 1820
MP: 13,400 → 14,512
Attack: 185 → 390
Defense: 170 → 385
Magic: 2,350 → 2,625
Evasion: 225 → 480

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】

Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6*】
Effect: *Adds +300 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 7 ➞ 8*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

It was about time I started to feel the effects of leveling up.

On a whim, I picked up a rock about the size of my fist. With a sharp exhale, I squeezed it tight—*crack.* A dull, dry pop rang out as

the stone crumbled to dust in my hand.

The image of fourteen-year-old Cordelia cutting a massive boulder clean in half, like it was made of tofu, flashed through my mind.

I'm starting to cross that line too…

The line where you stop being *just* human.

It made sense. This dungeon wasn't built for humans; it was a proving ground, a rite of passage for Young Dragons aiming to ascend. Of course, a normal human wouldn't survive it without going beyond normal limits.

In other words, this is the real starting line.

"So, past the goblin settlement… we should reach an underground water vein."

We were walking through a limestone cave. The air was cool and damp, wrapping around my overheated body like a balm. After a while, we arrived at an underground lake.

"What is that?"

It was enormous: a subterranean lake, easily fifty meters across. And there, stretched across half the water's surface, floated something even more massive.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

"A giant catfish?"

Lilith nodded in response to my words.

"Yes. I believe it's one of the truly dangerous ones."

Whale Catfish.

They called it that because it was a catfish the size of a whale—literally, a monster. Right now, it seemed to be in hibernation, lying utterly still beneath the surface of the water.

According to the texts I'd read, it was a voracious predator during its active season. It would tease anything nearby with its whiskers—playfully, almost innocently—then coil them around its prey and drag it underwater to devour it whole.

This underground lake was connected to the outside world by a massive subterranean waterway, and this spot served as its

preferred winter nesting ground.

Best not to mess with it. That thing's way too big for me to handle right now.

Just its body alone looked to be about twenty-five meters long. It was practically a kaiju. There was no way I could fight that thing at my current level.

"Hey, Lilith," I said, keeping my voice low.

"What?"

"How much water do we have left?"

She pulled a large leather water skin from her pack, uncorked it, and peered inside.

"We haven't even used twenty percent yet."

After a moment's thought, I reached over and pulled her pack off her shoulders.

"We're topping off here. There won't be another water source for a while."

"Huh? But what about the giant catfish?"

"It'll be fine."

"That's… more information from the *Sage's Wisdom* skill, isn't it?"

"Yeah. According to everything I've read, once this thing falls asleep, it won't budge no matter what. And this is exactly the season it hibernates."

"I object," she said flatly. "That thing's far too big. If anything happens, we'll be dead in an instant."

"I'm telling you, it's fine," I replied, more confident than I felt. "The original research came from one of the most reputable scholarly bodies in the country, if I remember right."

Lilith nodded slowly, the weight of her concern pressing her voice into a quiet murmur. "Still… Just be careful."

I gave her a dry chuckle in return. It felt like overkill. Scoffing at her concern, I crouched by the water's edge and dipped the mouth of the waterskin into the lake. Bubbles rose lazily as it filled, the cool subterranean water lapping gently at my hands. Once full, I tied it

off, set it aside, and dipped my hands again, this time to drink. The chill of it soothed the heat in my throat and brought a fleeting sense of comfort.

"Hey, Lilith. You should come over and—"

Before I could finish the sentence, something slender and whip-like coiled tightly around my neck.

"What the—"

Without warning, I was wrenched off my feet and yanked into the lake with violent force. The world around me turned murky, feeling only a rush of bubbles and pressure as I was dragged under. My mind reeled—this wasn't the Whale Catfish. It couldn't be. The records I'd read were clear: they hibernated through this season, dormant and harmless.

Then I saw it, and everything made sense.

It wasn't the massive beast I'd spotted earlier, but a smaller one, roughly three meters in length. A juvenile. Most likely the spawn of the creature slumbering in the deeper waters. It hadn't stored enough energy to hibernate properly and was now still active, driven by hunger.

It was hunting out of desperation… and I was about to become its next meal.

The barbed whisker cinched tighter, dragging me toward the gaping maw ahead. Panic surged, but so did instinct. I reached for the knife strapped to my waist and, just as the catfish opened wide to devour me, I jammed the blade upward into the soft flesh of its exposed gums.

The creature recoiled instantly, its whisker snapping loose.

I didn't wait. Kicking hard with a frantic breaststroke, I surged back toward the surface, my lungs burning and thoughts reeling with the narrowness of that escape.

As soon as I tore myself free from the creature's maw, I drove my knife into both of its eyes again and again. I stabbed wildly, relentlessly, with everything I had. For what felt like several minutes, I stayed underwater, plunging the blade into its skull until blood

clouded the lake and the beast finally floated to the surface, limp and motionless.

Maybe it was my enhanced physical stats. Maybe it was simply the benefit of having close to two thousand HP. Either way, I'd survived longer underwater than most people ever could, and I'd killed a monster in its element.

Just as I finally broke the surface and gasped for air, I felt another whisker curl around my neck like a noose.

Damn it… Not again!

This one was a different catfish—bigger, stronger, and just as hungry. I thrashed as it dragged me under again, sputtering through the rising water.

"Lilith! Run!" I choked out. "There's more of—"

My words dissolved into bubbles. My lungs burned. My vision dimmed at the edges, blackness closing in.

This is bad… Real bad.

As my consciousness began to slip, a bitter irony crept in.

So, this is how I go? Drowning, again? Some hero I turned out to be…

Memories flickered in my mind like a reel of old film: my first life, the betrayals, the regrets. I let my eyelids fall.

Guess this is the end…

And then, a jolt.

Electricity surged through my body. The whisker snapped free. My muscles reawakened with a burst of raw instinct, and I kicked hard, burning every last drop of oxygen to propel myself toward the surface.

With a gasping roar, I broke through.

And I froze.

Two catfish floated on the lake. One was mine, its body carved and bloodied. The other was untouched—no wounds, no marks.

No, wait. Not quite untouched.

It was smoking.

Tiny tendrils of steam curled up from its skin as it bobbed lifelessly on the surface.

I turned toward the shoreline… and there she was.

Lilith stood tall with her travel pack slung across her back, clutching a staff that was glowing faintly at the tip.

So, she can fight after all…

And I hadn’t died. Not today.



I stepped out of the water, soaked to the bone and trembling from the cold. Each footfall squelched against the rocky ground as I made my way toward Lilith.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, my breath hitching. "What did you just do?"

"Lightning," she replied without hesitation, her voice flat as ever. "Your mana reserves are far beyond human standards. Therefore, I calculated that your magical resistance would be immense, and with that in mind, I fired at full power."

She might as well have been reciting a formula. There was no emotion behind her words, only the unshakable precision of someone who'd run the numbers and come to a conclusion without doubt or hesitation.

"I'm not just some girl who wandered into the Dragons' Domain by mistake," she continued, lifting her arm to show the white band wrapped around her wrist. Three gold lines gleamed on its surface. "I've lived here for years. I may not be a frontline fighter, but I've earned the right to wear this. Support-level combat ability is the bare minimum."

She had a point. In this brutal society, weakness was the same as worthlessness. No one got to stay here without proving their value, not even humans. Especially not humans.

Before I could say anything, she cut in again, her voice shifting, sharpening.

"Can I say one thing?"

"What is it?"

She looked up at me, and for the first time since we met, there was heat in her eyes. The icy indifference cracked, revealing something harsher underneath.

"You don't get to decide everything on your own," she stated.

I blinked.

"What are you talking about?"

Her expression contorted into something fierce, something furious, and her normally detached voice rose with raw anger.

"You assumed I'd be useless in this dungeon. Maybe I am. Maybe this time was just dumb luck. But you don't get to decide that for me. You don't get to order me to run while you throw your life away. That's not your choice to make."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut. I'd heard this before, nearly word for word.

Cordelia… She said the same thing.

Lilith's hands tightened at her sides.

"I can support you. I *know* I can. Depending on the terrain, the magic, the timing… I have my own way of helping. Even if I can't fight like you."

"Maybe," I muttered. "But I can't risk it, Lilith. I can't put you in danger—"

She stepped forward and slapped me. The sound cracked through the cavern, loud and sudden, like a gunshot ricocheting off stone.

No calculated monotone. No cold logic. Just emotion, unfiltered and unrestrained.

"Don't you dare make light of this!" Lilith snapped, her voice breaking free of its usual restraint. The sharp edge of emotion in her words struck harder than the slap. "If that's how you see it, then what does that make *me*, the one putting *you* in danger?"

Her eyes shimmered, tears threatening to fall, but she didn't look away. She stood her ground, even as frustration twisted her features, raw and exposed.

"Stop deciding everything on your own. Stop carrying the burden alone. What am I to you, Ryuto? Do my feelings even matter in the choices you make?"

Her voice tangled with a memory: another outburst, another pair of tear-filled eyes.

"Don't decide for me!"

"That's not what I want! I don't even get a say in this!"

"Going off to the Dragons' Domain without a word, leaving for years? You never even asked!"

Cordelia's voice. Her heartbreak. Her anger. All of it echoed through Lilith now, word for word, wound for wound.

"I'm a person too," Lilith whispered. Her voice trembled, but the pain behind it was steady, relentless. "Don't throw your life away just to save me. I never asked for that. What am I supposed to do if you die for my sake? What then?"

I shut my eyes, inhaled slowly and deeply. My fist clenched tight at my side.

And then I smiled—just a little, just enough.

"Then, I just won't die," I said.

Reaching out, I tapped her gently on the head, as if trying to lighten the weight she carried.

"C'mon," I added with a grin. "We'll survive this together."

She looked up at me—really looked, for the first time. Her lips twitched, hesitant, then curved into the faintest smile.

It wasn't much… but it was real. And for now, it was enough.

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12
Level: 38 ➞ 45
HP: 1820 *1820 ➞ 2150* 2150
MP: 14512 *14512 ➞ 15730* 15730
Attack: 390 ➞ 470
Defense: 385 ➞ 465
Magic: 2625 ➞ 2705
Evasion: 480 ➞ 580

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】

Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6*】
Effect: *Adds +300 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 8*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

We had finally made it to the middle layers of the labyrinth.

The current floor, along with the one directly below it, made up what was known as the middle stratum.

The area I stood in now was entirely constructed from wood—walls, floors, and ceilings alike.

The monsters here were all undead.

As expected from the middle layers, the strength of undead enemies was a significant step up. Liches, wights, vampires… This place was a veritable parade of lords of the night.

It was said that the dragonkin used their magic to regularly summon high-ranking undead from the underworld into this floor to maintain its population. But setting that aside, this level of the labyrinth was a maze in every sense of the word.

The area spanned five hundred meters by five hundred meters. Narrow wooden passageways, just a meter and a half wide, branched off endlessly in every direction. Wandering aimlessly would guarantee getting lost—and once that happened, starvation was only a matter of time. There was no water source, and the only available food was the rotting flesh of the undead. Not exactly a viable diet.

For someone like me, constant battles against the undead posed a serious strain on my stats. Even for a dragonkin, facing multiple enemies at once was no trivial matter. These were high-level monsters you couldn't afford to underestimate. With so many undead packed into such a vast space, traversing this area felt more like a punishment than a challenge. Many Young Dragons had met their end here; their lives lost within this twisted wooden labyrinth.

"And so… this is the exit to the next floor," Lilith said, her voice laced with exasperation.

"Time to clear: twenty minutes. Enemy encounters: five. Escaped from three of them," she added with a sharp glance.

"I studied ahead of time," I replied, pointing at a geometric pattern carved into the wall. "There's a system to how the maze is constructed. Even if you don't have a map memorized, it's still possible to figure out the way through."

It was a kind of codebreaking, really. Once you understood the logic behind translating the symbols on the wall into a readable sequence, the correct path practically spelled itself out, complete with arrows pointing the way. This place wasn't just a test of strength, but of intelligence as well.

"We ran from the giant catfish on the previous floor. Before that, we fled from a Golem. At this rate, how can we ever hope to defeat the guardian of the deepest layer?" Lilith muttered, clearly displeased.

"I can't argue with that," I admitted.

Still scowling, she went on.

"Then maybe we should stay on this floor a little while longer and get some more experience first."

"It won't be 'a little while longer,'" I said flatly.

"What?" Lilith tilted her head, confused.

I gave her a grin.

"How many high-ranking undead monsters are packed into this floor? Around a hundred?"

"Probably," she replied cautiously. "Maybe even more."

"I'm going to take them all down. Every last one of them. Starting now."

"Are you planning to stay here for the next few *months* or something? We don't have enough water, and food is in short supply, too. I hate to say it, but… I honestly don't think you can keep winning long enough to reliably hunt the monsters here."

Ah, there it was again. Her earnest concern. She was serious about everything.

Not that I minded. In fact, I kind of liked that about her.

"Of course, I'm not staying here for months. I'm going to hit them all at once and end it in one go."

"All at once? How long are we talking?"

I raised a single finger.

"One day. No—half a day should be enough."

Lilith's eyes widened in shock. Her shoulders slumped in disbelief.

"That's impossible."

"No, I'm doing it," I said firmly.

My expression must've told her I wasn't joking, because a conflicted look crossed her face. Then, she finally realized I was serious.

"How exactly do you plan to pull that off?" she asked, her voice tight with tension.

I took a breath, then answered.

"First… we head to the next floor."

Lilith practically tripped over her own feet, her shoulders trembling with disbelief.

"This isn't funny. We were talking about clearing out the monsters on *this* floor, and now you're saying to move on?"

I wasn't joking. I was dead serious—more serious than I'd ever been.

"Just a hunch, but… you don't like jokes at all, do you?"

"Correct. I've never really understood the concept of jokes."

Yeah, I figured as much.

She was just that type—rigid, expressionless, a little too robotic for her own good. It was kind of a waste, honestly, considering how ridiculously beautiful she was. Not that the alternative—someone like Cordelia, who never shuts up—was much better.

"So, why exactly are we going to the next floor to hunt the enemies on *this* one? I don't understand," Lilith said, clearly baffled.

"You'll get it once you see what's about to happen, like it or not," I replied. "Come on, let's get moving. We've got an entire floor's worth of monsters to wipe out."

Without waiting for her response, I grabbed her hand.

Then… we began our descent down the spiral staircase to the floor below.

As soon as we stepped through the stairwell, we were hit by an oppressive wave of heat, thick and heavy, wrapping around us like a

furnace blast.

We had entered a vast underground chamber.

The space stretched out in all directions, easily five hundred meters in radius, and rose about two hundred meters from floor to ceiling. There were no walls obstructing the view; everything could be seen at a glance from the stairway landing.

The ground below shimmered in a deep crimson glow, magma stretching as far as the eye could see. Through it ran black veins—solid paths, like narrow roads, crisscrossing the molten expanse.

"Where are we?" Lilith asked quietly.

"This is what you'd call a magma zone," I explained. "We'll be walking across the black ground to reach the next level."

She gave a small nod. "That much is obvious just by looking."

"Supposedly, there are extremely dangerous creatures lurking in the magma," I continued. "Not true dragons, but dragon-like beasts with no intelligence. There'll be fire dragons and the like swarming the place."

Lilith swallowed hard.

"They may not match real dragons in overall ability, but in terms of raw power…"

"Yeah," I nodded. "In sheer strength, they're on par with us. Sure, a true dragon has the edge in base stats, intelligence, and combat knowledge, so one-on-one we'd have the advantage. But if they come at us in numbers…"

"And *that's* what makes them dangerous," Lilith murmured.

"Exactly." I nodded.

I glanced up at the ceiling, then abruptly came to a halt, stopping just in front of her. Lilith blinked in surprise.

"What's wrong? Why did you stop?"

"Why?" I repeated, flashing her a grin. "Because I'm about to deal with both the undead above and the fire dragons down here, all at once."

She gave me a confused look.

"What are you talking about?"

"Let me start with a basic premise," I said calmly. "The spiral staircase we just came down is made of orichalcum. Extremely—*unbelievably*—tough stuff. Practically indestructible."

Lilith narrowed her eyes, clearly not following.

"Trying to take on the undead above or the fire dragons below in a straight fight? Sure, I could probably win, but it'd still be tough even fighting each of them one at a time. Against multiple enemies, our situation isn't exactly ideal."

"So, what's your plan, then? I've been asking you that this whole time."

At her pointed question, I gave her a broad, confident nod.

"Arson."

"Arson?" she repeated, stunned.

Without another word, I raised my palm toward the wall—specifically, the wooden outer surface surrounding the spiral staircase we had just descended. Then, I activated a fire-starting spell using Life Magic.

The spell itself was weak—barely strong enough to have any effect in combat—but that wasn't the point. Life Magic wasn't meant for fighting; it was for chores. Starting a fire, for example.

It was perfect for this occasion.

I unleashed a flurry of spells in rapid succession, pounding the wall with tiny sparks of flame. Over and over, I hit the same spot, refusing to let up.

"Take this! And this! And this and this and this!"

My voice echoed with each cast as I continued to bombard the wall. One spark at a time, I set about turning the dry wood into kindling. Black scorch marks began to spread in clusters, smoke curling up from the growing burns as the structure began to smolder under the relentless barrage.

At last, the flames caught.

I must've been at it for over an hour. Spell after spell, strike after strike—until finally, the wooden walls of the spiral staircase

ignited in earnest. The passage we had used to descend was now completely engulfed in fire.

"Undead are weak to fire, right?" I asked, glancing over at Lilith.

"Yeah," she replied with a slow nod.

"See, fire's a tricky thing. Once it catches, it just keeps spreading. I don't expect to burn the whole upper floor to ash, but a good chunk of the ceiling should collapse."

"That does make sense," she admitted.

"The undead will be wiped out by the fire, and if things go well, the collapse might take some of the fire dragons with it, crushing them in the rubble. Two birds with one stone."

"So, in other words, you're using an area-of-effect attack on the floors themselves—on the entire structure?" she asked, her expression tightening.

"Exactly," I said.

At that, Lilith's face twisted into a visible grimace.

"But… this underground labyrinth is a sacred site for the dragonkin. A holy place where Young Dragons undergo trials to become full-fledged. This is supposed to be a ritual of growth."

She was absolutely right.

Which was precisely why no one would ever consider pulling a stunt like this. In the world of dragonkin, it was considered meaningful to face challenges honorably and overcome them through direct confrontation. That was the spirit of the trial.

In a typical dungeon, there'd be systems in place—fire prevention measures, protections against cross-floor interference, and so on. But this wasn't a normal dungeon.

This was a sanctified proving ground. It didn't *need* such measures.

Take the Minotaur at the very beginning, for example. It had been confined to its chamber, unable to leave, because that was how the trial was designed. The point was never about defeating enemies with brute strength alone.

The expectation was for foolhardy Young Dragons to retreat after being humbled. It wouldn't make sense to let the Minotaur chase down a fledgling who'd already escaped the trial room, hacking at their back with its axe. That's why the rules were set up so that simply leaving the room meant survival.

In that same sense, this labyrinth had all kinds of exploitable loopholes built into its system—loopholes no one had even taken advantage of… until now.

Even if others had noticed these loopholes, no dragon ever chose to exploit them. That was the nature of their pride, of their honor.

Fortunately, I wasn't a dragon. And because I wasn't, I could do whatever the hell I wanted.

"This method… it's unthinkable. No, it *shouldn't* be possible," Lilith stammered. "And the repair costs for these floors will be astronomical…"

"I'm not a dragon. Not my problem," I said with a shrug.

"What?" she blinked, thrown off by the bluntness.

Seriously, though, it truly didn't concern me. To me, this entire labyrinth was nothing more than a place to earn experience. Dragons might treat it like sacred ground, but I saw it as nothing more than just another grind spot. Sure, this stunt might provoke the wrath of the Dragon King, but if that happened, well… I'd deal with it when I had to.

In that sense, I knew full well I was taking a serious risk here. This was a high-stakes gamble.

"Besides," I added, "have you seen the Dragon King's castle? That thing's loaded with gold. Dragons hoard treasure like it's a hobby; they were born for it. Fixing up a couple of scorched floors? That's pocket change for them."

"Unbelievable," Lilith muttered, giving me a look of pure, exhausted disbelief.

Honestly, I expected as much. Her glare was sharp enough to pierce steel.

"I mean, I do get it," I said with a sheepish grin. "You're right to be fed up with me."

Unexpectedly, she began to laugh. It started as a chuckle—soft, almost reluctant—but quickly snowballed.

"Heh… hee hee… ha ha ha…"

"What's so funny?" I asked, blinking.

Tears welled at the corners of her eyes as she clutched her sides, laughter spilling from her like a dam had broken. She must've found it *very* funny.

"Ha ha… Honestly, I'm just amazed. But I see now…"

Finally catching her breath, she looked at me and smiled.

"Flexible thinking *is* important. I never know what to expect from you."

After that, using Life Magic, I conjured a steady current of wind, pumping air—oxygen—up into the upper floors to feed the flames.

At the same time, I kept firing off fire magic spells. Over and over. For twelve hours straight.

Beneath the orichalcum shell of the spiral staircase—our invincible roof—we were completely protected.

From that vantage point, we witnessed a sight no mortal should ever see.

The floor above us gave way, collapsing in massive sections. A whole portion of the level crumbled and fell, plummeting straight down into the magma basin below.

It was like watching hell itself open up—a cataclysmic cascade of fire, stone, and death. A vision torn from the end of the world.

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12
Level: 45 ➞ 99
HP: 2150 *2150* ➞ *4321* 4321
MP: 15730 *15730* ➞ *17850* 17850

Attack: 470 ➞ 1020
Defense: 465 ➞ 985
Magic: 2705 ➞ 3400
Evasion: 580 ➞ 1150

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6*】
Effect: *Adds +300 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】

【*Martial Arts: Level 8*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

"So, yeah," I said casually. "We're heading back up."

"Up? Why?" Lilith asked, her brow furrowing.

I nodded at her question.

"From here on down, it's a straight shot to the deepest level—the guardian awaits."

"Which is why I'm asking: Why go back up?"

"What exactly *is* the guardian?" I asked in return.

"A dragon zombie," she replied quietly. "A dragon that has died—felled by a younger one—and was sent on to the underworld. It's a sacred ritual, a passing of the torch to the next generation."

"Exactly," I agreed. "And what weapons do I have right now? Just a knife. Do you think I can take down a dragon—dead or not—with that? I'm guessing its body's still in near-perfect condition, scales and all."

Lilith shook her head slowly, side to side.

"I do think you've become strong, Ryuto. But no, even you can't pierce a dragon's scales in that state. Not unarmed like this."

"Which is why we're going back," I said. "Besides, we left some unfinished business, like that Whale Catfish and the Golem. Gotta clean up after myself."

"Back and forth… You really are something else," she muttered, clearly exasperated. "But you *do* remember that the upper floor is a wreck after your little arson stunt, right? Can we even get back up there?"

She glanced up with a deeply unimpressed expression, trying to gauge the state of the scorched upper level.

I nodded, unfazed.

"The foundation of this labyrinth is all built with orichalcum. And the central structure—the core connections between each floor—are all made of orichalcum staircases and walkways. They were part of the original design."

"Orichalcum. I understand its concept as an incredibly strong metal."

"Right. It's thanks to orichalcum and the dwarves' homunculi that this whole absurd dungeon is possible in the first place."

"Even so, this labyrinth must have taken more than a hundred years to construct. And then *someone* just had to go and torch part of it like it was nothing…"

Lilith shot me a sidelong glare, her eyes narrowed in that dry, unimpressed way she did so well.

Unbothered, I simply pointed upward.

"All right, let's head back up, starting from the first floor," I said.

We retraced our steps, and before long, I found myself once again standing in the chamber where the Minotaur had fallen. Its massive corpse lay still in the center of the room, and next to it rested the enormous battle axe it had once wielded.

I reached for the weapon—over two meters long and forged from some kind of rare metal. It had to weigh at least a hundred, maybe even two hundred kilograms. My Level 1 self would have been able to lift it, but swinging it around in actual combat? Not a chance.

That was then.

Now, I was Level 99.

And while my official class still read "Villager," the blessing of the Dragon King had significantly boosted my stat growth rate, putting me on par with high-tier classes like Sage. My stats were more than up to the task.

I gripped the axe and gave it a test swing. The blade cut through the air with a sharp *whoosh*, a clean wind-slicing sound that brought a grin to my face.

Good. Feels like I'm swinging a stick.

Swordsmanship and martial arts skills kicked in automatically. All the battle experience I'd accumulated fused seamlessly, guiding my body to find the most efficient way to handle the axe. Sure, having a proper battle axe skill would make things even smoother, but for now, I could manage just fine.

With a few more swings, I began spinning the weapon in one hand like a cyclone. The balance, the weight—it all felt right. Almost *too* right.

Maybe, just maybe, I can pull off what she did.

Acting on impulse, I strode out of the Minotaur's chamber.

I remembered it clearly. When Cordelia was fifteen, she had sliced through a massive boulder with a dull sword like she was cutting butter.

Inspired, I turned toward a similarly massive rock resting in the tunnel. It was five meters across, its surface jagged and uneven.

I struck…

The axe carved through it like it wasn't even there. Each blow smoothed the rough surface with frightening speed.

"This is insane… There's less resistance than slicing butter with a knife," I muttered in awe.

Minutes later, I had a perfect stone sphere in front of me, about three meters in diameter. Surrounding it were countless fragments of shattered rock—the remains of hundreds of precise, controlled strikes.

Lilith stood nearby, speechless, watching the scene unfold.

"The first time you used that axe, you had to activate every enhancement skill just to barely swing it," she said softly.

Perfect.

The weapon felt right in my hands now. I had all the feedback I needed.

"All right, let's move."

Lilith blinked at me.

"Move where?"

I grinned. "Time to pay that Golem a visit. It's round two."

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12

Level: 99
HP: 4321 / 4321
MP: 17850 / 17850
Attack: 1020
Defense: 985
Magic: 3400
Evasion: 1150

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6*】
Effect: *Adds +300 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 8*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

Equipment

【*Minotaur's Axe (Rarity Rank: B+)*】
Attack +500, Evasion -200

We descended the stairs and continued down the corridor.

The Golem was still struggling inside the pit trap where we'd left it. It writhed helplessly in the oil-slicked mud, exactly where it had fallen. Maybe I'd gone a little overboard with the oil prep, turning that hole into a tar pit from hell. For a massive metal body like that, being trapped there must've been torture.

Well, I'll put you out of your misery now.

"Here we go."

I raised the Minotaur's axe high over my head and brought it crashing down. The blade struck true, cleaving into the Golem's head with a clean *crunch*, slicing through its bronze shell like it was paper.

Perfect. This axe, combined with my current strength… Yeah, this'll do.

Slice. Slice. Slice.

One, two, three, four, five, six strikes.

When I was done dicing it into pieces, the Golem had finally gone still.

"Relentless strikes against a helpless target… You don't know mercy, do you?" Lilith murmured from behind me, her tone caught between awe and reproach.

I nodded without hesitation.

"Never said I'd show any."

With that, I glanced down at my status plate and grinned.

"I finally hit Level 100."

Just as the words left my mouth, the numbers confirmed it: Level 100.

Of course, in this world, there was no such thing as a level cap. Or, to be more precise, no known document had ever confirmed the existence of one.

There were legends, like the one about the greatest hero in history who returned from the Demon Realm with a level supposedly exceeding 500. Whether that was truth or myth, no one could say for sure.

The fact remained: even reaching Level 100 was already enough to step out of the realm of humanity.

In general, once someone surpassed Level 100, they entered the domain of B-rank adventurers. And those who reached such heights—whose abilities had begun to transcend what could reasonably be called "human"—came to be referred to as "living weapons."

Sure, the name might sound dramatic, but in the world of high-tier adventurers among A-rank and S-rank, it was no exaggeration. A single A-rank adventurer could change the tide of an entire localized warfront. That's how overwhelming their presence was.

Let's put that tangent aside for now.

The point is, reaching Level 100 is a big deal.

More importantly, it comes with a reward—every class unlocks a unique "Class Trait Skill" upon hitting this milestone.

For example, Sages receive the broken-tier skill Multi-Casting, which lets them cast two spells at once. It's absurdly powerful—you could mix flame and wind to create a firestorm, or combine ice and lightning for devastating effect.

The Adventurer's Guild publishes a reference manual for rookies, listing each class's special Level 100 skill. To fledgling adventurers, these skills belong to another world entirely. They look at those entries with admiration and longing, dreaming that one day they too might reach that rarefied air.

Of course, only one in several thousand ever makes it.

Me? I'm a Villager.

Nobody was even sure anyone with this class had ever reached Level 100 before… but apparently, there was one person who did. Just one, in all recorded history.

Thanks to that lone outlier, the Villager class's Level 100 skill is listed in the guild's handbook, complete with name and effect.

It was clearly intended as a joke. At least, that's how it read.

Villager's Wrath

(The fury of a Villager who, even upon reaching Level 100, learns nothing but garbage-tier skills, is channeled through the body's mana circuits and focused into a single fist.) **Effect:** *Consumes all MP to deliver a physical strike enhanced by both MP and Magic (High Damage).*

For reference, this "high damage" effect was basically identical to a skill taught at the Magic Academy called *Mana Strike*—a straightforward technique where you burned half your MP to land a massive blow.

In practical terms, it was a high-risk, high-output move. You either opened a battle with it to gain the upper hand or threw it out as a desperate final gambit.

Even then, to be honest, that level of power was only decent at best. That's about as generous as you could get. The output usually ended up barely stronger than the highest-tier spells available at the user's current level. When you considered that it ate up *half* your MP, it just wasn't very efficient. As a result, few people ever actually used the skill.

Now compare that to the Villager's Level 100 reward: the same effect, except it consumed *all* your MP instead of half.

That wasn't just inefficient—it was practically a garbage-tier skill. Absolutely useless… on paper.

With my nearly 20,000 MP, what would happen if I used it?

That part is… honestly kind of intriguing.

Which brings us to the present.

I now stood in the underground waterway, planted firmly in front of the pool that housed my unwitting test subject.

The massive catfish loomed just ahead—silent, slick, and exactly where I needed it to be.

Time to see what *Villager's Wrath* could do.

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12
Level: 99 ➞ 100
HP: 4321 *4321* ➞ *4352* 4352
MP: 17850 *17850* ➞ *17890* 17890
Attack: 1020 ➞ 1031
Defense: 985 ➞ 998
Magic: 3400 ➞ 3408
Evasion: 1150 ➞ 1162

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6*】
Effect: *Adds +300 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 8*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】

【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】

Class Trait Skill

【*Villager's Wrath*】
Effect: *Consumes all MP to deliver a high-damage physical attack that scales with MP and Magic.*

Equipment

【*Minotaur's Axe (Rarity Rank: B+)*】
Attack +500, Evasion -200

To put it bluntly, it was a *disaster*.

I gathered magic into my fist and threw a punch. That was it. That's all I did.

Just from that single strike, a crater opened in the giant catfish's torso. I'm pretty sure the thing was at least seven meters wide. The catfish itself was over twenty meters long, but once you've punched a hole straight through its gut, there's really no coming back from that.

Blood and flesh sprayed across the cavern like a bomb had gone off. It was… well, "a mess" would be putting it mildly.

"Unbelievable," Lilith sighed, shoulders slumping in genuine exasperation.

Honestly, I couldn't blame her. *I* was stunned. That kind of power was absurd. Turns out having nearly 20,000 MP really *was* insane.

All of a sudden, my vision swam.

The world tilted, and I collapsed right there on the spot. A wave of pain crashed over me—head pounding, body shaking, cold sweat pouring down my back.

Mana depletion.

"Sure packs a punch, but in terms of practical use in battle… this thing's a nightmare," I muttered, drawing ragged breaths. "The usability's damn near the worst."

Lilith leaned down beside me, her expression tight with concern. I mustered a shaky smile and forced out a few words.

"I'm starving. Let's eat something… then grab a nap."

※※※

The next day, we spent the night in a cavern where a subterranean spring trickled through the stalactites, resting in the faint humidity of the underground air.

We then pressed on, deeper still, toward the final level.

As I led Lilith by the hand, I turned to her with a question: "So, this dragon zombie… It's pretty much the same as it was just before it died, right?"

"Yes. After death, a secret ritual of the dragonkin is used to preserve the body and prevent decay. Then the soul is anchored to the physical realm. When the creature is reborn as an undead, its stats reflect the state it was in shortly before death."

"'Shortly before death,' huh?"

Lilith gave a small nod and said, "If it were already bedridden from illness—unable to move, even—that form wouldn't make a suitable guardian. So, the ritual ensures the soul is fixed in place at a point just before the body's collapse."

"Yeah… Makes sense," I replied, narrowing my eyes.

"That's right," Lilith said quietly. "The true purpose of this trial isn't simply to defeat a guardian or reach the bottom. It's to receive the *Divine Dragon's Blessing*."

She paused for a moment before continuing.

"A dead dragon is reduced to a soul, dwelling in the afterlife. There, it ascends into divinity, becoming a Divine Dragon. But that ascension only occurs at the moment of its death, when it entrusts its power to a successor in a true life-or-death battle. That transfer of strength and purpose is what raises its divine nature. That's why a fully matured dragon who has undergone Dragon Ascension holds strength vastly superior to a mere youngling."

"A ceremonial passing of the torch," I said. "Makes sense. And the zombie itself loses the blessing when it becomes undead, right?"

She nodded faintly.

The skill in question—*Divine Dragon's Blessing*—was insane. It stacked a 1.5 multiplier *on top of* the effects of *Physical Enhancement*, which already doubled physical stats. If someone like me had it, that meant my stats would be tripled due to a 2×1.5 multiplier.

Granted, that was still tame compared to the Level 100 skill granted to Heroes. That one straight-up *doubled* the multiplier of *Physical Enhancement* itself. Not a 2×1.5 multiplier, but a 2×2—a full four times base stats. That was ridiculous. It was no wonder the Hero class was considered the strongest of all; it truly was a cheat, plain and simple.

Which is exactly why I needed *Divine Dragon's Blessing*.

Compared to someone like Cordelia, who had insane growth and stat scaling, I couldn't afford to fall further behind. If I let even the stat multipliers slip out of reach, then there'd be no catching up to her.

"And dragons are rare," Lilith added softly. "There isn't always a dragon zombie conveniently waiting on the altar."

"But there is one this time, right?"

She didn't answer, and I didn't press her.

We walked on in silence, through a long and winding cavern.

Quiet.

Still.

Neither of us said a word. At some point, we had simply stopped talking. The only sound was the echo of our footsteps, swallowed by the deep stillness of the cave ahead.

The passage finally opened up, revealing a vast chamber roughly a hundred meters in radius.

"So, this is the altar…" I murmured.

At the center, encircling the dragon in a radius of about twenty meters, stood tall black stones—monoliths—placed in perfect symmetry, not unlike Stonehenge in England. Their presence was heavy, solemn, and ancient.

That hardly mattered now.

Just as I'd suspected, Lilith stood frozen, speechless.

Before us loomed a magnificent Earth Dragon, its golden-scaled body easily stretching over ten meters in length. A creature of undeniable power and grace, now silent and still in undeath.

I think both Lilith and I had known. Deep down, we'd sensed it. Maybe not in words, but from the moment we stepped into this labyrinth, the possibility had been there, unspoken yet present.

To be precise, we hadn't been unaware. We'd simply chosen not to *acknowledge* it.

"Father…" Lilith whispered.

Her voice, soft and fragile, could no longer reach the one who had already passed on.

She'd told me before: Her foster father, a dragon, had died a month ago.

Yeah… I figured as much.

It all made sense now. Her constant disapproval of my unorthodox methods, her fixation on form and ritual. This wasn't just a trial for her. It was a farewell, a final rite. A sacred duty to send off her parent to the afterlife.

No wonder she couldn't stand the idea of cutting corners.

There was no turning back now.

I glanced her way and gave her a firm, silent look—*Stand back.*

She hesitated, torn, her face shadowed with pain. Then, after a long moment of silence, she gave a slow, heavy nod.

"I knew this day would come. If there's a guardian in this labyrinth now… then yes, of course it would be my father."

"Are you sure about this?"

Lilith nodded once, steady and clear.

"This is a sacred ritual. Long ago, my father defeated the guardian that came before him. And now, he waits to be defeated himself—to pass on his will to the next generation."

All right then.

I rolled my neck, bones cracking in preparation.

With the massive axe gripped in one hand, I strode forward without hesitation.

The moment I stepped into the ring of monoliths—those solemn black stones arranged in a perfect circle—it happened.

Dragon Breath.

A blazing inferno roared toward me, a wall of searing heat and fire. But I didn't flinch. I charged straight through the flames, my eyes locked on the golden dragon ahead.

My absurdly high Magic stat automatically wove itself into a protective veil—a thin magical barrier that shimmered faintly around me. Fueled by both MP and raw magical force, it formed instinctively, shielding me from the brunt of the dragon's attack.

A breath weapon, no matter how fierce, wasn't enough to bring me down.

The flames died out. The distance between us had closed to less than ten meters.

The dragon's eyes widened slightly in surprise as it saw me emerge unscathed. Then, perhaps out of pride or joy, it gave a low, pleased rumble… and smiled.

In an instant, the beast began to spin in place like a massive top. Its massive tail, easily over five meters long, lashed out, whipping toward me with deadly speed.

It was fast. But not too fast to read.

I twisted my body and narrowly dodged the attack. The tip of the tail grazed my side, just enough to sting, but I'd evaded the full force of the blow.

Then it was my turn.

I brought the axe down in a sharp arc, aiming directly at the dragon's wing joint, right near the shoulder.

A solid hit.

The impact surged up through my arms—a deep, jarring *thud*. This thing was tough. The kind of tough that told you it wasn't going down easily.

Fortunately, it wasn't invincible.

The blade had bit into flesh. Not deeply, but enough for a thin line of red to open across the golden scales. Blood sprayed, warm against my cheek like war paint.

The dragon didn't pause. Without breaking rhythm, it spun again in another sweeping motion.

Its forelimb—or maybe it's arm—came crashing in sideways, claws slashing straight for my face.

GAA-KIIIN!

The sound of metal rang out as our blows collided. The entire chamber shook with the force.

I caught the dragon's blow with the haft of my axe, but the force behind it was overwhelming. The impact launched me through the air, my body spinning for several seconds before I finally hit the ground. I slid across the stone floor, gradually losing momentum until I came to a stop.

I nodded to myself.

Yeah. It's strong.

Definitely not invincible.

The experience I'd earned in this labyrinth—every battle, every life I'd taken—had become the foundation of my strength. Countless foes had fallen to me, and their deaths had shaped who I was now.

I grinned, unfazed. The dragon grinned back, as if pleased. Without hesitation, I surged forward again, charging straight for the golden beast.

Claws and axe clashed in midair.

I dodged its tail. The dragon evaded my strikes. Its jaws opened wide, lunging forward with lethal precision.

I met its fangs with a swing of Damascus steel, intercepting the bite with all my might.

Clang after clang of metal rang through the cavern. Each axe swing and claw swipe carved the air with howling gusts. The chamber trembled under the weight of our battle.

So, this *is what it means for the strong to seek the strong.*

For the first time, I started to understand that desire—the need to test one's strength. The reverence dragons held for battle… made sense now. Just a little. It was the purest form of contest. A trial by strength alone.

This wasn't a fight. This was a match—a sacred trial of power.

Its ultimate form was this rite of Dragon Ascension. Here, "match" became "deathmatch." A ritual carried out by the dead to judge who among the living was worthy to succeed them.

And yet…

I grimaced. After a few exchanges, I'd come to a cold, undeniable conclusion.

He's strong. No… He's a little too *strong.* This wasn't just some average Divine Dragon. Lilith's foster father must have been an elite among elites, a truly exceptional dragon even before death.

Honestly, I had planned to overpower the dragon zombie outright. With my current stats, that should have been possible.

Unfortunately, this was quickly turning into a war of attrition.

He fought with the precision of someone honed by countless real battles. There was no wasted motion, no hesitation. His technique was flawless, his timing ruthless.

I had power, but my combat instincts were still green. Eventually, I would slip. One mistake, one misread, would be all he needed. When that moment came, he'd end it without hesitation.

If I kept trading blows like this, it was only a matter of time before I lost. That much was inevitable. And yet, I smiled.

Because "inevitable" didn't mean "impossible."

It wasn't that I couldn't keep up; it was that I couldn't *win* through conventional means. But continuing the brawl a little longer was something I could handle. And if I could endure, if I could just create the right moment…

Then this fight is mine.

I dodged the sweeping tail, narrowly avoiding being flattened. The dragon lunged immediately after, its jaws descending like a bird pecking seed—sharp, precise, unrelenting.

I surged forward. Zigzagging laterally like a drill sergeant's nightmare, I darted to the side in a blur. Then, dropping low, I slid along the ground like a tackle on wet turf, slipping just beneath the snapping jaws.

【*Skill: Steel Body Technique activated.*】
【*Skill: Kimon Technique activated.*】

Until now, I'd been holding these back. Even without them, I could keep up thanks to my doubled stats from *Physical Enhancement*. But I'd known that even with *Steel Body* and *Kimon Technique*, I couldn't beat the dragon head-on. Not with raw power alone.

That wasn't what I needed them for.

Not *strength*.

Speed.

Just once, just for this moment, those buffs would let me move faster than the dragon could predict.

Acceleration.

Faster.

Faster still.

In a flash, I was at its side, beyond the arc of its vision. The timing was perfect—right after its last barrage, in the vulnerable gap between its patterns.

This is it.

An opening. A real one. Its massive torso, fully exposed, defenseless in that heartbeat of recovery.

I didn't hesitate. I threw away the axe.

【*Skill: Villager's Wrath activated.*】

All of my mana surged into my arm, compressing into a single point. My hand clenched into a fist as if it alone could carry the weight of everything I'd earned in this dungeon.

I drove that fist forward.

If this doesn't do it… then whatever happens next, so be it!

"Take thisssssss!"

With every last drop of my mana channeled into it, my final, desperate blow smashed into the dragon's exposed abdomen. It was a clean hit, perfectly aimed and perfectly timed. My fist, overflowing with compressed magic, drove straight through the scales, tearing through flesh and muscle until it struck bone.

Crack. A sickening crunch rang through my arm as I felt the dragon's ribcage shatter beneath the impact.

The next instant, the compressed mana exploded inside the beast, transforming into a pulsing shockwave that rampaged through its body like a storm. A hideous tearing sound—*rrrrrip-rrrrrip-rrrrrip*—echoed through the cavern as its organs were shredded from within.

If this had been anything but a dragon, it would've exploded like the catfish had—flesh, blood, and entrails showering the room. But dragon scales weren't so easily breached. They held the destruction in, containing the devastation within the golden cage of its own body.

Then, with a heavy *thud*, the massive creature collapsed to the ground, shaking the floor beneath it. It convulsed, choking up blood, limbs twitching as its systems began to fail.

At the same time, *I* collapsed.

My vision spun. I dropped to one knee, gasping, my head splitting open with pain. Sweat poured from my body like a fever breaking. It was just like before—mana depletion, only worse.

That had been too close. *Way* too close. If that blow hadn't finished it, then I would've been finished instead.

Panting hard, I forced myself to stay upright. I dug deep, beat back the screaming in my muscles, and forced myself to stand. My

breath came ragged, but I was still on my feet. Slowly, painfully, I staggered over to retrieve the axe I'd thrown aside.

It was still there, resting in the dust.

I gripped the handle and dragged it behind me, step by step, until I stood beside the dragon's neck. It was still alive, barely. Its golden body twitched with the last shudders of dying muscle, but it no longer had the strength to rise.

I raised the axe, high over my head.

I stopped and turned to look at Lilith.

It would be easy to finish this. A clean stroke. One final blow. But…

"Lilith?" I called out, my voice low. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes. This is what Father wanted."

Lilith's voice was quiet, steady.

I nodded, but then glanced at her, my expression unreadable.

"Then why?" I asked softly. "Why are you crying?"

The tears had been falling for a while now, silent and unstoppable. Large droplets rolled down her cheeks, one after another, soaking into the stone below her feet like scattered pearls.

"I don't know," she whispered.

"You don't know?" I frowned. "Come on…"

"I really don't," she said, her voice trembling. "Father is already dead. And if he's going to become a Divine Dragon by being slain by someone younger—by being defeated by *you*—then that should be… something to celebrate, right? That's supposed to be the highest honor for a dragon."

I was silent for a moment, then turned back to the fallen dragon.

I raised the axe—not to kill, but to deliver a blow with restraint. It struck near the base of the skull, right at the spinal cord. The dragon's body jolted violently, spasming, but it still hadn't reached the threshold where undeath would release it.

"I asked why you're crying," I said, my voice low. "This whole ritual—this rite—is sacred to dragons. No one questions it. Everyone

accepts it without hesitation. It's just… the way things are."

Lilith's sobs began to rise again, hiccupping between shaky breaths. Her face contorted, struggling to maintain composure, but the sorrow came spilling out anyway.

Yes. And becoming a soul and ascending is considered a joyous fate."

"Then maybe…" I said, turning back to face her, "maybe you're crying because… you're *human*."

She blinked, startled, eyes wide with sudden realization.

It made sense. People waged war over things as simple as skin color, religion, and differences in values. Even among humans, true understanding was rare. So how could dragons and humans, two completely different species, be expected to see the world the same way?

Lilith had been raised by dragons, yes, but she wasn't one of them.

She was human, through and through.

That's why this ceremony—this death—hit her differently. Not as a rite, but as a *loss*.

"That's why," I said gently, "you should be the one to end it."

In human tradition, it's the family who closes the casket. The final touch belongs to kin.

This wasn't just a ritual. It was a farewell. And only she could give it meaning.

In the end, Lilith's father had clashed with me in a battle that pushed us both to the brink. As far as dragon rites went, it was a proper send-off for a warrior.

"Me?" Lilith whispered. "But if I'm the one to do it… the *Divine Dragon's Blessing* skill will probably go to me, not you."

"Don't worry about that," I said without hesitation.

"But you fought your way here with incredible resolve and determination. You *need* that skill to become stronger. I… I can't accept it."

I let out a long, quiet sigh before answering.

“There are plenty of ways to get stronger. I’ll figure it out. But a funeral only happens once. If *you* don’t send your father off, then who will?”

Lilith stood silent, her lips trembling. After a long moment, she wiped her tears away with the sleeve of her robe, then spread her arms and took a deep breath, steadying herself.

Minutes passed. The tears slowed. Her shoulders relaxed. Then, finally, she gave a firm nod.

“I still don’t understand why I’m crying,” she said softly. “But… I understand what it *means* to be the one to say goodbye.”

She extended her palm. Her hand pointed toward the massive axe I had embedded earlier, the one still lodged near the base of the dragon’s neck. A surge of lightning magic gathered around her. The current would travel through the metal, arcing straight into the spinal cord. Even a dragon couldn’t survive if its nervous system were completely fried.

“Thank you, Father,” she whispered. “For taking me in.”

She inhaled slowly, channeling her magic. Her voice trembled, but she didn’t stop.

“You raised me with kindness… and I was happy.”

The lightning struck. A brilliant flash raced down the axe, and the dragon’s body convulsed violently, one final time.

Then—stillness.

Its body fell silent. The guardian of the labyrinth, the father who had raised her, was no more.

Lilith looked like she might collapse right there. But I caught her before she could.

She clung to me, her voice barely a breath. “I’m truly alone now. It feels… so empty.”

Her face crumpled, overcome with grief, and she buried herself against my chest. I said nothing. I just placed a hand on her head and gently, slowly, stroked her hair.

“Crying’s not a bad thing,” I said, my voice soft but steady. “It helps. So go ahead. Cry as much as you need. Just let it all out.”

"Okay…" Lilith whispered, leaning into me. "Just… let me stay like this for a while."

I held her quietly, not saying anything more. Time passed. Maybe it was only a few minutes, maybe much longer—honestly, I couldn't tell. All I knew was the warmth of her weight against me, the muffled sound of her breathing, and the sense of something heavy slowly being released.

Eventually, the trembling stopped. Her shoulders relaxed. The tears subsided.

When she finally pulled back, her eyes were swollen and red, her face blotchy with the aftermath of grief. But her expression was calmer, steadier.

"Okay," I said, giving her a small nod. "Let's go."

She returned it silently. "Yeah. Let's go."

I reached into my coat and pulled out my status plate, curious to see the results of our battle. After everything that happened, there had to be some serious experience gain. Maybe even a level-up.

What I saw froze me in place.

"What the hell?"

I blinked. Checked again. And again. But the skill was still there—clear, unmistakable.

Divine Dragon's Blessing.

A powerful stat-enhancing ability. It wasn't supposed to be mine, not if Lilith had delivered the final blow. But there it was, printed right on my status plate.

"Why do *I* have this?" I murmured, still staring.

I showed the plate to Lilith, and her eyes widened in disbelief.

"But I was the one who struck last. I'm sure of it…" Her voice trailed off as realization dawned. Without another word, she pulled out her plate and checked it. "Ah."

She stared at it for a moment, confused, then shook her head slowly and passed it to me. Her expression was a mix of awe and bewilderment.

Then I saw it.

Divine Dragon's Guardian Spirit.

An entirely different skill, one I'd never heard of before. Massive resistance to status effects. A huge boost to growth rate. Flat +500 bonuses to every combat stat.

We stood there for a long moment, looking at each other, silent and stunned.

Something inside me cracked.

Laughter burst from my chest, uncontrolled and irrepressible. I doubled over, grinning, unable to hold it in. After everything, after all that tension and sorrow, this twist was just absurd enough to break the weight in my chest.

Lilith blinked at me, confused for a heartbeat… then let out a breathless, tearful laugh of her own.

"I see, I see… So that's how it is," I murmured, nodding as the last pieces fell into place.

Lilith looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"What do you mean?"

I turned to her with a grin, the kind that carried both affection and exasperation.

"It means your dad was a massive doting parent, that's what."

"Still not following."

"Think about it. He left behind a cheat-level skill… for *you*. Not for the one who struck the final blow. For his daughter."

Lilith blinked, her confusion still lingering.

"Just a minute ago," I continued, "you said you felt alone. That you were truly on your own now."

"Yeah," she whispered.

I raised my fist gently. Then, with a light touch, I tapped the center of her chest, right over her heart.

"Then listen up," I said quietly. "Your father's still here. Right here, with you."

As those words sank in, Lilith's eyes widened. And then the tears returned, pouring freely down her cheeks. But this time, they

weren’t only born of sorrow.

Her face twisted in a way I couldn’t quite describe—a fragile, aching blend of sadness, relief, and something warmer. Something that looked a little like joy.



“You know…” I said, glancing over at her with a smirk. “You’re kind of a crybaby, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” Lilith muttered, turning her face away in mock irritation.

I stood up, dusted myself off, and reached into my pack. From it, I pulled out a simple kettle setup. It was nothing fancy, just enough to make tea. I used a bit of Life Magic to kindle a small flame, letting it heat. After all that crying, her throat was probably sore. A warm drink might help. That was the kind of moment this was.

“Go ahead and cry a little longer,” I said, not looking directly at her. “Then… when you’re ready, let’s head home.”

“Okay…” she murmured, her voice still thick with lingering emotion.

After a pause, she spoke again—hesitant, but curious.

“Once we’re back on the surface… what will you do?”

“For starters, I’ll hole up in the Dragon King’s Grand Archive. Then I’ll probably travel the world, collecting skills, gathering gear, and grinding levels. The usual.”

“And what about me?” she asked, her voice quieter now.

“I’ll vouch for you. Take responsibility for your identity and situation. After that, it’s your call. Stay a librarian, start something new—it’s up to you.”

“Like I said before, I don’t have anyone anymore. If you’re going to be traveling around the world… I don’t know what I’d do while you’re gone.”

I considered that for a moment, then looked at her directly.

“Wanna come?” I asked. “Travel with me?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. For a heartbeat, she simply stared at me, stunned.

Then her entire face lit up, her smile blooming so wide it almost erased the traces of sadness, and she answered in a voice that was bright, clear, and full of joy.

“Yes!”

Interlude: The Story of a Certain Earth Dragon

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Interlude: The Story of a Certain Earth Dragon

In the forested lowlands near a lakeshore, not far from human settlements, an enormous Earth Dragon lay collapsed at the base of an ancient tree. Its massive body, returned to its original form after releasing its human disguise, was sprawled across the roots like a felled titan.

Wounds covered every inch of its body—deep gashes, crushed scales, and broken limbs. Blood poured freely from those wounds, soaking into the soil beneath it until the earth had turned a dark, muddy red. Its breathing was shallow and ragged, each exhale a struggle for survival.

"I was careless," the dragon muttered.

Though it had returned to its true form, the dragon still spoke in fluent, articulate language—an ability some among its kind retained even outside of human guise.

As for how it had come to be in such a state, the reason was painfully simple.

This dragon, one who had completed the sacred rite of passage and earned its place among the fully realized, had left the sanctuary of its kin in search of battle. Hungry for challenge, perhaps a little too confident in its strength, it had roamed beyond the bounds of its territory, only to misjudge its opponent. A fatal miscalculation.

It had barely escaped with its life.

Its adversary had been no ordinary foe: the Evil Dragon Amanta.

She was known in whispered legend as a living omen, a walking calamity, and a disgrace among dragons.

Amanta was said to have used forbidden rituals to ascend to divinity while still alive—a being twisted by unnatural power, revered

by no one and feared by all. Even among the mighty dragonkin, she was considered a threat on par with the worst of disasters, belonging to the upper echelons of strength and infamy alike.

And now, the Earth Dragon stirred. Its body trembled violently as it forced breath back into its lungs. Eyes wide with alarm, it planted its claws against the ground and slowly, painfully, lifted itself upright.

Something was coming.

Its gaze locked forward, muscles tightening. Moments later, faint footsteps echoed through the trees—soft, deliberate, unhurried.

So, she appeared.

A young human woman, likely in her mid-twenties, stepped calmly into the clearing. She wore a simple sky-blue dress that fell to her knees, her long, pale blue hair swaying with each step. At first glance, she looked entirely ordinary, almost unremarkable.

All except for her right arm.

From shoulder to fingertip, it was completely wrapped in bandages… but obviously not for warmth or modesty. Something was being hidden underneath. Something dangerous.

The dragon's eyes narrowed, and the woman's steps halted.

In the silence that followed, the wind between them stilled—as if the forest itself were holding its breath.

Jade met gold.

The woman's eyes, clear and sharp like polished jade, locked with the dragon's brilliant golden gaze. They stood perhaps twenty meters apart, and for ten long seconds, neither looked away. The silence between them was heavy, saturated with something unspoken.

Then the dragon inhaled deeply.

"GUGAAAAAAHHH!"

The roar tore through the clearing, vibrating the air like a shockwave. It was the kind of roar that could shake the entire forest, send flocks of birds scattering into the sky, and make even the most aggressive grizzly turn tail and flee.

Alas, the woman didn't so much as flinch.

Calmly, with an almost clinical detachment, her gaze swept over the dragon's battered form, examining every inch of it in silence. Then, without a word, she gave a small nod, turned on her heel, and walked away, disappearing down the path from which she came.

"I suppose… this is it, then," the dragon murmured to itself.

It wasn't hard to guess what would come next. She'd be back—and not alone.

A dragon's corpse was a priceless commodity. Scales were used for armor, fangs for weapons. And the meat—especially the heart and the flank—was considered one of the three rarest and most luxurious delicacies in the world: dragon steak.

Ordinarily, dragons and humans avoided each other. There was a mutual understanding, an unspoken distance. But if a dragon was dying or already dead, then the equation changed. Morality blurred. A resource was a resource.

The dragon understood this perfectly.

In fact, it harbored no resentment. It was the one who had ventured too close to human lands. The one who'd overestimated itself. The one who had fallen. If it died here, torn apart and harvested, it had no one else to blame.

Resignation had already settled in its bones.

A short while later, the woman returned… alone.

The dragon tensed, expecting a trap. Were there archers concealed in the treetops, ready to fire on command? Or perhaps mercenaries waiting just out of sight? It glanced around, scanning for movement.

There was nothing. No rustle of armor, no glint of steel. No hint of killing intent.

Just her.

Step by step, she walked toward the dragon—calm, measured, and completely unafraid.

The woman closed the distance, stopping just five meters from where the dragon stood, still braced for combat. Without a word,

she set down the large wooden bucket she had been carrying in her right hand.

The dragon tilted its head slightly in confusion.

Then, the woman smiled—softly, gently.

"It's water," she said. "And if you need anything else, just let me know."

The dragon froze.

She remained standing there, smiling quietly, offering no explanation, no demands. Just kindness.

They gazed at one another in silence for a long time before the dragon finally broke it.

"Why would you bring me water? A dragon's corpse could fetch a fortune. By your standards, you could live in comfort for the rest of your life just from selling the parts of my body."

The woman tilted her head slightly, placing a slender hand under her chin as if in thought.

"Why, you ask?" she murmured. "Now that you mention it… I wonder why myself?"

She laughed softly. Not mocking, not evasive—just faint and wistful, like the sound of someone smiling through a dream.

Then the wind rose around them, catching her pale blue hair and sending it dancing in the sunlight like strands of silk. The dragon stared, transfixed. In that moment, as the wind whispered through the clearing and the sun kissed her hair, it found her beautiful.

A soft sigh escaped its throat—unbidden, involuntary.

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A week passed, and the woman returned every day.

She carried water, occasionally grinding nourishing herbs into thick, bitter pastes that promoted healing. She never lingered longer than was necessary and said very little, but she always showed up.

The dragon—wounded, humbled, and still too weak to fly—watched her come and go without a word.

Fetching water took time, but it was a simple enough task. The same could be said for the herbs: laborious, yes, but all it required was searching.

Food was another matter entirely.

From what the dragon could gather, the woman's circumstances couldn't be called comfortable. Her clothes were always clean but plainly mended. Her hands were calloused from work. And what she offered for sustenance was always the same: a tiny piece of dried meat, barely enough to qualify as a meal. It was really more of a token, given not out of abundance but from what little she had.

Still, it was enough.

Living creatures could survive without food for a week or more, especially when bedridden. Humans, for instance, often lost their appetite when gravely ill. This wasn't some flaw in nature; it was a protective response. Digesting food consumed tremendous energy, and when the body was under duress, it instinctively diverted that energy toward healing instead.

In that sense, the woman's modest offerings of water, herbs, and the occasional bite were, ironically, *exactly* what the dragon needed. Not too much. Not too little. Just right.

Days came and went. As always, the woman arrived at the base of the great tree, balancing a bucket of fresh water in her arms.

Today, she stopped mid-step.

The clearing was empty.

The massive form that had lain there for the past week was gone.

Instead, standing beside the tree was a young man—tall, lean, and striking. He had fine features, almost delicate in their sharpness, with long golden hair and a graceful bearing that gave him an air of quiet nobility.

"Excuse me," the woman said hesitantly, still gripping the bucket. "May I ask you something?"

The man turned toward her, offering a faint smile. “Of course.”

“There was… a large Earth Dragon here, badly injured. Do you know what happened to it?”

The man gave a soft chuckle, a glimmer of amusement in his golden eyes.

“That would be me,” he said. “I *am* the Earth Dragon.”

“Huh?”

He gestured lightly to himself. “The *Human Form Technique*,” he explained. “A little trick of our kind.”

Understanding dawned in her eyes. She nodded, slightly flustered but not shocked. Stories of dragons taking human form were common in myths and folktales, and it seemed she was familiar with at least some of them.

“I see… That makes sense.” She paused, then looked him over with concern. “What about your injuries? Are you all right?”

“I’m not back to full strength,” he admitted, “but I can walk now. I believe it’s time I returned to the Dragons’ Domain.”

At those words, the dragon bowed deeply.

“Thank you,” he said, his tone solemn. “You saved my life. Once I’ve fully recovered, I’ll return here. I owe you a great debt, and I intend to repay it.”

The woman shook her head gently.

“You’re not fully recovered, are you?” she said. “You may be able to walk now, but your wounds haven’t healed. These aren’t scratches you can just ignore.”

“No, I suppose they’re not,” the dragon admitted, his voice quiet.

The woman smiled.

“Then it’s settled,” she said with a warm glint in her eye. “I live alone—no one to object, no one to inconvenience. You’ll stay at my house, just for a while, until you’re truly well.”

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The village sat atop a hill blanketed in grass, surrounded by trees and overlooking a shimmering lakeshore. About thirty homes dotted the area, each one large and well-built. They were more like spacious countryside villas than modest rural dwellings. In modern Japanese terms, they'd be five-bedroom, two-story homes with private gardens. Every house was spaced generously apart, each set within its own quiet pocket of green, giving the whole settlement the feel of a secluded resort town.

In the garden of one such house, a man and woman sat side by side, sharing a quiet moment of tea. The man was striking—tall, elegant, with flowing golden hair and aristocratic features. The woman had long, aquamarine hair that caught the light with every breeze, and her right arm remained wrapped in bandages. Whether the cause was injury or something else, it was unclear, but she carried it as if it didn't trouble her.

Between them, the scent of herbs drifted gently from the teacups. It was a peaceful afternoon, steeped in stillness.

Then came the sound—*thud*—of a heavy sack being dropped at the front door.

Both the dragonkin man and the human woman rose from their chairs and walked to the entrance.

"What's this sack?" the man asked, eyeing the bundle warily.

The woman lifted it easily, brushing some dust off the fabric.

"A month's worth of supplies," she said. "The village sends them out regularly."

"Supplies?" he repeated.

"Yes," she replied with a faint, wry smile. "Rations. For those who live a little off the map, like me."

The dragon's eyes turned toward the edge of the path, where a man stood in silence—a strange, unsettling figure.

He wore a mask that concealed his entire face down to the shoulders, and his body was wrapped in layer upon layer of clothing, leaving not a single inch of skin exposed to the air. This was one of

the village's delivery men, individuals responsible for supplying the residents with daily necessities. They were essential to the survival of this place, but they kept to themselves, avoiding contact with others as much as possible.

The dragon's gaze lingered on the man for a moment before he turned to the woman.

"This place…" he said slowly. "It looks very much like an isolated sanatorium."

The woman nodded without hesitation.

"Yes. That's exactly what it is. In my case, it's the coughing. It won't stop."

"Tuberculosis, then," he replied quietly.

A long-feared, contagious illness, once considered incurable. A disease of the lungs, often requiring long-term care in clean, remote environments like this highland region. It made sense now why the houses were spaced so far apart, why there was so little movement, and why even the deliveryman took such drastic measures to avoid exposure.

The dragon's eyes returned to the sack at their feet. Something about it seemed odd. He glanced back at the woman.

"May I open it?"

"Of course."

He undid the twine securing the mouth of the sack and peered inside. His brow furrowed almost immediately.

"This looks more like subsistence-level rations. Barely enough for one person to survive, let alone recover. But isn't this a sanatorium for the wealthy?"

The woman gave a quiet nod.

"Yes. You're correct. Only those of noble or wealthy background can be admitted to a place like this. But… my husband passed away two years ago. He was from a respected aristocratic family, and through those connections, I was granted a sort of pardon and allowed to stay here despite my current means."

"I see… 'Was' noble?" the man prompted gently.

Her expression dimmed slightly.

"Our entire family fell from grace. A political collapse. My husband's house—his entire bloodline—was wiped from the nobility. To make matters worse, our investments failed at the same time, leaving us buried in debt."

The dragon was silent for a long moment, processing her words. Then he gave a slow nod, his expression difficult to read.

"I understand."

A heavy silence settled between them once more, the kind born not from awkwardness, but from the weight of things too painful for easy words.

Then, after a while, the man spoke, his voice low, "You mentioned your husband passed away… Did you have any children?"

The woman nodded slowly, her voice barely above a whisper. "An infant daughter. She was still just a baby… But when the debt collectors came, they took everything. When they tore the house apart and hauled off the furniture… they must have taken her too, in the chaos. I believe… she was sold. Most likely into slavery."

The man lifted his gaze to the sky, his jaw set and a quiet ache flickering behind his golden eyes.

"I searched," she continued. "I searched everywhere I could. For years. But I never found her. And in the end, it took its toll on my body and mind. That's how I ended up like this."

"I see…" the man murmured.

The woman's lashes lowered as she stared down at her hands.

"All I've ever wanted is for her to be happy. That's all. But now, even my body won't listen to me."

She smiled faintly. It was a fragile thing, like something that might vanish in a breeze. A smile carrying shadows of sorrow too deep to voice.

"That's why I need to get better. So that I can keep hoping."

They fell into silence again, lost in thought. A minute passed, maybe two. Neither moved nor spoke.

Then, quietly, the man nodded. As if some decision had solidified within him.

"I think I understand the shape of things now," he said, his voice gentler than before. Then he smiled—a rare, bright thing. "Give me two or three days. I will return."

That night, without a word, without leaving so much as a trace, the dragonkin man vanished from the sanatorium.

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Three mornings later, just after sunrise, a knock echoed softly at the door of the woman's home.

Knock, knock.

She opened it. And standing there, just as he had promised, was the dragonkin man.

He smiled gently and reached into his cloak, drawing out a small, round pill encased in a shimmering shell. He extended it toward the woman with quiet reverence.

"What is this?" she asked, blinking.

"A secret remedy of the dragon race," he said. "It's called a Noble Elixir. Technically, I'm not allowed to bring it outside the village, but it's known to be effective against even tuberculosis."

The woman stared at him, her mouth slightly open in disbelief.

"What?"

He chuckled softly, then reached out and gently brushed a hand over her head, his touch light and comforting.

"When your health returns, come with me," he said.

"With you?" she echoed, voice trembling.

"You said you have no home to return to, even if you recover."

"That's true."

"Then, let's find your daughter together. And after that… even if it's impossible for you to live in the dragon village, we'll find another place. Somewhere we can stay together."

Only then did she seem to fully comprehend what was happening: this man, who wasn't even human, had offered her a future she hadn't dared to imagine.

She shook her head softly, a wistful smile forming on her lips once more.

"A Noble Elixir," she murmured. "I've heard of it… Supposed to work even on tuberculosis."

"It is," he replied. "It's a high-level confidential medicine. Getting it out was… not easy."

"You've gone to too much trouble on my behalf," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Too much trouble?" he repeated, puzzled.

"This… won't cure me."

The words landed heavily. His expression faltered.

"What do you mean?"

Without answering immediately, she began to slowly unwrap the bandage around her right arm. The linen strips fell away with soft, rustling sounds. And as they did, a fine white powder drifted to the floor like snow.

When the cloth finally dropped, the surface of her right hand was revealed.

It was entirely coated in crystalline white nodules.

"This is… salt crystallization?" he murmured, his voice quiet.

She nodded.

"Yes. The salt has spread over the surface, but more than that… it's advanced internally. Part of my right lung has already begun to calcify. I don't have long."

The room fell silent again. Not the fragile silence of awkwardness this time, but a stillness so deep it felt sacred. A shared moment where words no longer knew what to do.

A long, deep sigh escaped the dragon's lips—heavy, weary, and filled with quiet frustration. He turned to the woman, his voice tinged with helplessness.

"Why? Why did you lie to me?"

She didn’t flinch. Her reply came calmly, with the same distant grace she always carried.

“Because I knew you would leave soon. And if that were the case…”

“If that were the case?” he prompted, gently but firmly.

“Then what good would it do to burden you with a truth that can’t be changed?” she said. “Telling you I had an incurable illness—what would it accomplish? Why cast a needless shadow over your heart?”

For a moment, he said nothing.

Then, softly, almost with admiration, he murmured, “You’re kind. Too kind.”

Even as he said it, he shook his head, slowly, as if dismissing his ability to help.

“There’s nothing I can do for you. Not even the Dragons’ Domain has any technique that can interfere with the progression of your condition.”

“Please,” she said, still wearing that wistful smile. “You don’t need to concern yourself with me.”

The dragon turned his gaze to the horizon, letting silence rest between them once more. When he spoke again, his voice was low, but serious.

“That day… You told me you wanted your daughter to live a happy life. That she was all that mattered. Was that true?”

Her smile faded. A complex look passed over her face—half pain, half hope—and then, slowly, she nodded.

He saw that nod. And in response, he gave one of his own, firm and resolute.

“Then, I understand.”

He returned the elixir to the folds of his cloak, turned, and took a single step away.

“I won’t come back here,” he said, not looking back. “Not because I’ve given up, but because I don’t have the time to waste. I

have a duty now… to find your daughter. To protect her. To make sure she lives."

The woman's breath caught. She stood frozen, stunned by the sudden declaration.

"But you can't. I can't let you go to such lengths for me—"

Her protest was cut off.

"Be silent," he snapped, not cruelly but with unmistakable force. "A dragon… a proud dragon… does not lie. *Cannot* lie."

His tone softened again, quiet and unwavering.

"When I said I accepted this task, I meant it. I will take full responsibility for your daughter. That is my vow." The dragon stood silently for a moment longer before asking, "What is your daughter's name?"

The woman raised her head, her voice trembling as she answered.

"Lilith. Her name is Lilith. Please… take care of her."

He gave a single, solemn nod.

"Understood."

Then, without another word, he turned his back to her and raised a hand in farewell.

"Live peacefully," he said, his voice firm and gentle as it carried through the quiet air. "Take your time, and when the moment comes… go without regret."

He didn't look back. Just walked.

It was only after ten minutes of steady pacing that he stopped again—beneath the great tree where, not so long ago, he had once lain dying. There, he drew in a deep breath… and released the spell.

Draconic Reversion.

His body shifted, swelled, transformed. Muscles elongated, golden scales rippled across his form, and vast wings unfurled from his back. The earth itself trembled as the true form of the Earth Dragon emerged once more.

He turned his gaze skyward, then spoke.

"*Clairvoyance*, activate." His voice was low, edged with urgency. "Even slavers wouldn't harm an infant that young… at least, not immediately. But I don't have time to be optimistic. If I can retrieve her unharmed, all the better, but I have to move fast."

With a beat of his mighty wings, he surged upward. The wind howled as his colossal frame cut through the air, rising swiftly, effortlessly.

Without hesitation, the golden Earth Dragon soared east, his massive silhouette vanishing into the sky.

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Twelve years passed, and in time, the dragon fulfilled his destiny. He lived with honor and died as dragons do, returning his spirit to the earth, his task complete.

Let that child live a happy life.

That single wish—so small, so human—had shaped everything.

In the end, to honor that mother's dying wish, the golden Divine Dragon bestowed his blessing upon a boy.

As for his soul… It found its way to the daughter he had once vowed to save.

It now lives on, quietly, within Lilith.

Chapter 4: Finally, I've Become Unstoppably Strong!

—

The Evil Dragon Subjugation Arc

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"
Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Chapter 4: Finally, I've Become Unstoppably Strong! — The Evil Dragon Subjugation Arc

There's no such thing as a prince on a white horse.

I don't know exactly when I realized that. Maybe it was the day of the Divine Prophecy, when we were both six years old. I remember looking at him—at Ryuto—and confessing, in a small, uncertain voice: "They say I'm going to be a Hero. That I have to fight to protect everyone. What should I do?"

He answered without missing a beat.

"You're the Hero, right? Then fight to protect everyone. That's what a Hero does."

He said it like it was the simplest truth in the world.

I was scared. I told him as much. I was afraid of devils and evil dragons, of the Demon Lord and the Demon God. All of them were enemies of the Hero. How could I possibly face them?

He just looked me in the eyes and said, "Then I'll help you. No matter what happens, no matter where you are, no matter what you're up against, I'll show up when you need me and knock the enemy flat. So don't worry. Just fight like the Hero you are. I'll be there to help, always."

Even as a child, I remember how deeply those words touched me. Ryuto always seemed older than the rest of us, more composed somehow. Back then, he was like the older brother I never had, taking care of me when I scraped my knee, finding me when I got lost. He felt like something out of a storybook.

Maybe that's why, for a long time, I saw him as my very own fairy tale prince, my white knight who would always show up just in time.

As I grew older—maybe around the time I turned ten—I began to understand something.

That kind of prince doesn't exist.

No one was going to magically appear at the last moment and save me every time I'm in danger. That just wasn't how the world worked. Ryuto was a Villager. I was a Hero. It was such a basic truth, but it took me a long time to grasp what it meant.

Our growth rates were different. Our classes gave us different skills, and so different futures. At some point, without realizing it, we had started walking completely different paths. And there was no going back.

I was okay with that.

If Ryuto were just a Villager, then I would be the Hero. He once acted like the big brother, saying he'd always protect me, but I then decided that I'd be the one to protect *him*.

Let him live a peaceful life, tending the fields. Let him have his family, and I'd have mine. Let the old folks we loved from the village gather around and all share a barbecue with the game I hunted. We'd laugh, eat together, and enjoy the evening air.

That was enough. That was my dream. My job was to protect those smiles, to make sure peace stayed in reach for all of us.

As a Hero, my mission had just grown a little bigger in scale, that's all.

Three years ago, something unbelievable happened.

Ryuto, who'd never been anything but a "Villager," stood alone against a horde of hundreds of goblins… and displayed power that surpassed even a Hero's. It was absurd. He fought like a force of nature.

Though to be fair, at the time, his strength was still more or less on par with mine. He was completely worn out afterward. He couldn't exactly live up to his childhood promise of always showing up and smashing every danger with ease. Not yet, anyway.

Still, I was floored—not because he failed, but because he'd come so *far*. That a mere Villager could fight like that, dragging

himself up through nothing but effort and stubbornness… it shocked me.

What I'm trying to say is this:

No, there's no prince on a white horse who'll swoop in and solve everything for me. That's a fantasy. But there is someone who'll fight beside me no matter how bad things get. A comrade I can trust. A battle partner who won't flinch.

And really, isn't that even better?

The moment I finished telling that story, laughter broke out around the campfire.

It was nighttime. We were in a forest clearing, in the middle of a celebratory feast.

"'Comrade?' You're bringing *that* story up again, Cordelia? At twelve years old, before your growth rate had even kicked in, there's no way a Villager could've matched you."

The Knight Commander took a long sip of wine as he scoffed at me. I shot back with a glare.

"I'm telling you, I really *was* saved that day. I owe my life to him," I said, biting off the words.

"Sure, sure," he replied with a smirk. "And then what? Your little prince got whisked away by a dragon on some grand adventure? Come on. What kind of fairy tale are you trying to sell us?"

That set the whole group roaring again. The firelight flickered across their grinning faces, cheeks flushed with drink and laughter. Everyone was in high spirits and more than a little tipsy.

"I'm not making it up…"

"Oh, come on, Cordelia," the Knight Commander pressed, clearly not done. His grin widened, and I could hear the teasing edge sharp in his tone. "Four hundred goblins, was it? Veteran adventurers like me could handle that before breakfast. I've taken down fifteen hundred, easy. And you? You could probably wipe out ten thousand by yourself now, couldn't you?"

"Well… yeah, maybe," I admitted, frowning.

"So, let's say he *was* a monster of a twelve-year-old. Even so, how far could a Villager grow? I'll tell you right now, his growth rate couldn't hold a candle to yours. That's just facts."

"Okay, fine, maybe that's true…" I muttered.

"And this whole 'battle partner' talk? Sounds like a bit of a stretch to me. I mean, seriously. That kind of burden would crush any normal person. Sounds more like wishful thinking… or a tall tale you've spun one too many times."

My cheeks puffed out in frustration, a soft *guuuh* escaping between my lips—a characteristic sound my old self might have made.

Honestly, if someone else had told me the same story, I probably wouldn't have believed them either.

According to the official records kept by the Allied Nations—my official growth log and performance evaluation—the "goblin incident" had been chalked up to a temporary loss of memory caused by a surge of runaway magic.

They concluded that *I* had defeated the goblins on my own, and that a boy named Ryuto had perished during the attack, his death triggering my breakdown and subsequent magical instability.

That's how the story's been written down in the annals of history. And yeah… I'll admit, my version does sound outrageous. Too outrageous.

To top it all off, there was even a dragon involved—that alone made the whole story sound like pure fantasy.

I get it. I really do. It does sound impossible.

Even I'd questioned it, more than once.

Maybe the clerks and officials sent from the Allied Nations were right. Maybe it *was* all just a hallucination. Some dream conjured up by my mind in a moment of collapse.

If Ryuto had truly died there in that battle, I don't think my twelve-year-old self could have survived it—not emotionally, not mentally. And if he died because I couldn't protect him… that's a truth my heart would never have been able to carry.

The trauma would've shattered me. My brain would have snapped under the weight of that grief, and I'd have spiraled into a state of irreversible mental collapse.

So maybe, just maybe… in a desperate bid for survival, my mind had fabricated this story.

A delusion. A comforting lie. A vision of Ryuto still alive, whisked away by a dragon, stronger than ever, promising we'd meet again someday.

I puffed out my cheeks again and let the sarcasm fly.

"Yes, yes, I get it already. The whole thing was probably just a nice little memory disorder, right? Fine. Whatever."

Then I tipped back the bottle of red wine and drank straight from the neck.

Across from me, the bearded Vice-Captain of the Knights chuckled. "Oh-ho! Look at Cordelia! Didn't know you were that kind of drinker!"

The Knight Commander gave an approving nod, raising his cup with a grin.

"Well, whatever the truth may be, we're only able to throw a feast here in the depths of the Great Forest thanks to you. As long as we've got Cordelia, no beast in this region is a threat to us."

Everyone laughed and toasted. Spirits were high.

In that moment, just for a second, something shifted in my mind. A faint ripple of unease. An itch I couldn't place.

This expedition wasn't about the forest. Our real target was *beyond* it—the massive Sand Worm lurking in the desert.

The job came with an enormous bounty, courtesy of a wealthy merchant caravan. The creature was powerful, and defeating it would probably net me at least a few more levels. With my current level in the 80s, that was no small thing.

Even as I sipped my wine and enjoyed the firelight with my comrades, something tugged at the edge of my thoughts.

This forest indeed felt safe, and yes, we'd earned this moment to relax.

Something about this mission… something about this place…

It didn't sit right.

There shouldn't have been any need for me to lift a finger. Against ordinary monsters, the knights could overwhelm them in an instant. That was exactly why we'd let our guard down, indulging in a victory feast on the eve of battle. And yet, beneath the warmth of firelight and laughter, a cold tendril of dread began to crawl through my chest.

I'd only had a glass and a half of wine—nothing out of the ordinary for a relaxed dinner. Nowhere near enough to dull my edge. But I suddenly shot to my feet, discarding what was left in my cup and grabbing my canteen. I drank—once, twice, three times—gulping mouthfuls of water in rapid succession.

This wasn't about clearing my head. It was about survival.

"What's wrong, Cordelia?" someone asked behind me.

Sweat rolled down my back, cold and sharp. This feeling… I hadn't felt anything like it in the last three years, since the day a goblin horde descended on my village.

"I'm fine," I said quickly. "Just got a little dizzy, that's all."

That was a lie. The dizziness was already gone, and honestly, I was never really drunk. I'd been playing along, pretending to be tipsy for the sake of the mood. But in truth, every life around this fire was my responsibility.

Technically, the Knight Commander was my second-in-command. In name, the knights liked to treat me like a child, but when it came to actual combat, they knew better. They were professionals, every one of them. They were aware of the importance of power and the chain of command.

I had power.

I'd been trained for this. Raised for this. I had the authority—and more importantly, the strength—to make people listen. I wasn't just some figurehead.

At my current level, I was considered equivalent to a lower-tier B-rank adventurer. Normally, that kind of strength wasn't achieved

until level 100 and beyond, but I was a Hero. My growth rate was exponentially higher. My strength had already reached the level where I was classified as a living weapon. Against untrained conscripts, I could probably take on a thousand by myself.

Maybe that was why—when I tensed, when my eyes sharpened—everyone else followed without question.

One after another, the knights sobered up. They poured out their wine, picked up their weapons, and began scanning the perimeter.

This was no ordinary squad. This was a unit once commanded by a legendary warrior: the man they used to call the Orc Killer. They knew how to snap into readiness at the first sign of real danger.

Right now, something *was* coming. I could feel it.

Though it had seemed like a rowdy celebration, in truth, everyone had kept their drinking to a minimum. The knights may have been laughing moments ago, but their instincts hadn't dulled.

"My lady?" the Knight Commander said, and in that moment, his tone shifted. No longer the teasing familiarity of a trusted subordinate, he now addressed me as a superior officer. As the Hero. He trusted my sixth sense more than anything else on the battlefield.

"We may need to abandon the Sand Worm mission," I said quietly, eyes scanning the shadows beyond the firelight. "I've got a *very* bad feeling about this. Something's wrong. Very wrong."

He didn't question me. Just nodded, grim-faced, and raised his hand to rally the others.

"At this moment, I am canceling the Sand Worm subjugation mission. All units, prepare for immediate retreat—"

His words cut off. Literally.

The upper and lower halves of his jaw were cleanly separated.

In clinical terms, his head had been severed.

I didn't even *see* the attack.

It had to have been a vacuum slash. The kind of strike that even I, a Hero with heightened senses and reflexes, couldn't track.

That alone was horrifying.

The real problem wasn't just his death. It was what it revealed to everyone else.

They'd all sensed something was wrong from my sudden change in demeanor. They'd trusted my instincts. But now, watching their commanding officer fall in an instant, and realizing that even *I* hadn't reacted in time?

That was pure terror.

Next came the voice.

"Aha ha! Aha ha! AHA HA! Hey, hey, big sister? And all you big brothers, too? What's wrong? What's the matter, huh? What's the matter?"

She stood there, suddenly and impossibly, ten meters in front of me.

A girl. A *child*.

Golden ringlets, wide smile twisted into a manic curve, and a black-and-purple Gothic Lolita dress so pristine it made her presence even more surreal. She couldn't have been more than ten; younger than me by several years.

The moment I laid eyes on her, I knew. This was *it*. The creature from the legends. The walking calamity.

"Who are you?" I asked, steeling my voice, though my throat had gone dry.

"Aha ha?! AHA HA HA! Hey, hey, you're the Hero, right? You're the Hero, right, big sis? But you're still growing, still weak, aren't you? And look at this puny little knight squad you brought with you… Hey, can I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

"Do you wanna die? Are you stupid? Do you wanna die that badly?"

The smile that followed wasn't childish at all.

It was something far, far older. Something monstrous. And something that had already decided we wouldn't be leaving this forest alive.

"I'll ask one more time… Who the hell are you?"

The girl in the frilled Gothic Lolita dress lifted the edges of her skirt with both hands and tilted her head in a gesture of feigned curiosity, her golden ringlets bouncing with the motion.

"Amanta the Evil Dragon," she said sweetly. "A somewhat well-known legendary monster, wouldn't you say?"

"I *know* that already!"

Amanta—this deceptively young-looking creature—had devoured countless Heroes before they'd ever reached maturity. She was a scourge of prodigies, a nightmare embedded in legend.

Even if she'd just killed the Knight Commander in a blink, we still had a chance. If everyone here coordinated properly, if we committed everything we had to it, we *could* bring her down. It would cost far too many lives, but it could be done.

Clenching my jaw and suppressing the tremor of dread in my spine, I reached for the longsword at my hip.

"All right, everyone! We surround her, hit her with everything we've—"

My voice never made it through.

It didn't reach *anyone*.

Sweat beaded down my back as I reached for the longsword at my waist.

"Everyone! Surround her! Now, together—"

My words never reached them. No one responded.

"Hmm? Hey, hey, big sister?" the girl chimed in again, her sing-song tone bordering on mockery. "Are you stupid or something?"

"What?"

"Why do you think I killed your knight commander first and not *you*, the strongest one here? Hmm? Hmm?"

"What are you getting at?"

"How many of these muscle-brained knights actually *trust* you, outsider?" she said, her voice dripping with saccharine malice. "Think about it. They just saw the one person they truly relied on—their commander—slaughtered in a blink. And then they look at you,

the "Hero," and they see that you didn't even flinch in time. So, what do you think *they're* going to do now? Hmmm?"

Dread settled deep in my gut. I turned slowly, afraid of what I already knew I'd see.

The knights, more than a hundred strong, had completely unraveled.

Some were fleeing with their weapons still clutched tight. Others had dropped them entirely and run in full panic. Over ninety percent had gone, consumed by terror and disbelief.

Only three remained behind me, still holding their swords, still standing with me against Amanta.

I heard her laughing.

A low, giddy giggle, like a child delighting in a cruel prank.

"*Charm*." The moment the words left Amanta's lips, the last three knights—my final line of defense—turned their blades toward me. "Rape and kill."

Without hesitation, they charged. The knights' pants bulged beneath their belts, their bodies responding to the dark magic that had taken hold of them.

I was left speechless. This was the worst-case scenario. As expected of the Evil Dragon, this was truly the most despicable kind of enemy imaginable.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry," I whispered, more to the fallen than to myself, as I raised the holy sword and struck three times. Each swing sliced the air with a sharp whistle, followed by three dull, crushing thuds. And just like that, three bodies lay motionless on the ground. My eyes locked onto Amanta with seething hatred, but my voice turned outward, desperate. I shouted at the others as they began to flee, their panic overtaking all reason.

"Stop! Everyone, please calm down! If we fight together, we can still win!"

No one listened. My plea was swallowed by chaos.

Amanta's mocking laughter rang out behind me, light and cruel.

“Hee hee… Hey, big sister. How does it feel? To be abandoned, ignored by your precious knights—how does *that* feel?” She wasn’t done. With theatrical glee, she added, “Can’t even keep a bunch of loser knights in line. What kind of Hero are you*?* That’s seriously hilarious!”

Without pause, Amanta swung her arms again and again in manic rhythm. Each motion summoned blades of wind, scything gusts that cut indiscriminately. The bodies of my comrades fell one after another, littering the field. It wasn’t even a fight anymore. They were running, their backs exposed, making them easy targets. Striking down a fleeing enemy—this wasn’t combat. It was execution.

Before long, silence fell. No breathing, no voices. Only Amanta and I remained among the dead.

“Hey, big sister, looks like you’re all alone now. So… What’ll you do? What will you *do*?” Her taunt was sing-song, almost childlike in its sadism.

I raised my sword, voice steady despite the despair. “If you’re going to kill me, then do it. I know I’ll lose. But I *will* take one of your arms with me.”

Amanta laughed, sharp and high. “You don’t even get *that* choice anymore, big sister.”

Still grinning, she swept her golden ringlets over her shoulder and raised one delicate finger. With a playful lilt, she sang out, “Readyyy?”

A sphere of magical energy, about twenty centimeters wide, began to glow at her fingertip.

She launched it at me.

“Hmph!” I grunted, slashing with the holy sword in a single, precise motion. The orb of magical energy split cleanly in two.

“Oh? Then how about *this* one? Readyyy?” Amanta sang, her tone playfully mocking.

“Hmph!” I cut down the next orb—larger now, about fifty centimeters across.

“Readyyy?”

“Hmph!”

One meter—cleaved in a flash.

“Readyyy?”

“Hmph!”

Two meters—still within my strength.

“Readyyy?”

“Hmph!”

Three meters. I cut it down, but a chill of dread ran down my spine.

I can’t cut anything bigger than that.

“Ohhh? What’s wrong, big sister?” Amanta teased, smiling as she extended her finger once more. “Readyyy?”

This time, the orb that formed at her fingertip was massive—five meters across—and it shot toward me with terrifying speed.

I twisted my body at the last second and barely dodged. The glowing sphere shot past, hurtling behind me. For a moment, I thought I was safe.

I was wrong.

The orb curved in midair and came back, tracking me. It was homing in on its target.

I twisted again to avoid it, but I wasn’t fast enough. The sphere clipped my right arm.

A searing jolt of pain shot through me. I felt something crack—probably the bone in my elbow. My grip failed, and the longsword slipped from my fingers, falling to the ground with a heavy clatter.

“Hee hee! Hee hee hee hee! Hee hee hee hee hee! Hey, hey, are you gonna die? Are you? Hero? Is the Hero really gonna die?!”

Amanta howled with laughter, her voice rising in unhinged delight. Once again, she extended her right index finger, gleefully poised to fire. That’s when my breath caught in my throat.

“A ten-meter magic orb… What kind of sick joke is this?”

There was no time to think, only to dodge. I moved instinctively, but just as I did, something burst from the ground beneath my feet

—soft, writhing arms shooting upward and clutching at my legs. I was trapped.

The massive orb grazed my left arm as I tried to escape. If it had hit me head-on, I might've been killed outright. No—with that kind of timing, she could have easily landed a direct hit.

Which meant…

"She missed on purpose?"

Amanta gave a smug nod as she looked down at my immobilized hands, utterly satisfied.

"Of course I did. You know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I *love* watching noble heroes and wise sages get gang-raped by filthy orcs… It's my absolute favorite thing!"

With a snap of her fingers, the ground rumbled. One by one, they emerged—orcs. Roughly humanoid pig-like creatures, clothed in rags, carrying crude weapons, and grunting with anticipation.

They kept crawling up from below, as if they'd been tunneling underground all this time. Dozens, then hundreds, gathered behind Amanta.

I froze in horror. Every last one of them had their groins fully erect, panting through flared nostrils. Drool dripped audibly into the dirt in thick strands. The air stank—hot, wet, and feral. Their eyes roamed over me, licking me with their gazes.

"A… ah…"

My arms were useless, crippled by injury. I could barely move. I lashed out with the only weapon I had left, slamming my foot into the neck of the nearest orc.

"B-BUHYAH!" he squealed.

A shriek rang out as my kick connected with a sickening *thud* against the orc's neck. I felt the impact vibrate up through the top of my foot. I'd crushed its medulla; this one was finished. It wouldn't be getting up again.

I ground my teeth in frustration.

Yes, orcs were weak. Individually, they posed little threat. But with Amanta—that embodiment of pure violence—backing them, the outcome from here on out was obvious. It was only a matter of time.

My knees buckled, and I nearly collapsed, but I forced myself to stay upright. Glaring at Amanta, I spat the words through clenched teeth.

"Even so, I am a Hero. I will never yield to evil."

Amanta let out a delighted giggle, absolutely reveling in my resistance.

"Hee hee… Hey, big sister? Even if they fill your womb with their seed, will you still be able to say that? You know, even humans can give birth to orc babiesss!"

Her words sent a jolt of revulsion down my spine. The orcs advanced. I caught a glimpse of their grotesque, engorged forms and felt a wave of physiological disgust flood my brain like poison.

Simply put, my spirit cracked.

What I saw was monstrously inhuman—well over fifty centimeters, grotesquely swollen and twitching with anticipation. I turned my face away from the filth and forced the words out through trembling lips.

"Stop."

"Hm? What was that? What was that, big sister?" Amanta cooed.

"Just… stop…"

"Hmm? Why? Why should I?" she asked, tilting her head with mock innocence.

"Because… I have someone I love. So please… Anything but the orcs… Not the orcs… please…"

Amanta beamed, her expression filled with perverse joy, as if my plea were the sweetest music. She raised her index finger again, summoning yet another orb of magic. This one spanned nearly twenty meters in diameter.

"Hee hee! Hee hee hee! Hey, big sister—"

"Will you stop?!"

"Nope," Amanta said sweetly. "If both your legs were still working, you'd probably kick these orcs to death, wouldn't you? So, I'll just have to disable one of them for good. I mean, an orc raping a woman who has someone she loves? That sounds like *so* much fun!"

With that, she once again raised her index finger, and at its tip, another massive orb of magical energy began to form.

A radius of twenty meters… I thought grimly. *That's way beyond what I can handle.*

With that thought, I shifted the pill hidden beneath my tongue and placed it gently on my tongue's surface. Then, sticking my tongue out, I showed it to Amanta with a quiet defiance.

"A capsule of monkshood and mandragora. Doesn't dissolve in saliva, but stomach acid will do the trick."

In this line of work, you prepared for moments like these. If I were going to die, I would die untouched, with my dignity intact.

"You're gonna die? Are you honestly going to kill yourself, big sister?" Amanta asked, almost giddy with anticipation.

"Well, I do have my pride," I replied calmly.

"Kya ha ha! Kya ha ha ha! Hey, hey, big sister, do you mean it? You're *really* going to die?"

"I'm fine with that," I said without hesitation.

Amanta puffed out her cheeks in a theatrical pout, clearly disappointed.

"You're no fun! I had this whole orc gangbang show planned out, and so much more…"

At her fingertip, the orb of magic swelled even larger—twenty meters became twenty-five, then thirty. She raised it high toward the sky, the sheer scale of it defying reason. I was left speechless before the overwhelming force gathering above me.

"Well then," she said, her voice suddenly cold, "if you're going to ruin the fun by offing yourself, how about *I* kill you instead? That'd be more entertaining, right?"

The crushing weight of that colossal magic sphere bore down on me, suffocating in its intensity. *So, this is it*, I thought. My end. Images of my life flashed behind my eyes like a silent reel of memories.

With everything I had left… I turned my back on her.

And ran.

It was a pathetic sight. Ungainly. Nothing heroic about it.

In that moment, there was only one condition for victory: survival.

Clinging to even the slimmest possibility, I ran with everything I had. Heart pounding, breath ragged, I threw my broken body forward in a desperate bid to live. But the magic sphere was faster. Even at a full sprint, it steadily closed the distance.

I glanced back.

Behind me loomed a sphere of magical energy over thirty meters in radius—an impossible mass of power. Not even the archmages of the imperial capital could create something like this without extensive preparations and the backing of a full-scale ritual. But this creature could, and *that* was precisely why it remained immortalized in legend.

It was only natural.

"So, this is where it ends," I whispered, a bitter calm settling over me. "Sorry, Ryuto…"

At the very least, I had protected my pride. I had protected my chastity. I grinned through the tears.

Serves you right, you filthy orcs—there's no virgin here for you to defile.

I looked over my shoulder again. The sphere was just three meters behind me. Any second now, it would swallow me whole. I would die.

"Goodbye… Goodbye, Ryuto."

Just as the sphere was about to consume me, I heard a familiar voice… yet deeper, more mature than I remembered. A whole octave lower, in fact. His voice had changed over the last three years.

"Don't you dare say goodbye like that without asking me first."

A figure stepped between me and the massive sphere.

Without even drawing the greatsword strapped to his back, the man exhaled through his nose with a short huff, then planted his feet and drove his fist upward in a hook-like uppercut, straight into the core of the thirty-meter orb.

With a *whomp*, the air cracked.

Just like that, Amanta's monstrous spell—the same one that had slaughtered countless heroes before me—disintegrated. It vanished, like mist under sunlight.

I couldn't believe it. A human had just erased Amanta's magic—by hand.

More than that… what was *he* doing here?

"Ryuto?"

He turned toward me, meeting my eyes. Then, without a word, he walked forward.

Gently, he placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Hero? Your shoulders are trembling," Ryuto said, his voice low and steady. "That's not like you. But, hey… Leave the rest to me."

"Eh?"

"We made a promise, didn't we? No matter what happens, no matter where you are, no matter what we're up against… I'll always show up when you're in trouble, and I'll knock the hell out of whatever's in our way."

With a light *thunk*, he rapped his knuckles gently on my head, then stepped forward without another word.

I couldn't comprehend what was happening. None of it made sense.

A Villager—a *Villager*—had just deflected a magic orb strong enough to kill a Hero instantly… with his *fist*. That wasn't just unbelievable; it was absurd. Impossible.

Still, Ryuto had said it plainly: *Leave the rest to me.*

The truth was that Ryuto had never once lied to me—not since we were children.

That's why I crumpled to the ground, my legs giving out beneath me. The tension that had been coiled tight inside me finally snapped. I couldn't explain it, but the moment Ryuto arrived… my heart was convinced that everything would be okay. It wasn't logic; it was instinct. Maybe it was something imprinted in me from childhood.

I was the Hero now, and he was just a Villager. Our status, our strength—those should be worlds apart. And yet… the feeling of security I got from his back hadn't changed one bit.

That back—Ryuto's back—was something I could always rely on.

Why? I didn't know. But somehow, impossibly… I couldn't imagine him losing.

Until just a moment ago, I believed there was no such thing as a prince on a white horse. I thought those stories were lies. That no one would come charging in to save me, no matter how desperate the danger.

The instant Ryuto appeared, I knew I'd been wrong.

No… I *understood* it, deep in my soul.

There really is someone who will come for me in my darkest hour, who will stand before me and protect me without hesitation. A real prince on a white horse.

That person is Ryuto Maclaine, my childhood friend.

※※※

All right… I thought to myself.

It had been three years since the goblin attack on our village. A lot had happened since then. Yeah—a lot. From dragon zombies to… well, all kinds of things.

I'd lost count of how many times I nearly died.

That's exactly why I'd become so strong.

Now, here I stood.

Behind me, a trembling Hero. In front of me, the Evil Dragon.

A villain and one to protect. The situation couldn't be clearer.

"Hey, who *are* you?" Amanta chirped, her tone half-curious, half-insane. "You just deflected my magic—*my* magic! Who are you, huh? Some A-rank adventurer sent from another kingdom? Really, who are you? Or, wait—don't tell me… *you're* actually the Hero? Is that it? Are you the real Hero?"

"An A-rank adventurer, huh? That's… really low-balling it," I said flatly. "You want to know what I am?"

I raised my hand.

With a perfectly unapologetic middle finger, I gave her my answer:

"I'm the strongest damn Villager in the world."



A moment later, Amanta's claws shot out from both hands—razor-sharp, extending with a sudden *shlick*. Just like a cat that hides its claws until the moment it strikes, this was her signal: she was shifting into full combat mode.

I couldn't help but let out a dry chuckle as I watched droplets of violet liquid begin to fall from those claws.

"So that's how it is," I said. "The big bad Evil Dragon is just a wicked little snake."

The droplets hit the ground with faint *plops*, and everything within several meters of each impact withered and rotted. Amanta giggled in delight, visibly thrilled by the destruction.

"Hee hee hee… Hey, big brother? Big brooo? You know, pretty roses always come with thorns."

"You call yourself a rose?" I scoffed. "You're more like a carnivorous plant, snatching up anything that gets too close. Definitely not something I want to touch if I can help it."

Truth be told, her appearance was that of a girl around ten years old, dressed in full Gothic Lolita attire. If we were in modern-day Japan, just laying a hand on her would've had the cops hauling me away on sight.

Amanta tittered again, glancing past me toward Cordelia, who was still behind me, collapsed and stunned. The girl's smile turned practically radiant.

"Hey, hey, big brotherrr? Big brotherrr?"

"What?"

"You know big sister? You know her?"

"What about her?"

"She said she's in *love*! Did you know that? Hey, hey, big brother? Big brooo?"

"What?"

"Could it be? Maybeee? The one she's in love with is big bro—"

I didn't let her finish.

Acceleration—no hesitation.

Sure, she looked like a little girl, but that was only on the surface. In truth, she was a classic loli-baba—a centuries-old monster in a child's form.

Honestly, she was starting to piss me off.

I reached for the greatsword strapped to my back, drew it in a single motion, and brought it down in a clean, overhead arc aimed straight at Amanta's skull.

"Hee hee hee! Ehee hee hee hee!"

Amanta laughed joyously, dancing through the air as she nimbly evaded my sword strike.

"Hey, hey, big brother? Big brooo? Where'd you get that sword, huh? Where'd you get it?"

She moved like a bratty little girl with no respect for personal space, and even less for combat etiquette.

She led with a low kick. I stepped back, dodging it just in time, but she closed the gap instantly, matching my distance without missing a beat.

Next came a high kick aimed at my head—or so it seemed. Mid-strike, she shifted her weight and redirected the blow low, right into my midsection.

A feint, then a Brazilian kick.

This little monster wasn't half bad.

"Guh!"

The kick landed square in my ribs. My organs jolted from the impact—not enough to kill, but way more than a slap on the wrist.

【*Skill: Indomitable activated.*】

Thanks to that, I didn't fall. I managed to stay on my feet and countered with a horizontal slash.

Unfortunately, Amanta saw it coming. Graceful as a dancer, she slipped out of the way with maddening ease. Her smirk deepened with smug confidence.

“Hey, hey, big brother? That sword you’ve got… it’s gotta be, like, *really* rare, right? Super strong, yeah? The kind of sword only a seasoned Hero would carry, don’t you think? Don’t you thinkkk?”

She dodged my blade with effortless elegance, like she was playing rather than fighting.

“But you know, you know?” she said, tilting her head coyly. “That sword… it doesn’t suit you, does it? Doesn’t really *fit*, does ittt?”

Her laughter echoed through the forest—mocking, musical, and merciless.

Then Cordelia’s voice rang out from behind me, steady and clear. She’d raised her sword and stepped forward.

“Ryuto. You’ve definitely gotten stronger—scary strong. I can see that. You’re strong enough to fight alongside me now, no doubt about it.”

“Well, hey, I appreciate that,” I said, cracking a half-grin.

“I respect you,” Cordelia said softly. “Because you’re a fully fledged hero, grown and honed. You’re on the same level as me now. But still… how the hell did a simple Villager train up *this* far? Honestly, Ryuto, you never cease to amaze me.”

With a purposeful stride, she walked toward my back, her presence steady.

“Okay, Ryuto, let’s do this together. With the strength we have now, even if our opponent is a full-blown calamity… we *can* handle it. I mean, to be fair, I kind of thought maybe you’d finish this on your own. But come on, this thing *is* in the calamity-class. It’d be reckless even for you—”

I sighed and shrugged, as if to say, *Give me a break*.

“You and me, taking on the Evil Dragon together? Why?”

Cordelia blinked.

“Uh… because I *watched* your last fight? And honestly, Ryuto, even you can’t pull this off alone. You need backup.”

“I see,” I said with a dry chuckle. “Cordelia?”

“Yeah?”

I paused for a beat, then dropped it on her.

"I wasn't using *Physical Enhancement* during that fight."

"Wait… What?"

Cordelia froze in place.

"I said, I didn't use *Physical Enhancement*."

She stood there, slack-jawed, her thoughts refusing to compute.

"What does that even *mean*?"

"*Physical Enhancement* is the most basic and most potent of all stat-boosting skills, right?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, it's *essential* for melee fighters. Not using it is like a mage not casting spells. It's *that* fundamental."

"Exactly. And when you activate it, all your combat stats double, right?"

Cordelia's face twitched with irritation as confusion and disbelief collided.

"Okay, seriously, what the hell are you saying? What does that *mean*?"

"Well, I *do* use plenty of other enhancement skills," I admitted casually. "But as part of my training, I've made it a point *not* to use the basic ones. In this case, that means… no *Physical Enhancement*."

Cordelia's expression paled by the second. Honestly, I couldn't blame her. Even *I* knew how absurd what I was saying sounded.

"You… You're *seriously* saying that?" she asked, her voice tight.

"Yeah," I nodded. "If I actually go all out… I'll be twice as powerful as this."

Right then, timing as terrible as ever, Amanta dashed toward me, grinning ear to ear like a child who had just discovered a prime opportunity for some mischief.

"Big brother? Big brooo? Didn't anyone ever teach you not to look away during a fight? Didn't they? Didn't they?"

【*Skill: Physical Enhancement activated.*】

All my physical stats—Attack, Defense, and Evasion—doubled in an instant. The world slowed around me like someone had dragged time itself through molasses. And the attack I launched was… a simple backfist.

With a crack, two of Amanta's front teeth shattered instantly. She didn't even have time to react. Her body flew backward like a ragdoll, the sheer force of the blow blasting her through the air.

She crashed into a massive tree deep in the forest—and kept going. She bulldozed through over a dozen thick trunks, leaving a trail of shattered wood and splintered bark before finally skidding to a halt nearly twenty meters away.

Stunned, Amanta reached up and touched her mouth, as if still trying to process what had happened. She looked down at her blood-covered hand—blood that was gushing freely from her mouth—and froze.

Ten seconds passed.

Then twenty.

Then thirty.

Name: Ryuto Maclaine
Race: Human
Class: Villager
Age: 12 → 15
Level: 100 → 341
HP: 4,352 *4,352 → 11,150* 11,150
MP: 17,890 *17,890 → 25,680* 25,680
Attack: 1,031 → 3,560
Defense: 998 → 3,540
Magic: 3,408 → 6,823
Evasion: 1,162 → 3,982

Enhancement Skills

【*Physical Enhancement: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Temporarily doubles Attack, Defense, and Evasion when activated.*

【*Divine Dragon's Blessing: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds ×1.5 multiplier to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Steel Body Technique: Level 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +150 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Kimon Technique: Level 6 → 10 (MAX)*】
Effect: *Adds +500 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion while active.*

【*Advent of the Dragon God: Level 0 → 5*】
Effect: *Adds +1,000 to Attack, Defense, and Evasion.*

【*Sennin Combat Aura: Level 0 → 3*】
Effect: *Adds ×1.5 multiplier to Attack, Defense, and Evasion.*

Offensive Skills

【*Godslayer: Lv. 0 → 3*】
Effect: *Enables damage to divine beings.*

Defensive Skills

【*Iron Stomach: Level 2*】
【*Mental Resistance: Level 2*】
【*Indomitable Will: Level 10 (MAX)*】

General Skills

【*Crop Cultivation: Level 15 (Limit Break: Gift from the Goddess)*】
【*Swordsmanship: Level 4 → 10 (MAX)*】
【*Martial Arts: Level 8 → 10 (MAX)*】
【*Clear Mirror Stance: Level 0 → 10 (MAX)*】
【*Dragon Vein Manipulation: Level 0 → 10 (MAX)*】

Magic Skills

【*Mana Control: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Life Magic: Level 10 (MAX)*】
【*Basic Offensive Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Basic Healing Magic: Level 1 (Growth Cap)*】
【*Immortal Arts: Level 0 → 5*】

Class Trait Skill

【*Villager's Wrath*】
Effect: *Consumes all MP to deliver a high-damage physical attack that scales with MP and Magic.*

Equipment

【*Excalibur*】
+1,200 Attack, +300 Evasion, Godslayer attribute ×3

【*Ring of the Dragon King*】
+300 Attack, +300 Defense, +300 Evasion

【*Garments of the Condemned*】
+100 Defense, +800 Evasion

At last, still frozen and barely comprehending, Amanta muttered, "*Huh?* Blood? Is this blood? Am I bleeding? Hey, hey… This *is* blood, right? It's blood, isn't it? What's going on? What *is* this?"

"What's going on," I replied coolly, "is that you got your front teeth smashed in and went flying without even reacting to my backfist. That's it. It just means your power didn't measure up, simple as that."

"Huh? *Me*? A Calamity? The embodiment of power itself? One of the mightiest among the dragonkin—an elite among elites—and you're telling me *my* power didn't measure up? Hey, hey, big brother? Are your brains leaking out of your ears or what? Huh? Huhhh?"

Amanta stood trembling, her shoulders quaking with barely contained rage. Her voice was shrill, cracking under disbelief. Cordelia, meanwhile, stood dumbstruck—unable to say a word, her mouth slightly agape.

I turned back to the so-called Evil Dragon with a sigh, utterly composed.

"So then… What now, oh 'supreme among the dragonkin,' mighty Evil Dragon?"

If she had to *claim* she was the strongest of her race, that already told me everything. Her strength wasn't absolute. She wasn't

even the peak among dragons.

In other words… she didn't hold a candle to *him*. My friend. That ridiculous host-samurai dragon king.

"*Hee hee heee.* Hey, big bro? So, your stats are a liiittle higher than average, huh? But guess what? I can do *this* too."

She let out a sultry laugh as her body began to glow with a pale, bluish aura—ethereal, divine.

"Ta-daaa! Ehe heh! This is something no human can do, y'know? This little trick is called *Divine Dragon's Blessing*! It's a dragonkin-only skill that boosts all your stats by *1.5 times*! Cool, huh? Cool, righttt?"

Cordelia's face paled. She muttered, barely audible.

"I've heard of that… *Divine Dragon's Blessing*… multiplies all stats by 1.5…"

Cordelia drew a sharp breath, then shouted at the top of her lungs.

"Then their stats must be equal again now! Ryuto and the Evil Dragon are back on even ground! Which means… *I'm joining in too!* I know, I know, I might be useless at this level of combat. I might just slow you down, but… I *won't* let you face a calamity-class monster all alone!"

I raised a hand to stop her, calm as ever.

"I told you, didn't I? I haven't even used my *basic* enhancement skills yet."

With those words, I activated the skill. In an instant, that same pale, blue-white aura—like divine frost—wrapped around my body.

【*Skill: Divine Dragon's Blessing activated.*】

A technique that multiplies physical stats by 1.5. A skill said to belong only to the dragonkin.

"There. Now I'm boosted by 1.5 times as well. So… looks like we're even now, Evil Dragon."

Amanta stared, her mouth flapping open and closed like a stunned goldfish.

Then, suddenly, she let out a high-pitched screech, twitching like a broken wind-up doll.

"W-W-What?! Why?! Why, why, *why*?! How?! What?! Why?!"

"Hmm… If I remember right," I said thoughtfully, "*Divine Dragon's Blessing* is supposed to be a skill granted only to dragonkin, isn't it?"

"Y-Y-Yeah! That's right! So then *why*?! Why do *you* have that skill?!"

I held up my right hand, showing her my middle finger—more specifically, the ring on it.

A single, ornate band glinted in the light: the Ring of the Dragon King.

"That ring! T-T-That's the Dragon King's… W-Wait, you're human, right? *Right?!*"

"I am," I nodded.

"Then, why do you—how do you—why are *you* wearing the Dragon King's ring?!"

"Last year, I entered a tournament in the Dragons' Domain," I said casually. "Ended up winning the whole thing. And, well… long story short, I got offered the title of next Dragon King—the thirty-eighth one."

It was a wild, no-holds-barred festival brawl, one where even the Dragon King himself could be punched square in the jaw. An all-out fistfight tournament held once a year with no formalities, no status, and no mercy.

That was one year ago.

That festival had originally been meant as my initiation into the Dragons' Domain—a final test to prove myself. I never expected to win. Honestly, I went in fully prepared to lose to the Dragon King.

At least, back then, I had no chance. Now's a different story, but a year ago? No way. He was out of my league. Seriously, that

slicked-back host wannabe of a Dragon King is way tougher than he looks.

Anyway, even though they went and unofficially declared me the next Dragon King, I have every intention of turning that offer down. That job's way too much of a pain in the ass.

Amanta's body shook in tiny tremors as she slowly crumpled to the ground, collapsing where she stood.

"Impossible… It's *impossible*… That can't be real. That's *not* real."

Honestly, I couldn't blame her. If our roles were reversed, I'd think the same thing. But she was dragonkin—she *should* have been able to recognize the ring as genuine.

Her mind must've been completely short-circuiting by now. Everything about this situation was absurd. Every part of it defied logic.

"Well, you can say it's impossible all you want," I said with a shrug. "But it's happening. So… tough luck."

Amanta kept shaking her head, still refusing to accept what she was seeing.

"No… no, no, no! I *refuse* to believe it! There's just *no way*! I can't believe this!"

"That's fine," I said casually. "You don't *have* to believe it—"

Suddenly, she sprang to her feet and clapped her hands together with a sharp *smack*.

"Then, let's *see*! Big brother, can you use *that*? I think you're lying! That ring—you probably just *stole* it or something! But *that* skill can only be used by someone truly worthy of the Dragon King's title!"

Amanta beamed, smug and triumphant, convinced she had me cornered. She didn't want to believe I'd obtained the Dragon King's ring through any legitimate means.

I blinked.

"That?" I asked. After thinking about it for a moment, I nodded. "Ah… *That*. Yeah, of course I can use it."

Dropping into a grounded stance, I focused my energy, and a faint crimson aura began to wrap around my body like heat rising off sun-scorched earth.

At the same moment, Amanta crumpled weakly to the ground, her legs giving out beneath her.

Well, of course she did. The technique I'd just activated was—

"*Advent of the Dragon God* grants +1000 to base Attack, Defense, and Evasion. It's a living invocation of the Dragon God into one's own body—a skill permitted only to the Dragon King. Not gonna lie, the MP cost is brutal."

Even the current Dragon King only uses it when absolutely necessary. The fuel efficiency is atrocious.

But in my case… well, my MP is a little out of the ordinary.

I glanced over my shoulder, curious how Cordelia was reacting. As expected, she looked totally lost. Her expression was one of pure confusion, with her jaw hanging open and her eyes blank.

Our eyes met.

"I'm sorry," she said at last, dazed. "I seriously don't get it. I take my eyes off you for *what*, a little while? And now you've powered up so hard, so *ridiculously*, that a Hero can't even keep up? Like, what even is this? I don't get it at all."

Yeah. I remember thinking the exact same thing about you in my second life. Your stat growth didn't know the meaning of "moderation." I honestly couldn't wrap my head around it. So really, I guess we're even now.

I smiled quietly, and Cordelia let out a long, weary sigh.

Then, with a small, embarrassed smile, she said, "Well… not like I can do anything about it now. You definitely worked hard, Ryuto. I mean it. You *really* did. So…"

"So?" I asked.

"So, let's finish off this Evil Dragon already, and then go home. Back to the village. Auntie's worried sick, you know? Uncle too—he won't say it out loud, but he's been worried ever since. You just… disappeared on us, Ryuto."

"Disappeared? Come on. Do you *really* not get why I'm doing all this?"

I drew in a breath as something in me faltered for a moment—because Cordelia was on the verge of crying. Her eyes shimmered, the corners wet with unshed tears, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

"I understand," she said. "No, understanding isn't enough. What you've done, it's beyond effort. I don't know exactly what path you took to become this strong… but I know it wasn't something just anyone could do easily."

She paused, then continued with quiet emotion, "I don't know what you were thinking, or how hard you pushed yourself—or rather,

I can't even imagine it. But that promise… 'I'll come when you're in trouble, and I'll always beat the enemy down.' You held onto it all this time. You never let it go."

A single tear slipped down her cheek and traced the curve of her face.

"Thank you, Ryuto. Thank you for coming. Thank you… truly."

At that moment, everything I'd gone through flashed through my mind in vivid clarity—like a reel of memories playing in fast-forward. In my second life, I had been powerless. That helplessness cut deep, and it was the first time I truly wished to become stronger. Then came this third life, in which I suffered the excruciating pain of mana starvation since I was a baby, pushing my body far beyond its capabilities. I had spent nearly every waking hour in this life chasing strength with ruthless efficiency, sacrificing everything else to reach it.

From the first goblin encounter to the dragon zombie, I had survived trial after trial, walked through the fire of life-threatening battles, and come out the other side. I had nearly died more times than I could count.

For what?

For this. For *her*.

To protect Cordelia's smile.

With just that one word of thanks, all of it had become worth it. Every injury. Every sleepless night. Every sacrifice.

I gave a simple, firm nod, then turned my gaze back toward Amanta. Fixing my eyes on the self-proclaimed Evil Dragon, I squared my stance and spoke with finality.

"Which means… all that's left now is to beat the hell out of you and wrap this up."

Before I even finished speaking, Amanta lunged at me. There was no wind-up, no warning.

Her first strike came fast, a sudden blow thrown with the intent to catch me off guard. I tilted my torso just slightly and let it sail past me.

That was only the beginning. From there, her attacks came in a flurry—blow after blow, relentless, unending. Poisonous fluid flew from her clawed fingertips as she launched a full-fledged assault, moving with the grace of a gothic ballerina. Her movements were fluid and refined, resembling a choreographed performance at a dark masquerade.

Despite all that finesse, every strike missed. Just like a dancer's arms cutting through the air, her attacks never landed.

I let out a sigh.

"You're putting me to sleep here."

My response came as I spoke—a tight, clean body blow straight to her solar plexus.

My fist sank in with unmistakable impact, and in that moment, her performance ended.

Amanta was launched backward in a sickening spiral, vomiting up a spray of bile mixed with stomach acid. Gone was any trace of grace or poise. She crashed into a tree, slammed hard, and then slid down it, crumpling to the forest floor.

Face down, shaking, she let out a hoarse, feral cry.

"Ghh… *Gueeeeehhh*!"

Then, she vomited again.

Just as she did, I stepped in and drove my foot straight into her head—a textbook soccer kick.

Her body rocketed across the ground and slammed into yet another tree. She bounced off it like a rag doll and collapsed again, this time landing on her knees, trembling violently.

Still coughing, she began retching again, this time spewing up bile streaked with blood. Tears and snot streamed down her face as her breath hitched and choked.

I looked down at her, wincing a little despite myself.

Ugh… No matter how much of a monstrous, centuries-old loli she is, there's something not so great about beating the crap out of someone who looks like a ten-year-old girl with your bare hands.

Not so great at all for your mental health.

I reached behind my back and drew the greatsword.

"Let's wrap this up, shall we, Evil Dragon?"

Behind me, I heard Cordelia swallow hard.

"This isn't just overwhelming…" she murmured. "That's a calamity-class creature—one of the most dangerous threats recognized by the kingdom—and you're treating her like a misbehaving child. Ryuto… you've become something unreal."

I let out a wry chuckle.

"Come on. I'm just a humble Villager who can't even cast basic magic properly. Sure, my stats are a *little* weird, but that's about it."

That last line seemed to breathe new life into Amanta's nearly broken frame. She grinned, lifting her bloodied face with renewed malice.

"Can't use magic, huh? I'd heard the next Dragon King was supposed to be an all-rounder, someone who could do anything. But now I get it… You're just a dumb musclehead, aren't you?"

She pushed herself to her feet, blood trailing from her nose and mouth, her face covered in scratches and bruises. Still, her laughter rang out—manic, discordant, beautiful in the most unsettling way.

Then, she reached down and pinched the hem of her gothic lolita skirt with both hands, lifting it deliberately.

"The hell?"

Her pale skin was exposed. Thighs. Hips. A pair of violet panties.

Still holding up the skirt with one hand, she began to pull the panties aside with the other.

That's when I froze.

Beneath the fabric, where there should have been anatomy, there was something else entirely.

Her entire lower abdomen was covered in eyeballs. Hundreds of them. Each roughly the size of a coin, embedded just beneath her skin.

Hyakume—a yokai from Japanese folklore flashed through my mind. But this was worse. Much worse.

Each of those eyes turned toward me in unison, glowing faintly with a sickly purple light.

"Magic eyes! Are you *serious*?! And what kind of twisted taste do you have to hide them *there*?!"

"Hee hee hee? Hee hee hee? Surprised? Surprised? This is me going all-out, you know?" Amanta giggled, lifting her skirt higher, her tone dripping with manic pride. "No man can resist my *Charm* skill when it's combined with my magic eyes. *None*! Not a single one!"

Goddammit… I clutched my head, a cold sheen of sweat rising to my brow as I grimaced in agony.

"Huh? No resistance to magical effects at *all*?" she cooed sweetly. "Wait, wait, don't tell me… you don't even have a resistance item equipped?! You're just a big ol' musclehead with *no* status effect countermeasures?! *Idiot! Big idiot!!* Hee hee hee hee! Ehee hee hee hee hee!"

Her voice pitched higher, giddy and mocking.

"Hey, hey, big brother? What happened to all that bravado from earlier? Huh? Where'd it go? Where'd it gooo? Ehee hee! You know… even though I'm a close-combat fighter, my Magic stat… is over 1500. Pretty amazing, right?"

I dropped to the ground, curling in on myself, my gaze unfocused and hollow.

"This is a liiiittle tough for a brainless musclehead, huh? Just a *tad* too much? Looks like it's working, though, doesn't it? Doesn't it?! And *this*—these eyes, this power—is why people call me an anomaly! Not many know this, but when I use *Charm*, my Magic stat *triples*! Isn't that insane?! *It triples!*"

"Magic… amplification… skill?" I murmured. "That's… definitely rare…"

Normally, status effects like charm or petrification don't work well in fights between magic users. The reason's simple: to land a heavy status effect, there needs to be an overwhelming gap in magic power.

Unfortunately, melee fighters are easy targets. Without magical resistance or divine-class support, they're sitting ducks.

Even with resistance gear, if the caster's magic power far outweighs yours, you'll still get tagged more frequently. That is precisely why adventuring parties split roles and cover each other. Warriors, especially, rely on clerics for magical resistance buffs or status recovery. They can't go into battle without that kind of backup.

As I sat there, dazed, lost in those idle thoughts with my eyes unfocused, Amanta tilted her head, putting on a calm, elegant smile.

"In other words," she said sweetly, "my *Charm* skill is currently being pumped out at over 4500 Magic Power. That's a completely broken-level output! There's no way a melee class like *you* can resist it. Absolutely, totally, no wayyy."

I kneeled on one knee, head bowed—apparently broken.

Amanta, wearing that same twistedly elegant smile, looked down at me with triumph blazing in her eyes. Then, with a playful snap of her fingers, she spoke with an almost sultry glee.

"Now then, my strong big brother… become my servant, won't you? I'll take *very* good care of you… in so many ways! *Ehee hee hee hee! Hee hee hee hee hee!* Oh yes… I'll love you tenderly, and *torturously*, and *lewdly*, too! I'm *very* generous with my pets! You didn't realize I was a specialist in status ailments, did you? Silly, silly little man!"

No, I already knew.

I smirked. To be honest, I was getting tired of humoring this loli hag's little performance.

"Welp," I said, casually cracking my neck as I stood upright like nothing had happened. "Guess that's enough of this farce."

"Huh?" Amanta blinked, stunned.

"I just thought you deserved to dream a little," I said with a half-grin.

"W-Wait… What? But you were—just now—you were totally out of it…"

"Yeah… That was acting. Pure theatrics. I figured if I just crushed you start to finish, that'd be a bit anticlimactic."

"What?!"

"And also," I continued, my voice now turning cold, "you tried to hand that girl behind me over to a bunch of orcs. Remember that?"

Color began draining from Amanta's face. Her breath caught as realization crept in—slowly, terribly.

She stayed silent.

"So, I figured it'd be more satisfying to let you ride that high a little longer… right before I knock you down into the dirt."

"Wait… you mean—"

"My MP is over 25,000. My Magic, just shy of 7,000. With all my buffs and skills, there's not a single person alive who could land a status effect on me. And even if someone could, I'd have the means to counter it."

I shrugged.

"That's why I don't carry resistance gear. Don't need it."

Amanta collapsed to her knees, clutching her head in both hands.

"*H-Huh?* Magic power… seven thousand?" she mumbled, her voice cracking under the weight of disbelief.

Then her expression twisted, shock giving way to raw panic.

"Damn it! Damn it! *Why?!* Why does a monster like you exist among humans?! The current generation of Heroes is supposed to be *weak*! They're not supposed to be raised properly yet! So why? Why, why, why, why?! *How is this happening?*"

"Guess you're just unlucky," I said flatly. "Sucks to be you."

In a flash, Amanta leapt sideways—clearing seven meters in a single bound—and landed facing Cordelia.

Her wide, frenzied eyes locked onto her.

"But too bad, too baaaddd!" she cried, manic joy twisting her voice. "I *can't* charm you… but that *big sister* over there, hee hee… *She's* still fair game! I'm gonna die here, sure! But you know what?

I'm taking *her* down with me! I *will*! Just one hit is all I need! Just *one!*"

Her jaw split unnaturally wide, bones cracking and reshaping with grotesque sounds. Her face warped, becoming frog-like and monstrous—more beast than girl now.

She spewed a stream of thick, foul fluid, the color of dried blood and rot.

"Here it is, the Evil Dragon Amanta's final curse! Drink deep of my parting gift! It's a *special poison*!"

"A status ailment… Poison, huh?"

"It won't *kill* her! Nope! But it *will* melt skin! Oh yes! It'll scar that pretty face forever! She'll live, but her *beauty* will be gone! Gooooooone!"

I had to admit, as far as last-ditch spite attacks went, this was a damn ugly one.

I let out a sigh and rolled my shoulders.

"Lilith?"

A calm voice responded behind me.

"Understood."

Short, ice-blue hair that barely reached her shoulders. A pure white robe, pristine and flowing.

The girl who stepped forward—her tone listless, even bored—nodded without hesitation, as if all of this were routine.

Lilith stepped calmly between Cordelia and Amanta, raising her palm without a word.

In an instant, a radiant barrier formed—silver and gold interwoven, the colors of divinity and the Earth Dragon lineage. It shimmered with holy power, and as the putrid, bruise-colored liquid struck it, the poison began to dissolve, purified as if washed away from existence itself.

"What is that?" Cordelia asked, her voice tight with awe.

Lilith didn't turn around. Her reply came in that same soft, disinterested tone.

"Skill: *Divine Dragon's Guardian Spirit.* Within my absolute domain, all negative status effects are nullified."

The moment Lilith appeared, Amanta recoiled, clutching her head again as the reality set in.

"You're… completely negating my status effects? What? Complete… shutout?" Her voice wavered, the last word cracking. Then she turned her gaze back to me, trembling now not with fear, but with rage. "Hey, big brother… What the hell is this?!"

I met her glare without flinching.

"Survival of the fittest. That's all it ever was."

She tilted her head, as if unable to comprehend.

"I'm strong. You're weak. That's it. That's the whole story."

"Weak?" Her voice trembled. "*Me*, weak? I, *Amanta the Evil Dragon*, who transcended mortality to attain godhood in the living world?"

"Godhood, huh," I said flatly. "You tossed away your pride as a dragon, sold yourself to raw power, became a servant of a higher evil, and as a reward, got promoted to a bottom-tier demigod. You're not revered. Among the Dragonkin, you're considered a disgrace. They *loathe* you."

Amanta paused. Just for a moment, she seemed to accept something, something she couldn't deny. Then, like a puppet releasing its strings, she tilted her head back and let out a wild, high-pitched laugh, the madness returning to her eyes.

"I'll take that as a *compliment*, thank you very much! Hee hee hee hee!"

With a flourish, she pulled a small orb from within her gothic robes—a perfect sphere, gleaming faintly—and raised it high above her head.

Then she grinned, winked at us, and sang out, "Aaaand with that… *Bye-byeee!*"

The object in her hand—whatever it was—was already falling, descending toward the ground.

A high-grade smokescreen, no doubt. Something meant to make her escape.

The moment the orb hit the ground, it would erupt with a force that turned the entire world black. Not just darkness—*absolute* darkness. Even advanced detection skills would be rendered useless for a time due to the dense smokescreen and magical interference.

How did I know? Because I'd been hit with this exact kind of thing before—several times, in the Demon Realm.

Anyway, once that smokescreen activated, her odds of escaping would skyrocket. I clicked my tongue and muttered to myself, "In that case…"

I focused, channeling power into every fiber of my body.

Skills not even listed on my status sheet—forbidden ones. Secret ones. My trump cards.

I instantly activated all necessary enhancements and launched myself toward Amanta.

A sharp, dry *crack* like a gunshot rang out around me. It wasn't a weapon; it was the shockwave of a human body breaking the sound barrier.

The moment my body pierced the wall of sound, time seemed to freeze. And in the literal blink of an eye, I was standing right in front of Amanta, my hand firmly wrapped around the wrist that held the smoke orb.

Her eyes flew wide.

"Th-That speed… What was that just now? What kind of *trick* did you pull?"

"Trick?" I scoffed. "You're one to talk. You were about to vanish with a party trick of your own."

I pried her fingers open and snatched the orb from her grasp. I'd hand it off to Lilith later—it'd make for a good emergency defense tool in her hands.

Then I smirked and said, "You don't know when to quit, do you? Third-rate villains like you are supposed to exit the stage fast. That's just how the story goes."

Amanta finally seemed to understand. Shoulders drooping slightly, she gave a soft, almost resigned smile and shrugged.

"So… this is it for me, huh? It's really… over…"

Even as she said it, the smile on her lips didn't fade. It remained—bright, childish, and laced with something not quite human.

Amanta remained unnervingly composed, even in defeat, flashing a serene smile as if her fate barely mattered.

"Three hundred years from now, maybe?" she said airily. "You won't be around by then, will you, big brother? That's okay. When that time comes, if some weak little Hero is wandering around, I'll just play with *them*. That'll be fun, won't it?"

She said it like she was talking about a children's game.

It wasn't surprising. Most monsters classified as "calamity-class" were more than just powerful creatures; they were also vessels for demon gods or evil deities. This implied that destroying their physical forms wasn't the end. Given a few decades or centuries, they'd reincarnate, regaining their full power. Their souls were tied to higher divine frameworks, giving them a sense of pseudo-immortality. For them, death was just a nap. A reset. The idea of finality didn't exist.

Which is why Amanta could face the end smiling.

I smiled too—because unlike her, *I knew better*.

She still believed this would end like every other time. That she could die, wait out the years, and come back. But she didn't realize she'd already lost that luxury.

I reached over my shoulder and drew my greatsword. As I did, silver light surged across the blade—luminous, pure, and absolute. An aura of divine radiance enveloped the weapon.

Amanta froze. Her smug expression cracked, and in a blink, all the color drained from her face. No longer pale—her skin turned *ashen*, almost gray.

She knew. The second she felt that light, she *knew*.

I confirmed her fear with quiet, deliberate words.

“There won’t be a next time. This is Excalibur, the God-Slaying Relic.”

Her mouth opened in a series of stammered denials.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaat*?!* No… No, no… that can’t… That’s not real… That’s not the real one, is it?”

“You should know best,” I said, stepping forward, my voice as cold as the steel I carried. “If it’s real or not—your life’s the proof. You feel it, don’t you? That edge at your soul. That fear that won’t stop crawling up your spine.”

Her whole body trembled, and then it broke—her face twisted in full-blown terror.

“No… No… No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no —*NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”*

Her scream tore through the air like a dying wind, the shriek of a god who had finally realized what it meant to be *mortal*.

She ran.

Amanta turned on her heel and bolted, sprinting with everything she had. She knew it was futile; anyone could tell by the way her body moved, the sheer desperation in her steps. There was no way she could best me in terms of speed, power, or resolve. Nonetheless, she fled because she had no other option.

She couldn’t match me in physical combat.

Her status ailments didn’t work.

Even her immortality had been taken off the table.

In her position, I’d be crying too.

Unfortunately for her, I wasn’t about to let her go. I wasn’t that softhearted, and I sure as hell wasn’t that stupid.

“You’re finished right here! *Die already!*”

I leapt into the air, channeling every ounce of strength into my swing, and brought the greatsword crashing down toward the back of her fleeing form—aimed directly at her skull, a final stroke to end it all.



A sharp hiss cut through the air as my blade came down, and in a flash, Amanta's head and torso separated cleanly.

Two muted thuds followed—one for her body, one for her head—as they hit the ground moments apart.

Only then did I finally exhale, feeling the tension drain from my limbs.

I reached into my coat, pulled out a cloth, and began wiping the sword. It was unnecessary—Excalibur was a divine artifact resistant to rust, grime, and dulling—but old habits die hard. My first swordmaster, the former Knight Commander Bernard, had drilled those habits into me so thoroughly that I still did it out of habit.

Behind me, Cordelia spoke, her voice tight and wavering.

"Ryuto… What you just did wasn't just killing her. That wasn't sealing. That was… *erasure*, wasn't it?"

I turned toward her as she continued, her voice almost trembling.

"Killing a divine being's physical form usually only delays them; they return eventually. Sealing them traps the soul and isolates them from the world for centuries. But what you just did…" She swallowed. "You destroyed her soul, the core of her existence. That's something only a full-fledged Hero can accomplish with a divine weapon, and *only* under ideal circumstances. You… You did that at fifteen?"

"Yeah," I replied flatly. "I destroyed her soul entirely. She's not coming back. That wasn't just some monster; she was a minor evil god. Letting something like that live would've been stupid."

Cordelia stared at me for a long moment, then sighed deeply.

"Unbelievable… This whole situation is just unbelievable."

Then her eyes drifted toward Lilith. She looked her up and down, slowly, as if sizing her up. Then she turned back to me with a new kind of scrutiny.

"Hey, Ryuto… Can I ask something?"

At the same time, Lilith tilted her head and stepped forward.

"Ryuto… I have a question too."

They both fixed their gazes on me, expectant. I blinked, feeling a strange chill settle over me.

"What kind of question?"

Without hesitation, they asked at the same time:

"Who is *this* girl?"

"You never mentioned your childhood friend Hero was a *girl*."

Cordelia smiled sweetly while cracking her knuckles with slow, deliberate tension.

Lilith gave a pleasant smile of her own… while biting her thumbnail hard enough to spark audible clicks.

Both girls stood there smiling, with veins visibly twitching on their temples.

I, caught dead center between them, could do nothing but let out a weak, dry *gulp*.

Epilogue: The Strongest Villager in the World

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi, Illustration by Famy Siraso

Epilogue: The Strongest Villager in the World

A year had passed since that day.

In the end, he vanished soon afterward, as if fleeing from something—maybe even from me. He left with barely a word, only saying he had his own inexplicable reasons and that he still needed to grow stronger. "Stronger," as if single-handedly destroying a calamity-class god wasn't already beyond human. Honestly, I was too dumbfounded to even be angry.

Seriously, what does he think a girl's heart is made of?

When I see him again, the very moment *I see his face, he's getting a slap. A real one. Right across the cheek.*

No, actually… What am *I to him?*

It's obvious we care about each other. That much has always been clear. And I… I'm in love with him, there's no denying that. But how does he *see me? Does he even think about me that way at all?*

I sighed heavily. Whatever the answer is, it doesn't matter. Because the next time he shows up, he's getting more than a slap. He vanished for years, reappeared out of nowhere, and then disappeared again*—this time dragging another girl with him.*

Unforgivable. Absolutely, completely unforgivable. A slap or two won't even begin to cut it.

※※※

"Ryuto? Ryuto Maclaine, you mean?"

We were walking down the long corridor that connected the towers of Altena Magic Academy. The boy beside me was Moses, another childhood friend. A Sage, like me, with an exceptional job

aptitude. It had already been decided that the two of us would be teamed up for future calamity-level operations.

Me, Moses, and Ryuto.

The three of us used to be inseparable.

It really was too perfect a coincidence. Three monstrously gifted individuals, all born in the same backwater village? Statistically implausible. Ridiculous, even. But for now, I chose to set that thought aside.

"I know," I said. "I know it doesn't make sense. The capital's official investigation makes far more logical sense… but still…"

Just as Moses had said, the Amanta incident had ended with the complete annihilation of the Knights' Order.

I was the only survivor. Again. Just like with the goblin attack.

A royal investigative team had been dispatched afterward, of course, just as they had been the last time. And just like before, their conclusion was… sanitized. Politically safe. They claimed the destruction had been caused by a sudden surge in *my* power—a "Hero's spiritual overload."

"Yes, there were traces of the Evil Dragon Amanta's presence," the report had stated. "And while the battle damage suggests the possibility of godslaying, it is more consistent with a scenario where Hero Cordelia's spirit went out of control."

Twice now: once with goblins, and again with a godlike enemy. Twice, they'd called it a berserk episode. Twice I had been "the sole survivor," the only witness to events that defied belief.

Now, thanks to that, I carried a second title along with "Hero"—the shameful nickname whispered behind my back: *The Mad Princess Berserker*.

Sometimes, even I wondered… Maybe Ryuto hadn't been there at all. Maybe, just maybe… it *was* some hallucination, a fragment of a mind pushed to its limit.

But still—no. No, no, no. That couldn't be. It didn't *feel* like a hallucination. And yet, it made no sense either. Nothing made sense anymore.

As a dull headache began to throb at my temples, a roar of laughter and cheers floated up from below. I looked down over the edge of the corridor, out toward the Academy's training grounds. A group of students gathered and cast spells at distant targets.

"What are they doing down there?" I asked.

Moses adjusted his glasses with one finger before answering, as matter-of-fact as ever.

"Well, both of us are technically attached to the Knights' Order, yes? Starting next month, our studies here will be part of that training, officially. But for all intents and purposes, it's framed as a sort of special internship."

"Right, that makes sense," I nodded. "They're paying us a pretty generous stipend, and it's not like we're covering any tuition."

"Indeed. We're part of the scholarship class—students deemed exceptional enough to be educated at the state's expense, regardless of origin. It's a strategic investment. The country values training assets like us."

He paused for a moment, his gaze returning to the students below.

"But all that aside… at its core, this place is still a school."

"Meaning?" I asked, tilting my head.

"There are plenty of people who pay tuition to learn magic here," Moses explained.

"Ah, I see. So, what we're watching is likely the entrance exam for new students." I motioned toward the bench set along the corridor. "Moses? Let's sit for a bit."

With a puzzled look, he followed me and took a seat beside me. A warm spring breeze drifted through the corridor, carrying with it the distant voices and cheers of the students below.

Together, we watched as young mages—boys and girls around our age or younger—hurled spells at stationary targets on the training grounds. Most of them were using basic spells, first-tier incantations. The occasional cheer indicated that someone had

successfully cast a mid-tier spell, which was met with wide-eyed excitement.

From the perspective of Moses and I—people trained to slay calamities and fight gods—those spells were, frankly, clumsy. Sloppy, even.

But still… they were trying.

With bright eyes full of hope, ambition, fear, and determination, they poured everything they had into each cast. Their gazes were unclouded, unjaded, unbroken by the weight of what lay ahead. Pure, in a way, we no longer were.

I couldn't help but smile.

"What do you think when you see this?" I asked.

Moses hummed thoughtfully, studying the students for a moment before letting out a short laugh through his nose.

"They're hopeless," he said plainly. "Not even worth talking about. These are people without any special class aptitude. Unlike us, chosen from birth. No matter how hard they train, they'll be lucky to hit C-rank as adventurers."

"That's not what I meant," I said, frowning slightly. "They're giving it their all. Isn't that something worth recognizing?"

"Whether someone tries hard or not has nothing to do with results," Moses replied flatly. "Effort and ability are entirely unrelated."

"I'm just saying," I continued. "*We've* gotten pretty strong, haven't we?"

"Obviously."

"Well, seeing them makes me want to remember where I started. Keep that feeling alive. You know… work hard, stay grounded. Don't take it all for granted. Don't you feel the same?"

Moses tilted his head.

"Not really. I don't understand that kind of thinking. In the end, people without a special class are just fundamentally different from us. It wouldn't be wrong to say we're not even the same species. We're operating on an entirely separate tier of existence."

Yeah, Moses definitely wasn't the kind of guy I'd want watching my back in a real fight.

Sure, he was brilliant. No one could deny that. But he was also the type who'd follow cold logic first, even in a crisis. The kind of person who'd make calculated decisions when people's lives were at stake—risk assessments, trade-offs. Not necessarily wrong, just… not someone you can trust to put himself in danger for a comrade.

Still, that was a problem for another day.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Being born with a rare class is an overwhelming advantage. It can feel hopeless for people without it. But…"

"But?"

"Does it *really* decide everything? Is it truly impossible to overturn fate with nothing but will, intelligence, and relentless effort?"

Moses gave me a skeptical look and said, "You say the strangest things, Cordelia."

"Do I?" I leaned back slightly, still looking at the students below. "What about the emperor of Seize? He rules nearly forty percent of the continent, but if you trace his lineage back by twenty generations, you'll see he's descended from a slave swordsman. Sure, maybe he had the aptitude of a Sword Saint. But rising from slavery to rule? If fate were entirely determined at birth like you claim, that shouldn't be possible."

Moses sighed and shrugged as if to say, "*You can't argue with idealists*." Clearly, he thought the conversation was going nowhere.

I turned my gaze back toward the training field, watching the new students once more.

And then…

I froze.

My eyes locked on one particular figure.

Just like that, I couldn't breathe.

My mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again, like a fish gasping for air.

Moses must've noticed something was off. He leaned forward slightly, frowning.

"Cordelia? Is something wrong?"

"I-I-I-I…"

"What?"

"He's there."

"'He?' *Who's* there?"

I shot to my feet. The next thing I knew, I was sprinting down the corridor, headed straight for the field, heart hammering in my chest.

Without even turning around, I shouted back over my shoulder:

"He's there! Ryuto Maclaine! He's right there with them!"

Afterword

"I'm Just a Villager, So What?"

Story by Arata Shiraisgi. Illustration by Famy Siraso

Afterword

Nice to meet you. My name is Arata Shiraishi.

To be blunt, this story began as a web novel. And to my great surprise—and even greater gratitude—it's been incredibly well received. I owe a huge thanks to all the readers who supported it online.

For those familiar with the platform, this series was originally published on *Let's Become a Novelist (Shousetsuka ni Narou)*. Within six months of its release, it had surpassed 25 million views and earned 100,000 points. It even placed first in the quarterly rankings. To be honest, the overwhelming response has taken even me, the author, by surprise.

In terms of genre, it's your classic "reincarnated in another world" fantasy, with an overpowered protagonist at the center. In short, a Japanese man dies in an accident and is reborn in a fantasy realm. And since we're talking about an "overpowered" protagonist—well, he's *strong*. Ridiculously strong. Sure, he's technically just a Villager, but he's the strongest one there is.

Heroes? Demon Lords? He flicks them away like dust.

No contest. Absolute power.

Evil arises? It gets a swift, satisfying *slash*.

That's the kind of story this is.

Of course, the internet is flooded with stories like this these days. Being overpowered alone isn't enough to make a series stand out anymore. But if you've made it to this afterword, you've probably already noticed—there are deliberate setups woven in from the very beginning, even in the prologue.

I know some of you may be the kind of readers who flip to the afterword first to get a sense of the story. If that's you, and you're

reading this now, then you probably have the chance to sample the book. In that case, I really hope you'll give the prologue a shot. Just the first chapter.

There's more here than just another power fantasy. Maybe it'll surprise you.

Lastly, I'd like to take a moment here to offer my heartfelt thanks.

To Siraso Famy, the illustrator: Thank you for the incredible character designs and an absolutely stunning cover. You brought the world and its people to life more beautifully than I could have imagined.

To my editor, Mr. O: Thank you for your endless patience in the face of all my unreasonable requests. I've lost count of how many times you saved this project from chaos.

To the tens of thousands of readers who supported this series from across the web: Thanks to all of you, this story was able to make the leap from online to print. I truly, deeply appreciate it. Thank you so much.

And finally, a bit of news.

Even before Volume 1 sales began, the KADOKAWA team—or, more specifically, the folks at *Fujimi Shobo's* magazine, *Monthly Dragon Age*—had already greenlit a manga adaptation.

Yes, it's officially in progress!

To everyone who's supported this story, in any way:

Thank you. From the bottom of my heart.

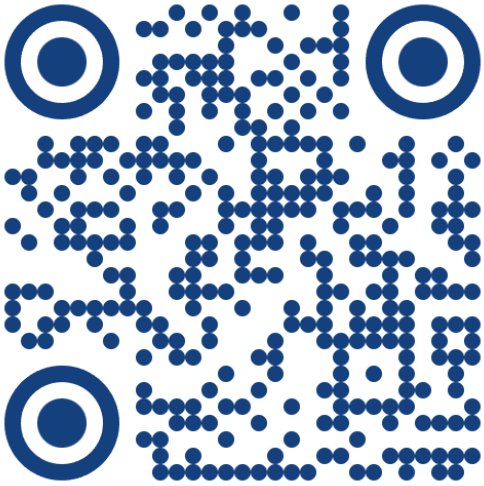
Thank you all

Thank you for reaching the end of **I’m Just a Villager, So What? Volume 1!** We hope you've enjoyed Makoto’s continued adventures in this magical world. Your support means the world to us!

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