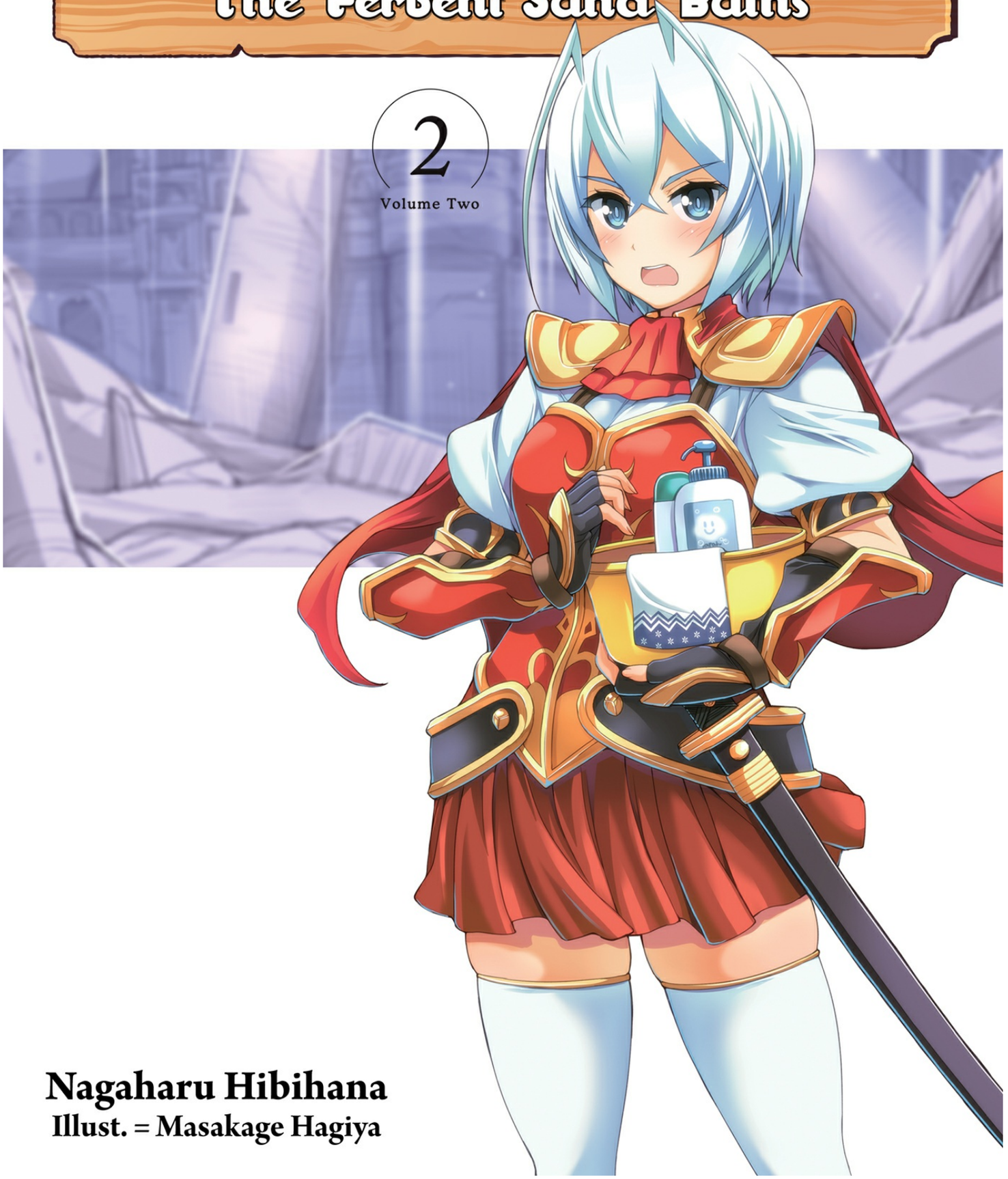
Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension

The Fervent Sand Baths

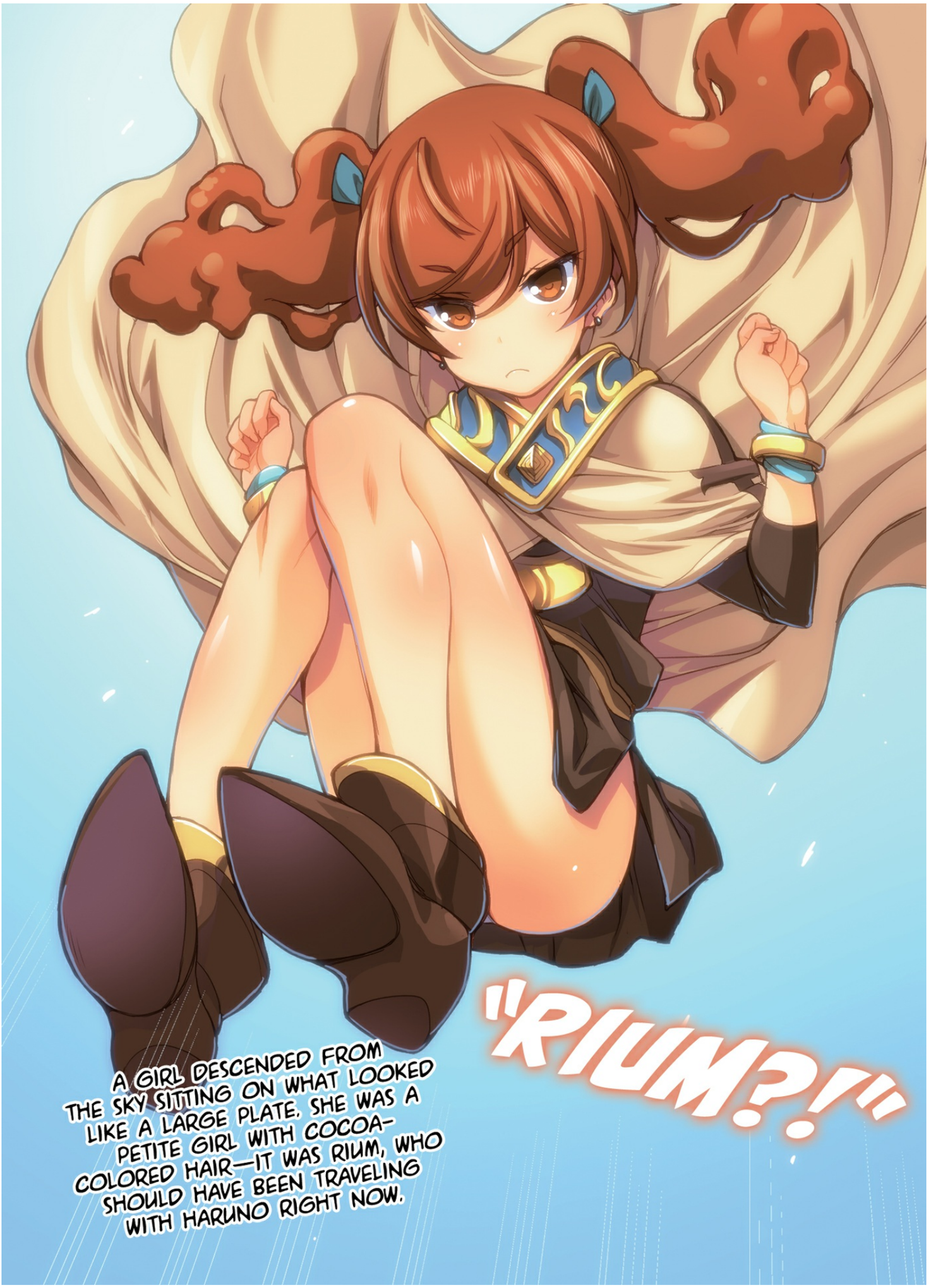
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Volume Two



Nagaharu Hibihana

Illust. = Masakage Hagiya


A GIRL DESCENDED FROM THE SKY SITTING ON WHAT LOOKED LIKE A LARGE PLATE. SHE WAS A PETITE GIRL WITH COCOA-COLORED HAIR—IT WAS RIUM, WHO SHOULD HAVE BEEN TRAVELING WITH HARUNO RIGHT NOW.
"RIUM?!"


THE PSEUDO-GOLDFISH MADE ITS WAY TO US, POPPED ITS FACE OUT OF THE WATER, AND...
"WHAT'S THE MATTER, YOUNG'NS? AIN'TCHA GON' DRINK THE WATER?"
...STARTED TALKING TO US IN HUMAN LANGUAGE.


"BUBBLES, BUBBLES~"



A HERO SUMMONED FROM ANOTHER WORLD LIKE TOUYA. CURRENTLY TRAVELING SEPARATELY.



A HERO WITH A GIFT CALLED THE UNLIMITED BATH. GETS FIRED UP AT THE THOUGHT OF MIXED BATHING.



A GIRL TOUYA MET DURING HIS JOURNEY. ON A QUEST TO FIND THE DESERT KINGDOM.



A SAND LIZARDMAN WHOSE HOMELAND TOUYA SAVED. A LOYAL COHORT.



HARUNO'S PARTY MEMBER.
A CRYSTAL MAGE.



CLENA'S ATTENDANT.
A LYCAON, A WOLF
DEMI-HUMAN.

WHAT'S HAPPENED SO FAR

TOUYA HOUJOU IS SUMMONED TO A PARALLEL WORLD TO DEFEAT THE DEMON LORD. HE'S GRANTED A SPECIAL POWER, BUT IT'S... THE POWER TO OPEN A DOOR TO A BATH ANYTIME AND ANYWHERE, THE UNLIMITED BATH.

UNDETERRED FROM HIS QUEST TO EVENTUALLY DEFEAT THE DEMON LORD, TOUYA DECIDES TO TRY AND MAKE THE BEST OF HIS SITUATION. HARUNO, A GIRL WHO HAD ALSO BEEN SUMMONED, SETS OFF ON HER OWN JOURNEY AS WELL.

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Pre-Bath – Prologue

Let me introduce myself again. My name is Touya Houjou. People who knew the kanji for my name would often say it sounded “cold.” My name had the kanji for “north,” “winter,” and “night,” so I couldn’t deny it.

I was one of five people summoned from Japan to this world in preparation for the demon lord’s supposed resurrection. Apparently the person who defeated and sealed away the demon lord 500 years ago was summoned from Japan back then, just like us.

“You’re stiff here, Touya.”

“Same goes for you, Clena.”

I, along with the two girls I had met in the void, Clena and Roni, were currently wrought with muscle aches.

Clena was a girl with silver hair, silver eyes, and radiant skin as fair as the snow. She had a complex about her weight, but from my perspective, she was just soft and plump. I’m sure she was toned from all of her journeying so far, but on the outside she looked quite tender and feminine. You could call it a miracle. In fact, I just did.

Roni had long, custard cream-colored hair, and often worried about how thick and frizzy it was. That part I couldn’t deny. Bearing the ears and tail of a wolf, she was a type of demi-human called lycaon. She possessed a friendly smile, and the firm gaze from her orange eyes left a lasting impression. They came from the northern country of Juno. Clena was born into and then disowned from an aristocratic family, and Roni was her attendant.

People summoned to this world were blessed by the goddess and bestowed with a mysterious power called a “gift.” We were likely summoned so that the people of this world could bring forth those powers. And the gift that I was

bestowed with was the “Unlimited Bath”—the power to summon a door that led into a bathroom whenever and wherever I wanted. The bathtub inside was a little too small to bathe together with a girl, but that also meant more intimate contact. You could say it was a mysterious power, or that the fact this power was brought out in the first place was mysterious. Either way, I doubted I was the only one who wanted a word with the responsible party.

In any case, this may have been a bathroom, but the changing room had enough space to sleep in. I was using it to rest tonight.

“Sorry, Rulitora.”

“No, don’t worry about me. I’d rather not be inside there anyway.”

Rulitora was on cargo-watching duty outside. He was the raver that I employed—a sand lizardman with amber-colored scales, vermilion eyes, and distinctive black markings around his eyes. He was averse to humidity, especially steam, so the fact that he could bathe in water but couldn’t enter baths was his one weakness. He was at least twice as tall as me, and his arms were bulkier than my entire torso. Not to mention he was incredibly muscular.

As the former warrior chief of his home tribe, he’d have no problem standing guard by himself. In fact, we’d just be a nuisance to him right now, with our weary muscles.

“I’m grateful we’re able to rest safely like this, Sir Touya.”

“Yeah, we’re completely sealed off from the outside if the door to the Unlimited Bath is closed.”

We hadn’t ridden the rickshaw, but that wasn’t the reason we were in this condition. We rode on the backs of the sand lizardmen until the edge of the void, but thanks to their merciless speeds, we had to grip on to them so that we wouldn’t fall off, and now our arms hated us for it. Try to imagine clinging on to the roof of a speeding car for half a day, then you’ll get the idea. We had prepared a rickshaw when we left Jupiter, but Rulitora was faster than any horse. We tried to continue our journey until we reached civilization again, but we were a sorry sight now that the sun had set.

“...Well, the best thing to do in this situation is to give each other massages.”

“I’m alright with that if you two are.”

We decided that taking a relaxing dip in the bath and massaging our arms and legs was the best solution, so the three of us entered the Unlimited Bath and did as such. At first, Roni, Clena’s raver, offered to give the two of us massages, but her limbs were stiff as a rock too, so we ended up all helping each other.

On that note, muscular pain was classified as “fatigue” under magical terms, so Healing Light wouldn’t work here, since it wasn’t an “injury.” And I had yet to learn any spells that would heal “fatigue.” In other words, I had absolutely no choice but to rub their thighs.

Yeah, that was just an excuse.

“Ah, that feels good...”

“Hm, over here?”

“Yeah yeah, right there. Put some more pressure there.”

“Got it!”

Clena was usually more headstrong, but it was no surprise seeing her as defenseless as this after the exhaustion.

That was no reason to do anything funny to her, though. I concentrated on massaging her fatigue away.

She was lending her body to me out of trust. There was no way I would betray that. That, and I realized that I enjoyed giving massages more than receiving them.

Though that may just have been because Clena and Roni were wearing nothing but a bath towel apiece at the moment. Not only that, Clena’s thighs were squishy while I rubbed them, and Roni’s were springy.

We all went silent as we exited the bath afterward. After returning to my senses, I realized that massaging each other was actually pretty embarrassing. We were groping each other in some questionable places, not to mention it felt really nice. *Ahem.* Let me gather myself and explain the situation.

It was a little over a week since we defeated the army of monsters that

launched an attack on Rulitora's home tribe, the Torano'o. We packed up the goods that the Torano'o tribe gave to us as thanks in the rickshaw, then our party set out for Ceresopolis.

However, they'd given us so many items that we were no longer able to fit in the rickshaw, so we opted to walk instead.

Fur from golden ox and lesser boars, rock salt, aloe, the stems and fruit of young cacti, and fruit called dates that had a flavor similar to apples. Specialty goods from the void were jam-packed in the rickshaw's seat. Apparently some people traveled to the void in search of these items, and fur from the gold ox were especially highly valued.

From the first time Clena and I bathed together, the "Red Panties Incident," I learned that items could be left inside the bathroom, and I'd been conducting experiments since. But unfortunately, I had yet to confirm whether we could pack our cargo in there or not. Thus, Rulitora was left in charge of pulling the rickshaw that had gotten heavier than I could imagine. He really was someone I could rely on.

Back in the present, Roni was doing laundry in the bathtub, but Clena and I were awkwardly sitting in the changing area with nothing to do.

Nothing would happen if I didn't bring up something to talk about. I had learned this from the past few days, so I was about to bring up the laundry Roni was currently washing. But then,

"By the way, that story I heard in the village about the hero—was she also summoned here?" Clena spoke up before I could.

She was referring to an incident that occurred when we stopped at a village along the main road. We had planned to rest there until our muscle aches healed, but that plan went out the window thanks to the hero that visited prior to us. Long story short, one of the villagers attempted to stab Clena.

"She was, yeah. But I hardly even know her. I never interacted with her after we were summoned."

"...So you haven't promised to bathe with her or anything?"

“Not at all.”

The hero that turned up before us was an office lady in her mid-twenties named Ritsu Nakahana. We had barely spoken to each other since being summoned, and she seemed to have no interest in me either.

She tried adding the royal prince to her party, but ended up angering him instead, and then fled off on her journey without making an alliance with either the royal family or temple. And when she passed through this village along the way, the fiancé of the daughter of the village head ran away in pursuit of Ritsu Nakahana. It had caused quite the uproar. Come to think of it, back in Jupiter, she’d also caused a stir when two pampered sons of nobles proclaimed they’d abandon their lineage to chase after her.

You could probably guess at this point, but the one who tried to stab Clena was the village head’s daughter. She wasn’t in the right state of mind at the time. Clena having a similar physique was all it took for the daughter to flip a switch and attack her.

I had grabbed my shield and prepared to jump in between them, but before I could do so, Rulitora let out a large roar. Fortunately, that was enough to stop the daughter in her tracks and prevent the event from escalating. The incident ended without much of a fuss since no one was harmed.

“The only one I promised to take a bath with was Haruno.”

“You hadn’t spoken to Haruno that much either, right?” Clena said, then turned away from me in a huff.

I see, so that’s why she suspected that I had also promised to bathe with Ritsu Nakahana. I needed to dispel her worries quickly.

“I helped Haruno with a few things here and there, including helping her awaken her gift. I don’t think I’ve ever even talked to Nakahana.”

“...Really?”

“Really. And besides, I think Haruno is much prettier than her.”

“...I see.”

“And I think you’re much cuter, Clena.”

Clena looked surprised at my first line. Then, with my next, her expression changed to bewilderment, and she puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Just letting you know, I’m being serious. Though it’s just *my* opinion whether someone is cute or pretty.”

And thus I delivered the final blow. Clena finally turned bright red and sank like a battleship. It was my victory. Well, I didn’t know what the rules of this game even were.

My promise with Haruno and her party was important, but it was unthinkable of me to abandon Clena and Roni, who had asked me to take them under my wing. Maybe I was just thinking highly of myself, but my goal was to obtain enough strength to protect those around me. Which of course was because I thought dearly of everyone around me.

“And then I’ll bathe with all of them!”

“...What are you talking about?”

I accidentally voiced my thoughts, which made Clena turn a scornful gaze up at me. Roni also paused her cleaning and turned toward us, giggling.

“Well, at least you’re motivated enough for me to trust. I’ll give you my support, so try your best,” Clena said to me with a perplexed expression, then turned away in a huff again. But her cheeks were a shade of red.

I took the opportunity to poke her cheek, and she poked my side in return. Thanks in part to the nightly massages, this amount of physical contact was a sign that the distance between us was shortening.

Roni joined us in playing around soon after that, and night fell on our journey.

First Bath – Towels, Right or Wrong?

Ceresopolis—a city enclosed by walls atop a small hill and surrounded by farmland. Like the other countries, it was developed as a city-state with just one central city.

Three days had passed. We had finally arrived at Ceresopolis. The sun had already set, so we were likely spending another night outside.

Sweepdogs and lesser boars. We'd encountered several of them during the first two days out, but we had yet to see a single one today. We had probably entered the domain of the Ceres army.

The only protocol at the city gates was to show them my status card that I had created at the temple. It was no exaggeration to say that this was the most trustworthy form of identification.

The country thriving with agriculture, Ceresopolis.

After we passed through the gates and the cityscape filled my vision, I unwittingly muttered, "How is this a 'country thriving with agriculture'?"

The sight before my eyes couldn't have been further from that image. The city, bathed in the colors of the sunset, was what I'd describe as "classy." There was a large road lined with many shops, though most of them were closed at this hour.

Beyond the roofs of the shops, I could spot several giant mansions. The atmosphere might have felt a little dated compared to modern Japan, but it reminded me of a traditional European town. Though I'd never been to one before.

I had imagined a country village from the name 'country thriving with agriculture,' but this was a metropolis comparable to Jupiteropolis. Clena addressed my doubts.

"You're looking at it right here."

“Do the farmers live in those fancy mansions?”

“...Oh, so that’s where you’re misunderstanding.” Clena faintly sighed. “The majority of the ones working in the fields are labor ravers. The people living in those mansions are their owners.”

“So they’re feudal lords...”

“Ceresopolis runs under a parliamentary system, so they have no lords.”

“Huh? Oh, so they’re like wealthy farmers?”

So Ceres indeed appeared to be thriving with agriculture, but the idea deviated a bit from what I had imagined. For one, it differed from Jupiter in that they had no noble families.

“Also, that village we passed? The people living there were most likely all labor ravers.”

“...Seriously?”

According to Clena, the possibility was high that all the villagers there were ravers besides the magistrate, priests at the shrine, and village head. In other words, that village was built to house the labor ravers that worked in the large fields outside the city. It was similar to the shouen system of old Japan.

There was the magistrate who managed the ravers, deployed by their owners.

There were the village heads, who remained in the village to assist the magistrate even after their term as a raver was over and they had gained citizenship.

And lastly, there were the priests who managed the village shrine, deployed by the temple.

The man who chased after Ritsu Nakahana would probably be treated as a “runaway raver.”

“What about the fields around the city?”

“They’re probably estates owned by the wealthy farmers. Ravers are working there, too.”

This country used the raver system as well, but it seemed that the majority of

them worked as labor ravers on the lands owned by the wealthy farmers. The ravers who finished their term of employment gained citizenship as well as their own tract of land, though small. The ones who managed to amass a fortune and obtain large amounts of land became the wealthy farmers who lived in those mansions.

The city-state was managed by a parliament consisting of wealthy farmers. In that sense, this was a “city thriving with agriculture.”

“So the Olympus Alliance isn’t entirely composed of monarchies...”

“Juno has no king, either.”

So Clena’s country also wasn’t ruled by a royal family.

“There were four countries with kings, if I remember right?”

The Olympus Alliance was formed from twelve countries, which meant that the countries with kings didn’t even make up half of them. Maybe royal powers were weak here... No, maybe that’s exactly why the sacred king held so much authority. I, who came from a parallel world, and Rulitora, who came from the Torano’o tribe and had little interaction with humans, were consistently impressed by Clena and Roni’s explanations.

We headed toward the temple as we conversed. Since I was a “Hero of the Goddess,” the temple should be willing to give us lodging. We weren’t strapped for cash, but saving money was always the better decision, and above all, the temple would be safer than any inn in the city. “We shouldn’t talk about the Desert Kingdom to the people in the temple, huh?”

“I bet they wouldn’t understand even if we did mention it, but it’d be best not to.”

It was a piece of history erased 500 years ago, and the people today seemed to be unaware of its existence at all. But it was indeed a dark blotch in history and best kept a secret.

Looking at it another way, all four of us shared this one big secret.

“Speaking of which, we had never even considered what else was out there when we lived in the desert.”

“Even you guys living in the void were like that, Rulitora?”

It was called the “void” exactly because there was nothing there. Knowing that the Desert Kingdom used to exist there made me suspect that there was an intent behind naming the region.

But the name came hundreds of years ago. The truth was hidden in the darkness.

And then we finally arrived at the temple of Ceresopolis. There was a shrine for the Goddess of Earth in the village we had passed, but this temple carried the symbol for the Goddess of Light. The architecture was similar to the one in Jupiteropolis as well.

“Even though this is the country of thriving agriculture, it’s not the Goddess of Earth.”

“The Goddess of Light is the eldest sister of all the goddesses. Any well-off individual typically worships the Goddess of Light.”

“They’re pretty accommodating.”

“...Well, in a sense.”

“In a sense?”

Clena explained things to us as she always did, but this time she looked a bit dejected. I echoed her words, wondering what was wrong.

“We’ll talk about it in our room. This is the wrong place for it.”

She didn’t answer me, and instead walked toward the temple knight guarding the temple.

If this was the wrong place to talk about it, then it probably had something to do with the desert kingdom. We didn’t say another word and followed Clena’s footsteps.

The temples could apparently use cross-temple magic to communicate, so they realized I was a Hero of the Goddess as soon as they saw my status card. We were given immediate audience with the temple elder and obtained permission to stay there.

The temple elder here was younger than the one in Jupiter. He had a gentle demeanor and appeared to be a good-natured middle-aged man.

We left the rickshaw in the courtyard and sorted through our cargo. We donated whatever fruit could still be eaten but were no longer in selling condition to the temple as thanks and in exchange for our lodging fees, along with the message to “please eat them quickly.” We also treated them to dried meat.

Maybe it was a difference in technique, but the dried meat made by humans stayed fresh longer compared to what the Torano’o tribe could make. It seemed best to buy a new batch when we left Ceresopolis.

We planned to sell the aloe and dried dates to further fund our travels. The furs had been treated, so it would depend on their price.

Anyhow, the temple residents enjoyed the fruit and dried meat. It looked like we left a good first impression.

The main problem was the room Rulitora would stay in. Sand lizardmen didn’t use beds—they’d even be fine sleeping on bare dirt. In fact, beds were so soft that they couldn’t relax in them. He had slept on the floor back in Jupiteropolis.

Thus, the room that the temple elder reserved for us was one that was once used by a visiting distinguished pilgrim. In other words, a VIP room.

The floor was furnished with carpet, which the elder suggested would be more comfortable to sleep on than hardwood.

“Oh, wow...” I couldn’t help but gasp when a priest led us into the room.

Unlike the other guest rooms, this one had separate living and bedrooms. It wasn’t overly extravagant, but it was decorated in a refined manner with motifs of the goddess sisters.

There was a fireplace in the living room. The large chimney above the fireplace was also decorated with a large relief.

Five women were lined up vertically in the relief. According to the priest, it was a historical masterpiece depicting the goddess sisters.

Clena entered the room and muttered “it sure feels like a temple now” as she

looked up at the piece.

After the priest left, Clena turned around and beckoned for me.

“What’s up?”

“Look at this.”

“By this, you mean the relief?”

I looked back at the relief hanging from the pillar as Clena told me. The top of it was rounded out, but otherwise it was shaped like the pillar. It sat inside a frame with golden lining, and was several steps above the rest of the furnishings in the room in terms of extravagance.

One person was depicted in the top middle, then four more people to her left and right in a zigzag pattern. No, they were goddesses, so should I be using the term “people”?

I couldn’t discern the good and bad characteristics of an art piece, but even I could tell that this was an outstanding work of art.

“From the top down, they’re the Goddesses of Light, Fire, Wind, Water, and Earth.”

“Huh, so they’re...”

“The five goddess sisters.”

Rulitora and Roni came up and stood beside us. Rulitora was looking at the relief in admiration, but Roni had somewhat of a meek expression as she grasped onto Clena’s sleeve.

Then, Clena pointed at the relief and began to speak. “This was created after the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord.”

“You can tell?”

“I can. Since there are five of them here.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Right now they’re called the five goddess sisters, but they used to be the six goddess sisters.”

So who was the missing one?

“Light, Fire, Wind, Water, Earth... could it be Darkness?”

“You’re right. I’m impressed you figured that out.”

“...Well, it’s no big deal. A lot of the stories back in my world used a similar setting.”

It was a pretty cliché pattern when it came to video games.

I doubted she would understand the term “video games,” so I opted to use “stories” instead.

“That was the goddess that the desert kingdom, Hadesopolis, worshiped. Right, Lady Clena?” Roni contributed to Clena’s explanation.

In short, this relief was created after the history involving the desert kingdom was erased 500 years ago, and thus there were only five goddesses here.

Maybe that was how these girls came to know of the desert kingdom. Perhaps they saw something that depicted all six goddesses.

The land where the demon lord and his race were born, and the Goddess of Darkness. It felt like the pieces were starting to fall into place.

And then there was the Olympus Alliance, who erased that history. Perhaps the battle from 500 years ago wasn’t as simple and straightforward as a fight between the hero and the demon lord.

Lost in thought, I grew uneasy that someone might be listening in on our conversation.

“...We’re not being spied on or anything, right?”

“It’d be a big scandal if the VIP room was bugged.”

“Do not worry, I detect no other presence at the moment.”

“I’m not picking up any scents of someone hiding, either.”

Clena, who knew that this was an inappropriate place to be spied on.

Rulitora, who could trace suspicious presences, and Roni, who could detect scents.

I had such reliable comrades.

In any case, it was still safest not to talk about the topic in the open too much. So we decided to end the conversation about the desert kingdom there.

After that, we unloaded our cargo, relaxed in the living room, and talked about what we were going to do from here.

Two sofas faced each other with a table in between. I was sitting on one, and Clena and Roni on the other. Rulitora was sitting cross-legged on top of the carpet. Since he had a long tail, he couldn't sit on any sofas with backs to them.

Of course, our next goal was to go back to the void and find the gate that the Torano'o elder told us about, but before that, we needed to prepare.

"I want to take a break for tomorrow."

"Me too."

The first suggestion to pop out from Clena and me, whose muscles had yet to heal, was to just take a break tomorrow.

"Oh, but we should sell our things sooner rather than later."

"Yeah, we do need to sell off the dried dates soon."

Selling them was impossible to do right now, but it was best to get done as soon as possible.

Roni agreed with this suggestion. We'd ask the temple residents for guidance tomorrow.

"Hey, why don't we check out the temple's library? We should be fine if we say we're collecting information on the demon lord's army."

"The demon lord's army... You're right, we're going to need that information."

Clena suggested an idea and Rulitora responded in agreement.

Indeed, we'd be better off not being ignorant about the demon lord's army. We'd ask for help from the temple on this matter as well.

After that, we needed to prepare for the next leg of our journey. We wanted

to buy a carriage because it seemed convenient, but there was one problem standing in our way.

“That destroyed gate... do you think a carriage could fit through it?”

If we were only investigating the outside of the gate that the Torano’o tribe destroyed, then there’d be no issue, as the surrounding area was only wasteland. But the problem arose if we wanted to pass through the gate itself with a carriage.

“It was fine when it was only Sir Touya and me, but now with Clena and Roni and all our luggage as well, it’d be impractical for us to travel with only a rickshaw.”

“I really can’t walk that much.”

Rulitora had a point. It’d be crazy to ask him to pull all three of us plus the belongings of four people in one rickshaw. And the argument against walking through the void was pretty convincing when the person making it had collapsed and almost died doing so.

“How about we consider the worst case scenario and buy a cheap carriage?”

“That sounds about right.”

It would be a waste, but we were taking safety measures. Buying a carriage would be best option here.

“I’m so glad we don’t have to calculate water into our cargo.”

“My gift is useful for that.”

Of course, we didn’t want to just pack as much as we could; we had to consider the possibility of having to abandon it all as well. Clena was ideal to consult on this topic thanks to her experiences traveling.

Now that the issue of cargo volume had come into play, we had one important point to consider: the storage capabilities of the Unlimited Bathroom.

From the experiments I conducted on our way to Ceresopolis, I learned that time passed normally inside the bathroom even when the door was shut. For

example, I closed the door while our laundry hung inside with the dryer fan turned on, and my MP continually depleted until the dryer fan turned off. I could dry our clothes in this manner.

Outside of the bathtub itself, it seemed that the other devices could be used even when I wasn't present.

This was a sign of my growth. I was conflicted whether this was more convenient because the bathroom could be used without me, or less convenient for the same reason.

So during our travels, I had Roni take care of washing our laundry while I dried them with the dryer fan to train my MP. In fact, I was doing so right now.

The problem lay beyond that. The fact that time passed inside meant that any food placed there should grow rotten and get moldy. However, while the fruit that I left inside indeed got dried up or overripe to the point that it was inedible, it never grew mold.

This perplexed Clena, Roni, and Rulitora, but I realized why it happened. The Unlimited Bath was a gift that allowed one to take a bath anywhere and anytime. It promised a pleasant bathing experience.

But try picturing this. Could you willingly enter a bathtub that had mold growing all over it?

The answer was no.

Presumably, the Unlimited Bath itself had functions to prevent the growth of mold. Thinking about it, I had been using the bath for two months up until now without doing much in the way of cleaning, but I had never spotted a speck of mold.

I had also tried placing a dagger inside, but it didn't rust at all, either. I concluded that the bathroom controlled both the growth of mold and rust.

"We'll have no problems storing money, either."

"And since we can do laundry every day, we don't need to bring too many changes of clothes!"

One of the unexpectedly heavier, bulkier items among our cargo were coins.

We had no choice, since there was no paper money in this world.

Here people used three categories of currency—copper coins, silver coins, and gold coins. It would have been a pain if the currency varied in value between countries, but fortunately on this continent, there existed a shared currency called the Olympus coin.

It was common sense for travelers to carry their daily expenses around in a small pouch and store the rest among their belongings. There was the risk of theft when walking around with a bag of coins. And it went without saying that there was the risk of burglary when storing belongings in an inn.

The common sense solution was splitting one's pouch into several more pouches. Another was exchanging one's coins for precious gems, which held more value than gold coins though there was a slight loss in the exchange, so one could carry more money around at a time.

And then there was me, who had no need for any common sense solutions whatsoever.

I did carry around a bag of coins, but I just put the rest of the money inside the Unlimited Bathroom. The coins wouldn't deteriorate like fruit, after all.

As for the changes of clothes that Roni mentioned, travelers usually had three options: increase the amount of clothing they carried, walk around in damp clothes, or put up with wearing dirty clothes.

But I had the power to dry our washed laundry while on the road. Nothing beat having your clothes dry under the basking sun, but I was blessed with a better environment compared to your ordinary traveler. The Unlimited Bath really found its place to shine outside of battle.

In any case, we now had our general plan of action in Ceresopolis. I was lounging on the sofa when a temple priestess came to tell us that they had prepared a bath for us before dinner. They had also prepared a place for Rulitora to bathe in the courtyard with a folding screen for cover.

I looked toward Clena to see what to do, but she replied to the priestess, "We'll be right there."

After the priestess left with Rulitora holding a towel, I turned to Clena.

“Was that so that they wouldn’t find out about the Unlimited Bath?”

“That too, but it takes some effort to prepare a bath here. We’d look bad if we didn’t take them up on their offer after they went through all that trouble.”

“...I see. That makes sense.”

Enough water to fill the tub and enough wood to heat it up. This wasn’t something I was exposed to much since I used the Unlimited Bath, but in this world, baths cost both labor and money. For that reason, only aristocrats owned private baths, and the rest used the public ones.

They had prepared all that for us. It would be flat-out rude to decline their hospitality.

Also, I was sure that the baths here would be as large as the ones in Jupiteropolis. Bathing in a packed tub with Clena and Roni wasn’t bad—in fact, it was paradise—but a nice, relaxing soak in a large bathtub might be nice once in a while as well.

“By the way, what will you do?”

“About what?”

“Do you want to bathe with us or bathe separately?”

“...You’re asking me?”

Was that really something best left for me to decide?

I looked over at Roni, and she repeatedly glanced up at me with a red face.

What did she mean with that expression? I hoped it didn’t signify her disapproval for perverted things.

“Would the temple mind if we entered together?”

“Huh? I doubt it... They wouldn’t try to meddle with personal affairs.”

“In that case, as long as you two are okay with it, I want to bathe with you,” I asserted bluntly, and then continued. “I am indeed a man who yearns for mixed bathing. But that doesn’t mean I am willing to bathe with anybody.”

“...Are you sure?”

“It may not seem that way, but I’m still putting a lot of my faith in you two. Also in Haruno and Sera and Rium. And Lumis and Rin and Sandra.”

Yes, I didn’t want just anybody. I hadn’t made promises to bathe with Lumis and the rest, but we had gone to town a few times together, so I considered them my friends. It might have seemed like all my friends were female from this, but I had male friends as well.

Our difference in social status aside, I considered Rulitora a close friend.

Then there was Dokutora and the other young warriors of the Torano’o tribe.

Huh, they’re all sand lizardmen.

“Wha?! Why are you crying?!”

“Er... It’s nothing.”

I’m not crying. I’m *not* crying. What’s wrong with having non-human friends?

“Well, anyway. It’s up to you two. It’s usually the girls who make the decision on things like this.”

“...I guess I have to, then. I bet you’re lonely, so we’ll keep you company. Is that okay with you, Roni?”

“Of course!”

Clena was bluffing, but as always, her cheeks were bright red.

As for Roni, she had a beaming smile on her face and was wagging her tail energetically. It looked like her glances from just now didn’t harbor any bad intentions, thank goodness.

“You’ll need to tell me all about those names I haven’t heard before.” Clena said with a grin.

Was she angry? She didn’t look like it...

“I’m not angry. I have some things I haven’t talked about, either.”

Most likely related to her being disowned. I had no plans to force her into telling me. We were in similar, though very different situations. There was also the factor that she might not be opposed to polygamy, having been born and raised in an aristocratic family.

“I’ll make you spill every last detail~♪” Clena said, as if she was enjoying some part of this.

And so she led me by the hand to the bath in the temple.

“I see, so all that happened.”

I spilled every last detail about my relationship with Haruno and the other girls in the temple’s bathhouse. Roni was washing my back in the meantime.

The bathhouse was underneath the temple, and light spirits lit the room up. It was one or two sizes smaller than a typical Japanese bathhouse, and was all made of stone.

From the changing area, you could see a door on the left-hand side, stools lined up against the left wall, and a large bath along the right wall. There was no faucet or shower—one had to carry water over from the bathtub to use.

There were no separate men’s and women’s baths. Instead, they were split up according to time slots. Our time slot was reserved for guests.

Clena was sitting beside me, talking to me with her arms crossed. I wondered if she noticed how she was emphasizing her cleavage with the way her arms were squeezing her chest?

“You’re not angry?”

“Why would I be?” She returned my question with a tilt of her head.

I had promised to bathe together with not only Haruno, but Sera and Rium as well, and I’d also talked about the kiss as well. Yet she didn’t seem particularly mad about any of it.

“As long as you have the capabilities, Touya, I have nothing to complain about.”

“So you’re saying I should support everyone?”

“That, and protect them. It’s a dangerous world here, after all.”

“I understand...”

In one way or another, this world was ruled by the threat of monsters.

Whether it be battle power, political power, or economic power, people would gather under those they felt had strength.

“I believe in you, Touya.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

Her blunt words made me feel pressure all the more, but I sensed that she had predicted my reaction and increased the force in her words even further.

Roni finished washing my back, so we traded places and I started washing hers instead. Roni, in turn, started washing Clena’s back. We were all lined up in a row.

The girls had their towels off for times like this, but right now, all I could see was Roni’s back. Or rather, her bushy tail caught my eyes the most. It made for a pleasant scene, but I had to admit I was still a little disappointed.

The soap we were using was taken from my Unlimited Bath. Warped bars of soap were set out for us, but the difference in how well they lathered was too significant.

“Oh yeah, Sir Touya. Should we ask to transmit a message through the temple?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean with the temple communication magic?”

Apparently all temples offered it as a service. There was a fee attached, of course, so it wasn’t something an ordinary person could freely use.

“Haruno’s party went to Athenapolis, right?”

“Yeah, she said they were making it their main base.”

Haruno didn’t know that I had left the Torano’o tribe and arrived at Ceresopolis. She probably had no way of finding that out unless I contacted her first.

“You think we should wait until tomorrow to ask?”

“Unless you want to abuse your status as a hero, that’s the best option.”

“I don’t. Who would want to try that?”

My goal was to bathe with Haruno and her party, and to achieve that, I needed to earn both power and reputation. I might be able to use my “Hero of the Goddess” title as a means to that end.

But I had no intent to brandish that authority without good reason. Rather, I might earn myself an ill reputation by doing so. Thus, we put off contacting Haruno until tomorrow.

After we finished cleaning ourselves, we wrapped ourselves in towels again and stood in front of the bathtub. At that moment, I realized something.

“Hey, Clena.”

“What is it? Hurry up and get in.”

“In this world, is it proper manners to enter the bath with a towel on?”

“...Huh? Why wouldn’t it be?”

Clena answered my question with a question. It appeared that this world didn’t address the issue at all.

Back in my world, entering the bath with a towel on would dirty the water with soap residue and towel lint, and it would clog the filters in the circulation system as well.

The residents of the temple were likely going to use this bath after us. The baths in this world had no circulation, so dirtying the water might cause an issue. The towels we had wrapped ourselves with were different from the ones we had just used to wash ourselves. They were all clean, so one would hardly notice a difference in the water, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it now that I was aware of the issue.

Clena looked troubled herself after I explained this to her. Roni looked like she didn’t pick up on all of it and stood there with a puzzled expression.

“But in the Unlimited Bath...”

“No one used that other than us, plus I can add or remove water at will, and clean it whenever.”

Not to mention I could control the temperature as well.

It was thanks to the gift's powers that we could enter the bathtub wrapped in towels unaffected by those issues. But now that we were using a regular bath, we had to consider our etiquette.

"Touya... You're not saying all this because you want to see us naked, right?"

"Wha— Why do you think that?!"

I turned toward Clena and was met with a scornful stare.

It was true that she could interpret my words that way, but that wasn't my intent by any means. It was a matter of etiquette for guests using this bath.

I mean, I did actually want to see them naked. I wanted to take in the sights of their bodies without a single thread of clothing or soap suds covering them up, but I didn't want to force them into anything.

"That's just how it was in my world."

"Well, since your baths are so different from ours, it's no wonder our rules of etiquette are different..." Clena was conflicted.

She was a prudent girl. I was sure she understood my reasoning. And I was sure she understood that there was a good point to my suggested rules of etiquette.

"But baths normally don't get that dirty anyway, right?"

"It's just that stuff like towel lint is hard to notice. But they're definitely in the water."

"With a towel like this, though..."

In this world, there were no towels as thick, fluffy, and soft on the skin as were common in Japan. They were all flimsy, like handkerchiefs. That one perverted craftsman never touched this field of work, likely because it didn't involve underwear.

In the end, there was probably no problem with just entering the bath with our towels on, since the residue wouldn't stand out. The question was what we should do if there *was* a problem.

In any case, even if I suggested for us to take off our towels, I doubted Clena would oblige with a simple “Okay, sure.” She would sometimes be bold and defiant, but despite that, she was easily embarrassed at heart.

On the other hand, Roni would probably strip without a second thought. In her case, it was less that she had no shame and more that she paid little mind to it.

And thus I tried suggesting a compromise.

“It’s a pretty large bath, so why don’t we get in with some distance between us?”

“Hm? Oh, that’s a good idea.”

Clena must have been pretty anxious if she hadn’t arrived at that idea herself.

“What should we do for the usual massages, Sir Touya?”

“We can do those when we get back to the room. We have a bed today, after all.”

“That’s true. Let’s take up Touya on his idea,” Clena said, then led Roni and herself toward the far end of the bath.

Clena was probably suspecting that after taking off her towel and soaking in the water, I would get out of the bath and walk by her. I tried to stop her, but soon enough, I just stopped and stared at the wet bath towel clinging to her round and shapely butt.

“Ughhh...”

After that, Clena was lying on the sofa in our VIP room, feeling faint after the bath. Roni was doing a respectable job preparing water and other remedies for her. Rulitora was fanning her, and I was being used as a lap pillow.

I had tried to stop her because I thought this would happen. Between the three of us, I tended to bathe the longest.

Next was Roni.

And Clena was in last place with the shortest time.

Though we entered the bath at a distance from each other, it wasn't so much so that we could no longer see each other. Clena noticed that and drew herself further away in the bath, and was likely planning to get out after I was done.

I had planned to get out soon enough, but before that, Clena started to faint. Perhaps because the bath was underground, the steam collected more easily than usual.

I realized Clena had fainted when Roni called out to her, and then I rushed over myself to help her up. I of course let myself revel at the sight and even touched her as well. Or rather, Clena was totally limp, so Roni and I had to wipe her down and change her into her clothes.

How should I put it? They were incredible.

Clena didn't have a particularly large build; she was shorter than me. She had a dignified appearance, but still possessed an air of youthful cuteness about her. On the contrary, her body was that of a fine woman. She was voluptuous with skin tinted light rose.

She was always worried about how she was plump compared to Roni, but looking at her like this, her soft, buxom breasts and plump, full butt granted her some amazing proportions. I didn't have the opportunity to take it all in when I was healing her burns, but now that I was wiping her down, I felt like I was handling a work of art.

I was making contact with something meant to be sacred. The thought made me feel elated and even brought a tear to my eye.

My only mistake was not wrapping a towel around my waist in the frenzy and letting Roni see me.

Not to mention it was while I was having a reaction any healthy male would have.

She was predictably embarrassed by that, and kept glancing in my direction with red cheeks as she looked after Clena.



Clena noticed her behavior and asked me about it.

“Hey, what’s wrong with Roni?”

“...While we were taking care of you in the changing room, she saw me too.”

As she heard that, her face was quickly dyed the color of embarrassment. From those words, she could deduce what Roni had seen of me, and what I had seen of Clena as well.

Roni had exposed herself to me as well, but she appeared not at all bothered by that, which was very in-character for her. I’ll just say that lycaons, the wolven demi-humans, weren’t particularly hairy aside from their ears and tail.

“Should I apologize to her now?”

“Apologize for what? Just act like you always do. I’ll make sure to follow up with her later,” Clena said, and sat back up. It seemed like she was fine now.

“Sorry, you’re a big help.”

“Don’t worry about it. That’s my role, after all.”

Clena laughed and waved her hand at me.

Clena had been disowned and lost her place to return to, but she became my party member because she saw potential in my future and allowed herself to be taken under my wing.

But that didn’t mean she just followed me around. She stood beside me and offered mutual support. She didn’t want to just be taken care of; that was her way of life.

That notion of not simply relying on others felt similar to Haruno’s mannerisms as well. Perhaps one of Haruno’s aspirations was to lead a lifestyle similar to Clena’s.

I took Clena and Roni to the bedroom.

Since the first sacred king had a party of four, the notion that a party should consist of four people persisted in this world to this day. Even in the military, the smallest number a troop could be made of was four. Because of that, it was

common for guest rooms to have accommodations for four people, and this VIP room was no exception.

We were supposed to massage each other as we weren't able to do so in the bath, but now that Roni was being shy, I was massaging Clena instead.

"I've been wanting to try this~ Come on, lie down over there."

It was my turn first tonight. I lied face down on the bed as Clena commanded, and then she sat herself down on my back in her thin pajamas.

"Whoa... soft!"

"...Were you saying something just now?"

"N-no, just your imagination."

The weight on my back was soothing.

Roni, who had yet to receive her massage, stared at me with a bright red face and eyes that looked ready to devour me. She was embarrassed, yet filled with curiosity. I didn't think it was just my imagination that her line of sight went toward my hips.

At this rate, Clena should handle Roni's massage tonight rather than me. We might not be able to bathe together tomorrow night. The best decision here was to wait for Clena to handle the situation rather than for me to approach her with the awkward topic. It seemed prudent for me to leave the room while Clena massaged Roni.

I wonder if I'll be able to see Roni's usual smile tomorrow? I indulged myself in Clena's massage as I gave thought to these things.

"Good morning, Sir Touya!"

Roni's attitude had lightened up a bit after all the worrying I had done last night. Or rather, it felt like we were acting more like how she and Clena normally acted together. Like we had grown a little more intimate with each other.

I didn't know what Clena discussed with her last night, but by the time I returned to the bedroom, Roni had covered her face with the blankets and

wouldn’t let me look at her. That made me concerned about what was going to happen with her, but it seemed my worries were unfounded. Roni just happened to be embarrassed at the time.

I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, wanting to wash my face.

“...Excuse me.”

But I closed the door as soon as I opened it.

“What’s wrong, Touya?”

“Wrong room.”

“Uh, how could you have gotten the wrong room?” Clena looked perplexed.

Well, she had a point.

I tried opening the door again. The view was just the same as before. I wasn’t just seeing things.

“Um, Sir Touya...? Where did this door lead to again...?”

The sight past the door was completely different from how it was just last night.

“Uh, it shouldn’t lead anywhere other than the Unlimited Bath, but... Did I gain a level from lodging here?” I’d heard of games with such features in the past.

“You gain levels naturally. Though you can’t tell until you update your status card,” Clena said, then peered inside the Unlimited Bath from beside me.

“There’s no bathtub anymore...”

“There’s a big window, but the glass doesn’t seem very high quality.”

Roni also peered inside from my other side, both of them speaking their minds. But they were both missing the point.

They probably didn’t understand at the moment, but beyond this door was the changing room.

It was about the size of six tatami mats. The floor was tiled in a soft color. A sink was on the right, and next to it was a large, front-loading washing machine.

The thing Roni called a big window was, in fact, a door. Before it lay a bath mat for your feet.

Until this day, the Unlimited Bath comprised of just one room, but instead of a door it had a curtain dividing the changing and bathing rooms. It must have been their first time seeing a door like this.

Compared to the world we were currently in, the quality of the glass was very high. No one would even consider having a door made of glass here. Roni's comment on it being low quality likely referred to how opaque it was, but that was because of the bathing room on the opposite side.

"For now, let's go to Rulitora... No, let's get him over here. We'll have our breakfasts delivered to the room."

"I understand. I'll get him." Roni quickly spun around on her heels and left the room to fetch Rulitora.

In the meantime, Clena and I stepped into the Unlimited Bath and started investigating.

I opened the glass door to find a bathtub. No surprises there. The materials of the walls and floor were unchanged. The goods we had left next to the wall were spread all over the floor, where the wall would've been had the room not changed in size. The control panel was on the wall at about eye level right next to the door, and another one was located on the wall near the bathtub.

This room had also expanded. Now all three of us could wash ourselves like we did last night in the larger bathroom. The bathtub was large enough to fit all three of us.

"Clena, would you mind checking if the bathroom works like it did before? I'll check out the changing room in the meantime."

"That's the door, right? Got it."

She switched places with me and went to check if the faucets and shower could run both hot and cold water like they did before. During the past week she'd gotten accustomed to the control panel that regulated water temperature.

Keeping one eye on her, I began scouting the area, starting from the sink. In front of me was a large mirror. This would also be considered high quality to the people of this world. To the left and right of it were cabinets. I found a toothbrush holder in the right cabinet.

They had toothbrushes in this world, but the quality was a far cry from modern Japan's. Cavities could be healed with magic here, so there was no demand for higher quality toothbrushes. You could say that brushing your teeth here was mainly to keep bad breath at bay. For people with regular access to healing magic, it wasn't uncommon to skip the brushing process entirely and just chew on specialized herbs. It was an environment that I just couldn't get used to, as a person with modern Japanese sensibilities.

Opening the cabinet under the sink, I found spare toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shampoo, and even laundry detergent. Of course, all of this was created from my MP. The toothpaste came in all varieties, from kid's to medicinal to ones for sensitive teeth.

Actually, Clena was pretty obsessive about brushing her teeth. She claimed it was to preserve their bright whiteness, but according to Roni, she had suffered from cavities as a child.

She might like the whitening toothpaste.

At that point, Roni returned with Rulitora in tow. The two of them stood in the doorway, curiously gauging the inside of the room.

"Is this because of you leveling up?"

"You think so, too?" I answered Rulitora's question with a question of my own. I didn't really know, either.

"We're checking to see if everything can still be used for now, so can you two check if all our stuff is okay?"

"Understood."

"Alright, then I'll take them outside for now."

"Thank you. I've gotten better with it now, but I'm still not good with

humidity.”

The humidity had gone down now that the washroom and changing rooms were separate, but Rulitora still seemed averse to the damp air. Considering how he used to avert his face and complain about his eyes stinging, though, it was a huge step forward.

That aside, I went to inspect the washing machine next. It was front-loading, and from the control panel I could tell that it also had a drying function. The text on it was of this world, though. It looked like something you’d find where I came from, but I wasn’t able to locate a manufacturer logo anywhere.

There was a metal basket on the side, in which an instruction manual was placed. It was a standard modern electrical appliance manual no matter how you looked at it, but just like the control panel it was written in this world’s language, which gave it a surreal aura.

“It’s powered on... So this is running off my MP, too.”

We had a change of clothes, so we should try washing whatever was meant to be laundered today in here. We just needed to take out any important items we couldn’t risk losing in case something went wrong.

And then I turned around to the sight of a surprisingly spacious changing room. It was a big step up from the previous changing room, where the three of us had to bunch up if we wanted to sleep.

On the opposite end was a large shelf stacked with bath and hand towels. There were empty shelves as well, perhaps for placing your clothes while you were changing.

And lastly, there was one shelf stacked with something other than towels. I took one out to see what it was, and found something called a “yuamigi.” It sported a colorful design.

“Clena, take a look at this.”

“What’s up? ...Er, what’s that? A dress?”

It might have looked like one based on the shape. There were a variety of designs in there, as well as ones for men.

“This is called a *yuamigi*. You wear it when you take a bath.”

“S-something you wear when you take a bath? And it’s not a swimsuit?”

Clena seemed confused at my explanation. Due to cultural differences, this might have been hard to comprehend for her.

“We’re wearing bath towels right now anyway, right?”

“Oh, I see.”

Clena understood once I explained that it could be used instead of a bath towel.

“I mean, do you wanna bathe with girls so badly that you’d create those things?”

“What do you mean? These are common where I come from.”

“But the thing that made them was your gift.”

“Hmm...? Oh, is that what this means...?” I noticed after Clena pointed it out to me.

Indeed, I had the thought that using just a bath towel to cover ourselves was inconvenient, and the tub was too small for three of us in the previous version of the Unlimited Bath. I had wanted a washing machine after seeing Roni do our laundry, and I had thought about the fact we didn’t have decent toothbrushes or toothpaste. This supposedly improved Unlimited Bath solved those problems.

There were some issues left, though. It was still inconvenient to sleep in and Rulitora said it still hurt to enter. But this Unlimited Bath had indeed become more user-friendly.

“So it’s granting my wishes?”

“It might be more correct to say that your gift is growing according to your desires, Touya.”

“Hm, that sounds about right.”

Rulitora and I both agreed with Clena. You could say it was the power to gain what you wish for.

“Is it really that convenient of a power?”

“I’m no expert, but I’ve heard that gifts are a manifestation of the traits of your soul.”

“Your soul, huh...”

“In other words, your desire to bathe with girls goes down to your very core, Touya!”

“Hey!”

“Isn’t it true, though? This Unlimited Bath is proof.”

Clena accused me smugly, to which I drew my face close to hers in anger, but she remained unwavering as she replied to me nonchalantly.

“...You’re such a pervert, Sir Touya,” Roni muttered as she turned away from me, her face red like a ripe apple.

I wasn’t just imagining it, Roni’s bashful remark had pierced my heart more sharply than Clena ever could with words.

We inspected the facilities thoroughly after that, but found no particular issues with the power, water supply, or detergent selection. You could say the Unlimited Bath just grew bigger and gained new powers. It didn’t grow stronger, but rather became more convenient. I was kinda done with hearing about its power over and over again.

Now that we had a sink, I could wash my face in the mornings more easily.

I was going over the instruction manual of the washing machine with Roni, and we did a test wash on some clothes that’d be fine even if it failed. It was an automatic machine that did everything including drying, so all we had to do was wait.

Roni couldn’t believe that you could do laundry by just putting things inside a box. As soon as the machine started turning and making noises, she latched on to me in surprise. It didn’t take long until she and Clena were entranced by the tumbling clothes to the point that their heads were spinning.

Most surprised of all was Rulitora, who almost burst into the Unlimited Bath ready to attack after hearing the washing machine. He had assumed an enemy

appeared due to the unfamiliar, non-human sounds coming from within. For me, it was a nostalgic but familiar sound, but for the people of this world, it must have been a bizarre noise they hadn't ever heard before.

"Hey, when we send the message to Haruno, how about we request a status card upgrade as well?"

"Good call. Let's do it."

The Unlimited Bath's growth must have been connected to my own. Was the timing just a coincidence, or did it happen as a result of me getting a good night's sleep?

We had a late breakfast because of the time spent on investigating the new bathroom, then the four of us headed out to find a temple cleric.

"A message for the Hero of the Goddess in Athenapolis? I don't mind."

We asked the designated cleric and she graciously granted our favor.

Knowledge had already spread to the various temples of Haruno arriving and beginning her duties at Athenapolis. Her party had established their base in Athenapolis, and together with the pilgrims they were currently helping fix the damage incurred in the city from monsters.

I was disappointed that the message couldn't be a love letter. It was a new experience for me, so I was pretty excited.

That said, the message was sent by carving it onto a clay tablet, and transmitting it onto the destination temple's own clay tablet. So the temple sending it out would have to read my message. Not only that, the receiving temple would need to check the contents of the message as well, so they could read every word. Thus, the contents of the message had to remain discreet. I couldn't send any declarations of love, of course, but I also couldn't send her anything about the desert kingdom.

In the end, I decided to tell Haruno about how I managed to save the Torano'o tribe and about my two new party members, Clena and Roni. And that I wouldn't be staying in Ceresopolis for long, and would be heading out to meet her soon.

“Soon” referred to after we finished our investigations in the desert kingdom. I couldn’t tell her about that detail in the message. I didn’t know what we would find after our investigations, but in any case, it was something we needed to talk to Haruno about directly.

I was the one who dictated the message, while Clena wrote it down for me, and then we handed it over to the cleric. I hadn’t been able to write too smoothly yet.

Even though I was a “Hero of the Goddess,” we paid the fee necessary to send the message. Thanks to that I also knew that it was a pretty hefty fee, one that an ordinary person wouldn’t be able to easily pay.

Afterward we had our status cards updated. Clena and Roni had gained one level each, probably thanks to subduing that monster army.

Clena was level 20 and Roni level 19. Clena was a top-class party member, but Roni was only a step behind.

Clena’s stats were higher than average across the board, with her MP and MEN particularly high. Roni, on the other hand, had lower numbers in MP and MEN, but her TEC soared above the rest.

Unfortunately, Rulitora was still stationary at level 29.

My status card update was to be done under the presence of the temple elder. This might have seemed unnecessarily grandiose, but apparently it was normal for a Hero of the Goddess.

The newly updated card came out the same blue color it had always been, which unfortunately meant that I had yet to reach level 20.

Level 19.

I matched with Roni, but that was hardly the end of it.

“...The hell is this?” Clena exclaimed in shock after she peered at my card from my right.

The problem was my stats. The graph drawn on my status card was jutting out.

“Your MP and MEN are off the charts.”

My other stats had grown across the board, but just as Roni said, my MP and MEN were outstanding... no, they were literally shooting beyond the border of the card.

Even the temple elder from Jupiteropolis still had his stats contained within the card. Looking at it from that perspective, I could tell how extraordinary this case was.

I had been anticipating the extent of my growth since training in the Torano’o tribe’s settlement, but this came completely out of left field.

The temple residents couldn’t hide their surprise either, as several of them lauded me with words of praise.

“Was this from using your gift so much in the settlement?” Rulitora wasn’t able to contain his surprise either, as he looked at my card from over my head.

That was the only explanation I could think of myself. That must have done it.

“Ah...” Clena said faintly, as if she had just thought of something. “Sir temple elder. Please prepare the guide we had asked for earlier. We shall be taking our leave now to make preparations.” Clena said in an uncharacteristic tone, then grabbed my hand and promptly exited the room.

It probably involved something she couldn’t talk about right then and there. We inferred as such and followed Clena back to our room as she dictated.

Once we entered our room, Clena sat down on the sofa with a troubled expression. Roni and I took place on the sofa across from her, while Rulitora sat down beside us on the ground, seeing as his tail wouldn’t allow him a spot on the sofa. Assured we were all sitting down, Clena began to speak.

“Touya, you were conjuring water in the settlement for about half of every day, weren’t you?”

“Yeah, six to seven hours, to be specific.”

Clena sighed deeply. She found something troubling about my answer.

“To be frank, even I can’t continuously use my magic for more than an hour. I might be able to pull it off with some breaks in between, but that would knock

me out for days.”

“The Unlimited Bath doesn’t put too much of a strain on me, though.”

“Even so, you were using it constantly. You wore your MP down to the last drop every day.”

“I managed to fill the reservoir with enough water in just half a month thanks to that. I’m glad I did so.”

Come to think of it, I had increased my water output to fill it up faster. I had probably used more MP because of that, seeing how I didn’t scale back the time I spent on it.

“I was naive. I should’ve realized when you healed all of my burns, leaving not a single scar behind...”

She cradled her head in her palms.

Speaking of which, my Healing Light was the most basic of healing spells. Achieving such results using only that spell implied immensely powerful MP.

She probably hadn’t been in the right state of mind. You couldn’t blame her for not noticing at the time.

“Oh yeah, Sir Touya. After we’d left the settlement, you were using the dryer fan to dry our clothes, right? Does that use MP, too?”

“Yeah, it does. Anything you can use in the Unlimited Bath requires my MP.”

The washing machine was running at the moment, and was being powered by my MP as well.

Roni was probably just asking me an honest question.

Rulitora simply looked on with a dubious expression.

But Clena’s eyes grew wide after hearing my answer.

“I-it’s true that there are some long-term spells out there, but...”

Clena was a top-class magic user, but maintaining a spell for that long would put a huge strain even on her.

In comparison, I was draining my MP dry every day for six or seven hours

straight. Even after leaving the settlement, I was using my MP while we were traveling. What's more, I even used it while we were taking breaks and bathing together, and for ventilation during our sleep. I hadn't paid it any mind, but I might even have been using MP to keep our goods stored inside the bathroom.

Seeing how the Unlimited Bath had increased its features, I'm sure it would continue taking its toll on my MP. Thinking about it now, this was all pretty incredible.

"Your MP has gotten to the level of someone who's been using magic for decades, Touya. It's on the level of legends."

My MP and MEN shooting off the edges of my card were the results of that.

People blessed by the Goddess of Light were said to progress faster than others, but apparently I had already soared past those limits without realizing it. And if I kept using my powers, I'd keep growing.

"What kinds of spells could you use again?"

"Just your basic light spirit summoning, Healing Light, and Antidote."

The main problem was that, even if my MP was legendary, I had no use for it past my Unlimited Bath.

I was tempted to take a bath in the new bathroom since the conversation kind of wore me out, but our cleric guide had arrived, so we went ahead into town.

We had decided to sell the cactus fruit, dates, and lesser boar fur, as well as the aloe that could be used to make medicine. Last was the gold ox fur. We weren't going to sell it unless we got the going price, but since that turned out surprisingly high we decided to do it anyway.

Clena took charge of judging the prices. Gold ox were only encountered in the void, so you could get a pretty penny for their fur in northern countries like Junopolis. Their price here in Ceresopolis rivaled Clena's estimations, so we decided to sell them all off.

This country had no royal family, and instead was ruled by a council made up of the greater landlords. That in itself wasn't an issue, but nobles from other

kingdoms within the Olympus Alliance tended to look down on countries without a king. As a result, the upper class in this country reveled in showboating by dressing up in extravagant clothing and accessories. Gold ox fur fetched such high prices because its golden color was perfectly in line with their fashion senses. You could just write it off as vulgar excess, but their economic influence covered a much wider breadth than that of the useless nobles of other kingdoms.

The fur trader took us for amateurs and tried to haggle us down, but Clena saw through it and called his bluff. He grew flustered, but when I saw he still tried to slip in some miscalculated prices, I spoke up. Ultimately we managed to sell the fur off to him at a slightly boosted rate.

A lack of compulsory education in this world meant that illiteracy was through the roof, so you'd often encounter people who couldn't even do simple math. But you shouldn't ever try to swindle a high school student from modern Japan.

As for our own shopping, we first purchased some items that we'd been wanting for a while—a tent and a folding screen. After that, Clena and I purchased a full set of hard leather armor. We had learned the agonies of traveling through the void in metal armor.

We then went to the shop of the grandmaster pervert—the Ficus Brand shop—so Clena and Roni could get some nice, breathable underwear. They had also suffered some personal, painful experiences during our stint in the void.

I somehow got dragged into helping them pick out their underwear.

The shop had plenty of designs to choose from as far as breathable underwear went. Roni came up to me sporting an innocent smile, and a selection of said underwear.

"Sir Touya! Which of these colors do you like?"

Roni had brought me three sets with different colors. They were top and bottom matching sets, decorated with a cute heart pattern and ribbons. The colors were white, light blue, and pink. I imagined the warm tone of the pink one would match well with her custard cream-colored hair, and said as much.

"How about the pink one?"

“Got it! As long as you like it, Sir Touya!” Roni said, then went back to Clena with a happy smile, waving around the underwear that I picked out for her.

Her smile was innocent as usual, but beyond that, I felt like the distance between us had shrunk just a bit.

“Hey, Touya. If you’re going to help us pick, then come over here.”

“...If you’re fine with that, Clena, then sure.”

Rulitora, the cleric and I assumed the girls would feel embarrassed, so we were guarding the bags at a distance. But if Clena wanted me to come with her, what choice did I have?

I left Rulitora and the cleric, and made my way toward Clena. I couldn’t take the cleric along, and Rulitora was far too big to fit through the aisles. Actually, the aisles here were much narrower compared to the shops back in Jupiteropolis.

“This place is pretty cramped compared to the one in Jupiter.”

Clena looked around in response, then finally caught on to my remark on the aisles. She probably hadn’t noticed before, since it didn’t hamper her own browsing.

“Hm? Oh, that might be because demi-humans don’t come here.”

“They don’t? Why not?”

“Ceresopolis has a distinct lack of demi-humans. It’s a farming country, so they’re probably not interested.”

“Is that it?”

“I think most of them would prefer hunting to farming work,” Roni said with a tilted head.

Basically, since demi-humans had little interest in this agricultural country, shops weren’t built with demi-humans in mind, either. Come to think of it, Roni and Rulitora *were* garnering a lot of stares from people. Especially Rulitora.

“Anyway, what do you think of this?”

“...They’re big.”

“Not that,” She retorted in exasperation as I blurted out my thoughts on the bra she’d picked out.

“Er, I mean, I think it looks good. Though I don’t think I’ve seen you wear white before.”

“That’s because I’m so pale.”

Clena was showing me a pure white bra. She didn’t normally wear that color, but she seemed to have taken a liking to the frilly design. Apparently she liked underwear in deeper colors, due to her pale skin and silver hair.

Sure enough, her skin had gotten a little red when we were traveling through the void, but you could barely call it a tan. It was just the way her body was.

Her porcelain skin stood out even more compared to Roni and I, who were now plenty tanned.

The girls weren’t done after just one pair, of course, and proceeded to pick out several more. I didn’t have anything new I needed to buy here. I had previously already bought everything I needed with our trip to the void in mind.

It was almost noon by the time we left the store, so we got the location of a carriage seller and headed back to the temple. You see, we wanted to pick out a carriage for our journey to the void without the cleric accompanying us.

It would have been weird to reject the cleric as our guide for the afternoon, so instead we opted to do research on the demon lord in the temple library.

That said, it was particularly difficult to keep our interest in the desert kingdom under wraps. Clena and Roni had journeyed all the way from Junopolis like this, so I’m sure my problems faded in comparison to theirs.

It’s not like I had any intentions of becoming your garden variety hero, but I sure seemed to have ended up on an alternative path to becoming one.

I didn’t regret it, though. The fact of the matter was that I couldn’t just abandon these two girls in this reckless journey.

And since we all felt compelled to uncover the hidden history, the truth about the demon lord, we decided to head for the desert kingdom together.

Upon our return to the temple, we took out our half-dried clothes and hung

them out to dry under the sun. Leaving them in for the full cycle would wear them down faster. Drying clothes under the sun was something that we could only do while staying in one place. Normally, I'd be hanging them to dry inside the Unlimited Bath.

We then ate lunch, and spent the rest of the day scavenging the library.

Both Rulitora and Roni weren't great at reading, so they were put on book transporting duty, while Clena and I did the actual reading.

Even though I was summoned from another world, I could read in the language of this world thanks to the blessing of the Goddess. That wasn't the end of it. I could even read the books written in an ancient language that Clena couldn't decipher. It was convenient, sure, but this goddess blessing just didn't know where to quit.

"Ugh... not a single lead..."

Despite all our research, we couldn't find a single article with details on the demon lord.

I drooped my head down on the table after hours of unfruitful work.

The temple library was a smaller room than the name might have implied. We had looked though all the documents that seemed noteworthy, and while we found a mountain of texts on the first sacred king, we barely found anything on the demon lord. Maybe information on the demon lord was erased along with everything pertaining to the desert kingdom.

The legend of the first sacred king defeating the demon lord had been passed down, but knowledge on where that demon king had lived was lost. Part of the legend told of the first sacred king's party storming the demon lord's castle, after learning of its location from a sage living in a spring. However, there were no records of the whereabouts of said spring.

And now, 500 years later, the only information we had was that this sage's spring was located on the continent, but we weren't able to determine *which* spring. This might have been another piece of cover-up work they had done.

Looking at a map, Ceresopolis also had a "Sage's Spring" to the east. Assuming

the desert kingdom was where the demon lord had lived, this was likely the one. I was only able to figure that out thanks to the information Clena had given me.

“Hmm, do you think we could stop by this spring since it’s along the way to the gate?” Rulitora asked, inspecting the map.

If this map was correct, we would arrive at the spring if we left Ceresopolis heading directly east. A little more to the south of that stood the gate that was once overflowing with demons—the gate that the Torano’o tribe had destroyed.

“We should check it out just in case. Though I don’t expect to find anything there.”

“Yeah, it’s been well over 500 years since the sage lived there.”

We decided to add the sage’s spring to our itinerary, so we could use it as a landmark for getting to the gate.

During my research, I also tried looking for books on cleric spells to find other ways of utilizing my colossal pool of MP. Unfortunately, those efforts ended in vain as well.

Well, it’s not that I didn’t find any books. There were quite a few, this being a temple and all.

I just wasn’t able to find anything more thorough than the textbook the temple elder at Jupiteropolis had given me. That man had really gone all out for me.

After we concluded our research and returned to our room, I sat down on the sofa and went over the textbook. I put off practical training for now and skimmed through the entire thing, but attacking spells didn’t fall under the domain of clerical magic. The only exception I found was one for purifying impure beings such as the undead, but unfortunately it had no effect against normal opponents.

“Do you think I could learn your spirit spells, Clena?”

“That’d be impossible. You can’t even hear the voices of the spirits, can you, Touya?”

I came up with an idea, but unfortunately, it required some special traits that I didn’t possess. “Cleric spells are very systematized, so anyone who receives a blessing should be able to learn them fairly easily.”

“Is that how it works...?” I drooped my shoulders.

I should’ve been confident in the efficacy of my spells, but as a man, was I wrong in wanting some uniqueness to my spells?

Other than the clerical ones, spells weren’t systematized. So, to learn them, you had to study under one of the various practitioners.

The only people I knew who could use magic outside of cleric spells were Clena, who used spirit magic, the princess of Jupiteropolis, who used holy magic, and Rium, who used crystal magic.

“Is there a way to find other magic users?”

“Some of them take students, but in any case you’d have to meet with them in person first. The only spells you can learn from a textbook are cleric spells... Oh.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You might be able to find some in temples for other goddesses. Textbooks for other spells, I mean.”

“Really?”

“Well, do you think summoning light spirits is a spell that uses the power of the Goddess of Earth?”

“Ohh... Yeah, guess not.”

It would be “summoning earth spirits,” if anything.

They’d still be your run-of-the-mill cleric spells, but if there were any attacking ones, I could start utilizing this crazy MP pool of mine and be more useful during battles.

“Oh, Sir Touya. I think this city also has an earth temple.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, since the Goddess of Earth is worshiped by farmers and hunters.”

I see. That meant that the Goddess of Earth’s followers were here in this agricultural capital of Ceres.

“Come to think of it, I think I saw their symbol today. It was a small building compared to this temple.”

“Of course it would be. The rulers of a country prefer to worship the Goddess of Light.”

In all but a few countries, the temple for the Goddess of Light was the biggest one, thus being their representative temple. But that didn’t mean temples for other goddesses didn’t exist.

According to Rulitora, the Goddess of Earth’s temple was only half the size of this one. To be frank, they probably weren’t getting nearly as many donations from their followers.

“We probably shouldn’t head out now, huh?”

“It’s already getting late. I think the clerics are making dinner for us right now, too.”

“All right, then we’ll head out tomorrow morning.”

I was ready to go, but as Roni pointed out, we couldn’t just ignore our dinner, let alone go visiting other temples so late at night.

“Let’s gather our luggage for now.” Rulitora slowly stood up and jumped right into it.

The heaviest, bulkiest part of our cargo right now was coins. We divvied up the amount we’d need on hand among several pouches, then tucked the rest away in a bag inside the Unlimited Bath. There was no safe more secure than this.

“Touya, let’s go say hi to the temple elder.”

“Would it be okay to tell him about us going to the Goddess of Earth’s temple?”

“It’ll be fine. The temples should be on good terms with each other. You can even tell him that we’re going to look stuff up in their library.”

“All right, I will.”

We left the cargo to Rulitora and Roni, then the two of us went to greet the temple elder. But when we did, the elder urged us to stick around for a bit.

I was taken aback by his hasty demeanor, but Clena remained unaffected and kept a straight face. I guess she had predicted it would come to this. When I asked her about it later, she told me that donations from followers would accumulate just by having a Hero of the Goddess present. As if to say “Allow us to chip in for the hero’s accommodations.”

And just as Clena had suggested earlier, the elder remained silent when I told him that we’d be visiting the library in the Goddess of Earth’s temple, as if he had given up. He probably figured out that we had gained nothing from our research in their library. I felt a little guilty for relying on them so much, but we had at least donated enough fruit and dried meat for everyone in the temple to enjoy. We had only stayed a day, so there shouldn’t be any problems.

As we were heading back to our room after the conversation with the elder, blankly staring ahead of me, I asked Clena in a subdued voice:

“Should we give our donation to the earth temple in coins?”

“We probably will, if we’re going to stay there. Let’s make preparations back in the room.”

On that note, we had gone all the way down to the underground bath to wash up for the night, but we were unable to hold back our curiosity about the new bathroom and opened the door to the Unlimited Bath there.

The girls were enjoying the shower. It was endearing to see them play around in their yuamigi while sharing the handheld shower head.

The tub wasn’t as large as the temple’s, where we could stretch our legs out all the way, but it was still plenty big. It went without saying that all three of us had a relaxing time.

The next day, our party departed from the temple of light and headed for the

temple of earth.

I took to the streets fully armed, the attack on the hero Cosmos still fresh in my mind. Without exchanging a word about it, the others had also armed themselves to the teeth. No big whoop, right?

Rulitora led us to the Goddess of Earth temple, which was located between two streets lined with various shops. I hadn't noticed yesterday, but this was the street we'd taken on our way back from the armor shop. Rulitora was paying extra attention while we walked, so he had noticed the symbol for the Goddess of Earth.

Just like he said, this was about half the size of the temple of light. It had a cozy atmosphere and resembled a large workshop or office more than a temple. It made me recall a small shrine surrounded by houses in my neighborhood back home.

The front gate was similar in design to the temple of light, but you still wouldn't be able to tell this was a temple were it not for that symbol above the gate.

Incidentally, there was a fruit shop next to the temple. You could hear a lively old man and woman raising their voices at each other. They were probably married.

There were baskets of fruit for donating to the temple lined up in front. They had a good sense of business. In fact, I'd say the baskets stood out more than the symbol on the gate.

We bought a basket while we were there, then walked through the temple gates as we heard the fruit-selling couple yell out "May the Earth bless you!" from behind us.

This temple had a front yard instead of a courtyard, so we left our rickshaw there. The guard already seemed to know that I was a Hero of the Goddess and was staying in the temple of light, so he let us in as soon as I showed him my status card.

It was funny seeing his eyes bug out when he saw the stats shooting off my card.

Interesting, so whenever I handed my status card over as personal identification, I'd also be revealing my stats. Obviously people were going to be shocked, I mean, even I still wasn't used to seeing them.

We were able to meet the temple elder immediately. He was a middle-aged man with brown hair, a round face, and no facial hair. He had a short, portly figure and stumpy legs. If it weren't for the cassock he was wearing, I'd have assumed he was a company manager or something.

We gave him the fruit basket and told him we were looking for information on the demon lord and textbooks on the Goddess of Earth's spells. He promptly led us to the library, excusing himself for its small size. It was the kind of place you'd expect to find information that was once erased and forgotten, though, so I was more than happy with it.

I was quickly given a magic textbook. They apparently had plenty of spares, since most people wanted to become clerics under the temple of light rather than the temple of earth these days.

"If you wish to study these spells, may I suggest you be given a blessing?"

"You mean a goddess blessing? I've already gotten that."

"That is only the Goddess of Light's blessing. This would be the Goddess of Earth's blessing."

"Is that really okay?"

"Why would it not be? A normal person might not be able to handle it, but you should have no issues with your MP levels, Sir Hero."

It seemed there were no problems with receiving multiple blessings, since the five—no, six goddesses were all sisters. The ceremony itself was also a standard one, conducted whenever someone was to become a cleric.

"The arch-cleric in the first sacred king's party, San Pilaca, was blessed by all five of the goddesses."

"That was one of the allies of the past hero, right?"

"Yes, one of the three."

In other words, even if it wasn't common, there was at least a precedent.

Though that precedent was someone who had achieved legendary status.

I checked with Clena, who said that I should be fine with my MP levels. I trusted Clena and her knowledge about magic, so I agreed to receive the blessing of the Goddess of Earth.

The temple made preparations for a few hours after that, we had lunch, and then the ceremony itself would take another couple of hours. The temple elder had changed from a cassock to a ceremonial robe and looked like a proper elder rather than a salaryman now.

The ceremony involved me sitting down inside a magic circle, similar to the one used to summon me here, and the elder endlessly chanting ritual prayers.

The magic circle beneath me started giving off a warm, soft light. Thoughts floated in and out of my mind as I wondered if it was like this when I was summoned. I just sat there the entire time, but the elder remained standing, chanting those prayers for several hours. That must have been tough. He was gasping for air when it was over.

I didn't really notice anything particular about being blessed by the Goddess of Earth after the ceremony, but I was told it would come after I'd learned some spells.

We had an early dinner, matching our early lunch, then remained in the temple for the rest of the night. The fruit basket was a donation for perusing their library, so we donated a coin-filled pouch for letting us stay. We felt much obliged as the temple elder himself guided us to our room.

The room's cramped size reflected the temple's, and there was no large bath, but at least it had a place for Rulitora to bathe, so we couldn't complain.

That evening, the three of us went into the Unlimited Bath with our changes of clothes in hand.

"...What?"

The floor of the changing room was now made of wood. The bathtub had changed to a Japanese cedar wood tub.

I could only trace the cause back to the Goddess of Earth's blessing.

We had stayed in the Goddess of Earth's temple for three days now.

I was borrowing the ceremonial grounds and carried a bucket of soil over to practice my spells on.

Learning a new spell in three days might have sounded fast to some. However, taking three days to learn a basic spell when I already knew the fundamentals of clerical magic was actually on the slow side.

Apparently the problem was me trying to use the power of the Goddess of Earth for spells, where I had previously used the power of the Goddess of Light. Using cooking as an example, it'd be like trying to make something salty by adding sugar. Basically, these past three days were me learning to use salt instead of sugar.

It was surprisingly difficult. I could now see why so few people could use spells from multiple goddesses.

And the results were as such...

"Summon spirit!"

I rested my hand on the pile of soil and summoned spirits of the earth. My MP activated. A portion of the soil transformed into the shape of a cone, pointing towards the ceiling. I wasn't the one shaping it—the earth spirits were.

I successfully pierced through a plank of wood with the cone. I might be able to toughen this up by pouring more MP into it and increasing its density.

Unlike light spirit summoning, which could be done anywhere as long as you had MP and yourself, earth spirit summoning had the disadvantage of requiring soil. On the other hand, it had an advantage over light spirits for being able to create physical offensive power.

I grabbed the pointy end of the cone, channeled my MP into it, and the soil grew more dense and turned black. I pulled my hand out in a swoop, and what was left was a crooked, black knife. It almost looked like a knife made of obsidian.

I tapped the glossy surface with my finger and it made a high-pitched sound,

indicating how hard it was. It wasn't very firm, but it seemed sharp enough to make up for that.

I tested it on the plank I just pierced a hole into. The blade went deep into the wood and then broke. It was definitely sharp, but brittle, too. I probably could've cut the plank in two if the MP I had put in was stronger, or if I'd used more dirt.

I stopped the flow of my MP and a moment later the knife bulged out, then reverted back to soil.

"This spell is pretty useful. I could use it in battle."

"Excuse me, that spell is actually used for tending the fields or building aqueducts..."

The elder who looked like a middle-aged salaryman and was watching over my practice told me with a tired expression as I was nodding to myself in satisfaction.

This spell was normally used for construction, so compressing it into a weapon would require a significant amount of MP.

"This is merely a blessing from our little temple, but if you receive a blessing from the main temple, you'd be able to achieve much more."

"Does the size of the temple change things?"

"Yes. The head temple is on another level."

It looked like I had to pay a visit to the main temple of the Goddess of Earth if I wanted more power. It might be best to do the same for each of the other goddess' blessings.

Coincidentally, the head temple for the Goddess of Light was in Jupiteropolis, so I had nothing more to gain on that front. For now, though, I needed to concentrate on getting to the desert kingdom, so I kept it in mind as an option for later.

When I went back to the room after practice, Clena and the rest had just returned as well. While I was training, they were making preparations for the

journey.

I would have helped ordering a new carriage if we were gonna get one made to order, but since we were buying secondhand I left it to Clena.

“Oh, Touya. How’s your magic coming along?”

“Pretty great. I’ve learned the basic spells and have a textbook now, so I’ll just need to practice on my own after this.”

“I see. We got our hands on a good carriage, too. We just need to purchase a supply of food, and then we’ll be ready to go.”

According to Clena, the carriage they bought was unattractive, but sturdy. Roni and Rulitora said it was just your standard covered wagon, though.

Apparently when Clena thought of a carriage, she imagined the fancy coach her family had used when she was young, so that’s why she called it unattractive.

She had also purchased large cushions for us to sit on during the journey. She was properly preparing us for all the shaking.

As for the rickshaw, we sold it off. It had kept us good company ever since we left Jupiter, but the time had come to switch it out with the carriage and say farewell.

“When will the hard leather armor be ready again?”

“It should be ready this evening.”

Rulitora answered my question this time.

It would only take half the time the metal armor took in Jupiter, probably because leather was easier to tailor.

“Then let’s order some food on our way there, so we can pick it up first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Oh, we can take the day off tomorrow, then!”

Roni happily agreed with my suggestion. Since she was always making our daily lives easier, I wanted to give her a day off.

We had a washing machine now, so I could take care of the laundry for her.

Though I would need Clena to help take care of her and Roni's underwear.

Above all, there was Rulitora. Even during our time in Ceresopolis, we were constantly using him as our bodyguard whenever we went out. I wanted him to have a nice day off tomorrow as well.

After that, the four of us went to pick up our hard leather armor, making sure there were no problems with our tailored pieces.

There was a rush fee if we wanted our food ready by tomorrow morning, so we opted to wait until the morning after tomorrow, so we could pay the standard prices. We had paid our advance with a bit of a tip thrown in so we'd be getting good, durable products.

Clena commended me for how used to the system I'd gotten, which was probably thanks to my experiences exploring the city and learning how to make purchases with Haruno and her party back in Jupiter.

Even if a product came from the exact same store, storage life would depend on the season it was made. Where I came from, you had easy to understand labels with expiration and sell-by dates, but there was no such convenience in this world. Assuming your eyes weren't sharp enough to make out when an item was made, your best option was tipping the shop in the hopes they'd make something good.

And so, next was our day off.

Since I had told Rulitora about this last night, he had been sleeping all morning. He wasn't the type to show it, but he must have been tired after all those nights standing guard. I peeked inside the bedroom to find him lying on his side on the rug, his tiger-pattern tail lazily sprawled out. He looked like a father on a Sunday.

As for me, I took over our laundry as planned and let Roni rest.

"Um, are you sure? It's easier for me now with the *washa masheen*."

She couldn't help it since the word was still unfamiliar to her, but her awkward pronunciation was adorable.

“Yeah, so we can handle it, too.”

“But, the underwear... um...”

“I won’t be touching them. Clena will be helping me.”

I had no intention of touching the girls’ underwear, of course. I had seen them completely naked before, never mind seeing them in their underwear, but touching their delicates was a different matter.

Clena should be able to handle taking clothes in and out of the washing machine and hanging them up to dry.

“Huh, me?”

“If you don’t want to, I’ll have to handle it.”

“I never said I don’t want to.”

Clena realized that I’d be the one washing their underwear if she didn’t, and jumped up. Though she was a born and raised aristocrat, she often helped Roni with cooking and didn’t mind taking up the menial tasks.

“That’s not all, Lady Clena. The *washa masheen* can’t clean underwear.”

“...What?”

“Eh?”

“The ones it washed before got kind of worn...”

“Ahh, no wonder since it gets tossed around and heated up so much.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Clena folded her arms and nodded. She seemed to be in agreement.

I didn’t quite understand, but I guessed this wasn’t a topic a man could broach too deeply, so I decided to leave myself out of it.

“So you two will take care of the underwear, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“...Got it. I’ll take the opportunity to learn how to do this. Roni, will you teach me?”

“I understand. Sir Touya, may I use the sink?”

“Sure, do whatever you need to do.” Trying my best to avoid looking in their direction as they used the warm water to scrub their underwear, I got started on the rest of the laundry.

Though back in Japan, I was just your average high school student who didn’t try to help out with chores too much.

And so I took out the instruction manual again and navigated through the steps. It was easy to not mess up as long as I used the correct type and amount of detergent. The wash cycle finished without bubbles shooting out of the machine or anything.

Then, I set the clothes to dry until they were half-dry, and hung them on a clothesline in the changing room to finish drying. I couldn’t hang them out to dry in the temple yard, since it was a front yard facing the road.

I left the Unlimited Bath quickly after completing my laundry duties. I had been reading the clerical magic textbook for a while when Clena and Roni stepped out, having finished hanging up the rest. All that was left was a day of resting up. I was using my MP the entire time the clothes were drying, but it didn’t put any physical strain on my body.

“Where *is* the Unlimited Bath, anyway?”

“What are you talking about? It’s right there.”

I hadn’t closed the door yet, so it was still floating in front of us. It was a strange sight, but I was used to it by now.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s all made from your MP, right, Touya? So does it all go inside you when you close the door?”

“...I wonder?”

It felt like I was opening the door to a parallel dimension, but everything in there was made from my MP, so there was no doubt that it was under my control. So technically she could be correct by saying it was all inside me.

“It’s a little weird thinking that my underwear is drying inside Touya right now.”

“Oh, is *that* what that means?”

Clena had a dubious expression and Roni was aghast at her words. Clena had only noticed since it was her first time doing the laundry. I knew where she was coming from, but the sentiment felt a little delayed after all the time she’d spent cleaning herself in there.

“Well, we don’t know if it’s actually inside me in the first place. I could see it being explained as this world being connected to another dimension. The proof is right here,” I said as I pointed at myself.

A hero summoned from another world. I myself was evidence that another world really existed.

“Well, don’t worry about it. I’m not actually absorbing all of it into my MP.”

“If that were the case, I’m not sure I could use the bath anymore.” Roni gave me a wry smile.

In reality, we’d had no issues bathing so far, and the cargo we were storing inside remained unchanged. The question of how it all actually worked remained, but I chose to not think about it too hard.

“A parallel space for myself created by my own MP. That’s all you need to think of it as.”

“...I see, that does work.”

Clena seemed convinced enough. Worrying about it would get you nowhere.

After that, we told the temple elder that we would be heading off tomorrow, and donated more coins as thanks for letting us stay.

And then we simply relaxed in our room.

It’d be boring to just do nothing, though, so I read the textbooks on cleric spells.

Clena was a bookworm like me. She was reading a biography of the first sacred king that she had borrowed from the library.

Roni was sewing. She seemed to be quite adept at it, currently mending the frayed sleeve of a shirt. The other shirt wasn’t fit to be worn anymore, so she

was going to transform it into a hand towel.

I was reading both the light textbook and the earth textbook simultaneously. I took note of any common and differing points while comparing the two. For example, the basic spell “Healing Light” was present in both books. There were more details to the shared spells in the light textbook, so it seemed smart to reference that one whenever I needed to practice.

Incidentally, Rulitora had woken up once around noon, but he just ate his meal and went back to sleep. He woke up again for dinner, but went to sleep right after that as well.

“Don’t you have anything to do, Rulitora?”

“No, I’m not keeping watch or being a bodyguard today, and I can’t hunt in the city, either. I’ll stock up on sleep while I can.”

Apparently he had nothing to do. I guess this was what you called a workaholic.

He acted as our bodyguard in the city, so even while we were walking around town, he likely hadn’t allowed himself to relax. In that respect, the days we spent indoors were the perfect opportunities for him to catch up on rest.

I looked over at Clena, who raised her index finger. She was telling me to keep quiet.

When I looked over to Roni, she gave me a sweet smile and a nod.

I had no objections. He’d been taking care of us day to day, so we were going to give him some peace and quiet today.

Spring Bath – Great Detective Harunon

There was a small hill in the shape of a table, enshrined by the rest of the city.

The top of the hill was surrounded by walls, and within those walls stood a grand, chalk-colored temple that brought Greek mythology to mind. It was as if the hill itself was one giant fortress.

You would always find the white city at the foot of the hill bustling with life. One peek inside the town meeting plaza, and you could hear lively voices discussing all sorts of matters.

The arguments were numerous. They discussed the scarcity of this year's wheat harvest, whether they should increase temple donations, and if they should reinforce their troops in preparation for the demon lord's revival. The one who suggested increasing donations to the temple was a cleric from the temple of the Goddess of Light, but I digress.

It didn't matter if the debater was male or female. Everyone was wearing a piece of cloth over their clothing. The cloth was wrapped around their bodies and draped over one shoulder—the traditional style of wear in Athena. One could tell from the delicate embroidery on their tunics that they were all upper middle class.

Hard labor was handled by their servants, the ravers, and they would go to work in a way that contributed to society. Such was this assembly of intellectuals called the *ecclesia*.

This was the nation of the wise, Athena. They lived as ordinary middle class citizens within the capital of Athenapolis.

Recently, one topic had grabbed the attention of all the citizens of Athena. The topic of Haruno Shinonome, who had traveled here from Jupiteropolis.

She was currently under the care of Rium's master, the renowned crystal mage Nartha, in a mansion in the outskirts of Athenapolis. She led the Goddess of Light Pilgrims, who had begun taking down the monsters in the surrounding

area.

The pilgrims normally were a group who traveled around, assisting anyone in need, never staying in one place. However, the pilgrims led by Haruno were her bodyguards. They were staying under Nartha's care along with Haruno.

They had started the monster subjugation as a means to train Haruno using real battle experience, but the citizens of Athena didn't have to know that. For them, simply having pilgrims around to eliminate monsters was reason enough to be thankful.

Haruno herself was kind and beautiful, showing everyone a friendly, charming smile whenever she went into town. Athena had strong faith in the Goddess of Light, and there were even whispers of her being the incarnation of the Goddess herself, despite her black hair. It was a matter of course that Haruno had become so well accepted by the citizens of Athena.

Yet another reason for her favorable reception was her status as a Hero of the Goddess, not a Hero of the Sacred King under Jupiter's royal family.

At that very moment, the famed Haruno was letting out a deep sigh outside Nartha's mansion.

"...My Unlimited Reflection is so useless..."

"There aren't many monsters that use magic, after all..."

The female cleric sitting beside her, Sera, gave her a strained smile. Haruno considered Sera her first friend in this world, but even this friend couldn't offer her any words of encouragement right now. She swayed her body from side to side, thinking of a way to respond, her blonde hair swaying in turn.

Haruno's gift, Unlimited Reflection, allowed her to nullify spells and anything else that used MP. The name might imply a gift used to reflect spells, rather than just nullifying them. Unfortunately, she had yet to refine it to that extent.

It was a powerful gift capable of blocking all attacks from opponents such as demons, but alas, the only monsters to wander near human territory were on the weaker end. Strong monsters that could use magic were a rare occurrence.

"U-um, I heard that some monsters' poison breath uses magic! I'm sure you'd

be able to nullify that!”

“And where would those monsters be?”

“...Deep in the mountains, maybe?”

Assuming monsters were even the slightest bit intelligent, they wouldn’t intentionally wander near human civilization. The strong ones lived in secluded areas away from human eyes.

Back when the demon lord was still in good health, they had initiated an attack. But now, 500 years after the demon lord’s defeat, humans and monsters had segregated themselves, maintaining a cease fire to this day.

“But even if you could protect yourself from that breath, you’d still be in trouble if you get hit. If you have to fight those monsters, then you have no choice but to toughen up your body and learn the fundamentals of battle.”

Sandra put in her two cents. She was a temple knight and one of the pilgrims, sporting long blue hair tied up into a ponytail, and a dignified aura. Thanks to her long-lasting friendship with Sera, she grew close to Haruno, and had become her personal bodyguard. Along with another close group of two, they made up the “three temple knight sisters.”

“You’re right... I’ll take it one step at a time without rushing things.”

Haruno wholeheartedly agreed with Sandra. She was no fool. In fact, prior to her summoning, she had been an honor student. Her smarts had carried over to this world as well, and she had decided to concentrate on steadily becoming stronger before giving in to her urges to see Touya. And so, on days off from subduing monsters, she trained her sword along with the temple knights during their stay at Nartha’s mansion.

The yard was huge. On the west side you’d find a botanical garden, neatly filled with several types of plants. And on the east side there was an empty lawn. Looking up at the mansion from the road, you’d see that the two sides were stylistically mismatched, which had to do with the east side being crystal mage Nartha’s experiment grounds. Haruno was borrowing this space for her training.

“I wish Rin was as well-behaved as you...”

“Why did you have to bring me up?”

The middle of the three sisters, Rin, grew agitated after being given the stink eye. She also belonged to the temple knights of which the pilgrim group was comprised, and had become friends with Haruno after a long friendship with Sandra. Although that long friendship mostly consisted of the ever-serious Sandra scolding Rin as she took care of her over the years. Even now, Rin’s twin braids were drooping like dog ears.

“Now now, Sandra. Come on Rin, let’s go train together.”

“Oh, fine. I would never turn you down, Lady Haruno.”

“Geez, you’re so haphazard...”

Rin’s attitude did a one-eighty as soon as Haruno stepped in. Sandra sighed as she watched on. At the end of the day, their relationship was one between two girls who were on one hand, carefree and go-with-the-flow, and on the other, worldly and ever-serious. Yet in some mysterious way they were still the closest of friends.

“Haruno! I’m baaack!” A cheerful voice called out from the front gate.

There were only two girls in Haruno’s party who didn’t address her by her title, and only one with such liveliness to it.

“Welcome back, Lumis!”

Haruno addressed her informally, too. She was the last of the three sisters, Lumis. Since she was the youngest of the pilgrims and the same age as Haruno, she was more of a friend than a bodyguard.

“Welcome back to you, too, Rium!”

“I’m back...”

Behind Lumis stood Rium, holding an elegant old lady’s hand. Rium was the other one who didn’t address Haruno with a title.

The old woman’s name was Nartha, Rium’s master. When the two were together like that, they looked like grandmother and grandchild. Rium didn’t have any parents, so she really was more of a mother to her.

Nartha had business in the capital that day, so Rium tagged along, with Lumis following as their guard. They had just returned from their errand.

“I have a present for you today, Haruno...”

“For me? What is it?”

“A message from Touya.”

The moment she head those words, Haruno jumped straight up without so much as a word. She accepted a single envelope from Rium, her hands quivering, and an unsteady grin on her face.

A letter from the one she longed so much to see. She paid no mind to the gazes around her.

Haruno and Sera each gripped one side of the letter, and Rium popped her head out from under them. The remaining three girls surrounded them, and all six ended up reading the letter at once.

The letter detailed how he managed to save Rulitora’s home tribe, and how he had met two new party members by the names of Clena and Roni. Also that they had safely reached Ceresopolis, but would shortly be setting off again. Lastly, he said that he wanted to meet her soon.

Haruno rested her hand on her chest in relief, knowing he had found the new party members he had promised to find.

“Hmm... it’s so bland. It’s his first letter, so he could afford to be a little more interesting.”

Rin, however, didn’t agree with the letter’s contents.

“Well, this message went through the temple, you know?”

“It was sent from the temple in Ceresopolis to the temple here in Athenapolis.”

“In that case, the message must have been read by the clerics. Even Touya wouldn’t be able to send a love letter like that.”

Sandra voiced her counter-argument. Her guess was remarkably right.

I wonder if Haruno is disappointed? Sera thought, and turned toward Haruno.

“...Looks like I had nothing to worry about.”

Haruno looked overjoyed as she held the letter, her grin even wider than before. It was an expression she could never show the people in the capital.

“Isn’t this great, Lady Haruno?”

“Thank you, Sera.”

Sera was similarly beaming. She’d also been worried about Touya, praying for him every night, so she was happy knowing he was safe.

Haruno knew she wouldn’t be able to write a love letter either, so she was satisfied just knowing that Touya was safe and sound.

Of course, it’s not like she didn’t want to. She had a mountain of feelings she wanted to convey to Touya. But since those feelings were so dear to her, they also embarrassed her, and she definitely didn’t want the clerics knowing about them.

“What’s wrong, Rium?” Lumis then asked.

The others stopped talking, wondering what was wrong as they looked down on Rium, who had her arms crossed and her head tilted.

“Rium?”

Rium stared back up when Haruno said her name. She had a stoic expression and a delicate, doll-like face.

But Haruno could tell. A picture was worth a thousand words. Hey eyes, gray as the sea, conveyed many of her thoughts.

Rium’s eyes were sparkling and brimming with inquisitiveness. She was very curious about something pertaining to the letter.

“Haruno... something is off with that letter.”

“Off? What do you mean?”

“One. They’re leaving from Ceres soon, so that means they’ve already decided on their next destination. But he only says that he ‘wants to see you soon,’ not exactly that he’s coming here next.”

“In other words, they’re going somewhere else before coming to see Lady Haruno?” Sera proposed as Rium confidently nodded in response.

Haruno fought back the urge to pat her head as if to say “clever girl,” and allowed the conversation to go on.

“Two. The party members he gained in Rulitora’s home tribe, Clena and Roni. What were those two trying to do, going all the way to the Torano’o settlement?”

“Huh? Wasn’t that merely one of the stops on their journey?”

“No one goes to the void without a specific goal in mind.” Haruno questioned in confusion, but Rium shot her down quickly.

“There are some rare goods in the void, so maybe they were hunters trying to gather those. I can’t imagine they’d wander so far in, though.”

“So they must have had some goal in mind...?”

Nartha pitched in with an explanation of her own. She was a gentle woman, but the way she spoke showed assertiveness, dignity, and had real persuasive power.

“So Touya aligned himself with that goal, whatever it may be?”

“That explains why he teamed up with them. It does sound pretty plausible.”

Based on this discussion, it would appear Touya was hiding something. But Haruno didn’t think so. It made no sense that he would be hiding something from her now, after he’d come clean to wanting to bathe with Sera and Rium, in addition to Haruno.

If he really was hiding something, it would be from the clerics reading his message. Haruno concluded as such and started wracking her brain, thinking of what it could be that he needed to keep secret.

“Umm, what’s in the void? I don’t know much about it...”

“It’s called the void because there’s nothing there. There’s literally nothing. Not even any data on the place.”

“No data at all?”

“Yeah, it’s boring.” Rium answered Rin’s question rather matter-of-factly. She had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, so she had no interest in places without any material for her to research.

Haruno was left with one question after listening to their exchange. The void was hardly an unexplored area. It was close to Jupiter, the head of the Olympus Alliance, and was surrounded by many other nations including Ceres. Yet only the void’s environment was made up of wasteland and desert, which made it feel very unnatural. Not only that, in general there was hardly any data about the place. It really did feel unnatural.

“Touya must have figured something out about this unnaturalness... Or no, maybe he heard about it from Clena and the rest...”

“Lady Haruno?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

If that’s the case, I want to help— She was about to say, before stopping herself.

Touya must have had good reason for not mentioning this in his letter at all.

Assuming the lack of data on the void had a human cause, who exactly was behind it? You’d assume the people in power when the void was created. Perhaps even the Temple of Light had a hand in it.

And even now, there was a power trying to hide it all. If such wasn’t the case, then Touya would have said something in his message.

When Haruno came to that conclusion, she cradled her head.

“What?! What’s wrong, Lady Haruno?!” “Are you hurt?! Are you feeling ill?! Cleric! We need a cleric!!” “I’m the cleric here, Sandra!” Haruno ignored Sera and Sandra as they scrambled about, and laid her head down listlessly. She had realized something. Her train of thought had unknowingly shifted to a conspiracy theory.

But all things considered, she probably wasn’t too far off the mark. As she arrived to that, her eyes inadvertently shifted to Sera and the rest.

There were Sera and Lumis, squatting next to her. The two of them were so worried about her that they had grown pale. Sandra was in a panic, with nary a trace left of her usually collected self. Rin, on the other hand, looked docile and handed her a glass of cold water, asking if she was okay.

“Oh...” And finally, with her eyes locked on Haruno, Rium stretched out her small hand and touched her cheek.

It felt cool and soothing. She was ashamed of herself for doubting her friends even for a second.

I can trust these girls, at the very least. Haruno decided, and squeezed Rium’s hand. Her expression turned serious as she began to address the others.

“I have some thoughts I’d like to share on this matter. Will you all hear me out somewhere more private?”

Haruno paid attention to the gazes around her as they entered Nartha’s room. She made sure the thin lace curtains were properly closed. Rays of sunlight came in through the lace, lighting up the room, but it was difficult enough to tell what was going on from the outside.

Soft carpet flooring and a large wall-side bookshelf made up the room. They all sat around a large table in the center of the room, and Haruno unabashedly shared her thoughts.

“So you’re saying there’s something hidden within the void...?”

“And there’s a chance the temple of the Goddess of Light played a role in hiding it?”

“No way...”

Sera and Sandra looked at each other with bewildered expressions. Lumis shook her head in disbelief.

“Hold on, Lady Haruno. You shouldn’t be saying that. You shouldn’t be saying stuff like that. What if the temple leader hears about it...?” Rin, who was sitting beside her, whispered into her ear with a strained face.

The four of them were followers of the Goddess of Light. Even though it

would've happened a long time ago, it was a natural reaction to suggesting their temple had been involved in something suspicious.

Even so, none of them got mad or left their seats. Haruno was right in putting her trust in them.

On the other hand, Rium and Nartha had remained silent, only exchanging the odd glance. They didn't deem her story to be complete hot air.

"There's some sense to what Haruno is saying."

"Yeah. There's some hearsay about a ruined kingdom in the middle of the void, though it's mostly superstition."

The two of them had apparently heard of the desert kingdom as well.

"So the temple may have altered that fact into a rumor?"

"I can't say that much."

Sera asked timidly, but Nartha slowly shook her head in response.

"I can't say for sure, either." Haruno also spoke up.

Haruno had concluded that the temple was the only organization capable of exerting its influence over the entire alliance, but it wouldn't be absurd for another unknown organization to exist just for protecting this secret. More importantly, they didn't have enough information to determine exactly what that secret was. With the way things were, it was impossible to draw conclusions.

"Anyway, I don't think this is something we should talk to anyone else about."

"I agree."

"Same here. We're just speculating right now."

Rin, Lumis, and Rium spoke in order.

The pilgrims were followers of the Goddess of Light. As Rin said, they should be wary of spreading word about this as long as it was merely speculation.

"In that case, I'd rather have been kept in the dark for a while longer..."

"I-I'm sorry. I just didn't want to keep any secrets from all of you."

“Well, I’m glad you trust us...”

Sandra and Sera looked a little troubled, but not too annoyed.

“You two are taking it too seriously. It’s a story from ages ago.”

Rin was right in the end. It was just an old story, and there was a good chance that the current temple clergy were in the dark, too. That was their one saving grace.

Rium, who had no particular connections to these matters, tugged Haruno’s sleeve.

“What’s the matter, Rium?”

“Haruno, I have a plan.”

Haruno looked toward Rium, who continued talking with a stoic stare.

“The tool that the temple uses to send messages is actually made by crystal mages.”

“Huh, so Nartha can make them?”

“I made the one here in Athenapolis.” Everyone looked toward Nartha as she stated that as if it were nothing.

They furthermore learned that this tool was designed for clerical magic, instead of crystal magic, and that there were several other kinds as well.

Clergymen called them holy tools, but they didn’t actually require the power of a goddess.

“Sera and Touya can use them, too.”

“Oh...!” Haruno unwittingly gasped.

Yes, if the messages were sent using cleric spells, they’d be able to send messages to each other without the use of a temple as a middleman, as long as they had the proper equipment.

“But we’d have to get one of them to Touya, wouldn’t we?”

“It’s only a jump away with my flying disc.” Rium gave a thumbs up, looking ever so proud of herself.

The “flying disc” was big enough to fit a person, and crystal mages could use them to fly through the air. Rium had managed to journey from Athenapolis to Jupiteropolis all thanks to her flying disc.

“Is that okay?”

“I’ll ask to use the Unlimited Bath while I’m at it.”

“Then I... can’t go too, huh.”

It was the perfect opportunity for Rium, who had been wanting to check out the Unlimited Bath for some time now. Haruno wanted to tag along after hearing that, but unfortunately, the flying disc only had room for one.

In any case, as long as Sera agreed, they would be able to relay messages to each other without the aid of the temple now. Haruno gave Sera the old puppy eyes. Sera looked back at her for a bit, eventually sighing, and turning toward Nartha with a decision in mind.

“...I understand. I’m also curious about Sir Touya’s findings. Lady Nartha, could we use those tools?”

“...I can’t simply hand you one of the temple’s because of regulations, but I can give you a simplified one if you’d like. There shouldn’t be any issues when it’s just the two of you sending messages.”

“Thank you so much!” Haruno and Sera stood up and bowed deeply at her.

“Isn’t that great, Haruno?!”

“Congratulations, now you get to send a love letter!”

“Ah...”

Haruno only realized after Rin said it. If they could send messages to each other without the aid of the temple, not only would they be able to exchange secret information, but love letters as well. And even if they couldn’t, she could at least send one through Rium this time.

With this knowledge, there was no stopping her. That night, Haruno wrote her first ever love letter.

Her cheeks ran hot, even though Touya wasn’t there. She stuffed every last

one of her feelings of wanting to meet Touya in the letter.

What kind of face will Touya make when he reads this? What will he write in return?

The more she thought about it, the tighter her chest grew.

I want to send him all of these feelings.

Her pen flowed, fueled by her heart.

"...Let's not send this." The next morning, she reread the letter she had written. Her face turned a bright red, all the way back to her ears, and she tore it up. Maybe it's because she'd written it in the middle of the night, but there were some bold things in it even she found hard to believe she'd written. Seeing how she had destroyed it right away, no one other than Haruno herself knew what the letter had said.

But let's just say that the rewritten version was quite a doozy, too.



Second Bath – The Moon in the Bath Water

We completed our preparations and the day to leave Ceresopolis had finally come, but first let me touch on two things that took place before that.

The first had to do with one of the summoned heroes, Ritsu Nakahana. I remember it like it happened yesterday; one of the labor ravers from the village we'd passed had gone off to join her. She should have arrived before us, but seeing how we hadn't heard a peep from her I'd assumed she set off again. Yet it seemed she was still here in Ceresopolis.

I figured she'd gotten into trouble for taking a labor raver along without permission, but apparently she became his official owner after having met with the wealthy landlord who employed him. I'd be impressed by her display of common sense if that's where the story ended, but that was just the start of it.

The truth was that she was still living it up at the landlord's mansion every day. On top of that, the battle ravers in the city had started flocking to her and formed a group called the "Ritsu Troops."

When I learned of this, I stopped wondering just how kind and benevolent that landlord was and started wondering if something was up with Ritsu herself.

Take her gift, for example. She should have had a power similar to my Unlimited Bath, Haruno's Unlimited Reflection, or Cosmos' Unlimited Bullet. If her power was something that attracted people to her, then that would've explained it.

She didn't seem concerned with me at all, but I figured I'd do well to keep an eye out for her as a person of interest. I was hardly one to talk, though, considering how I was trying to uncover the secret history that the Olympus Alliance had put a veil on.

Another thing was how Clena had asked that we go to the raver market right before setting off. I asked if she wanted a new raver, but that wasn't the case. When we arrived at the raver market, she inquired about a certain procedure—

one that would involve transferring the ownership rights to Roni over to me if anything were to happen to her. It sounded so much like a will that I had to ask her what she was thinking.

She replied to me that with the way things currently were, Roni's ownership would be transferred to her family. That was just the way the system worked. As a contracted raver, she got paid in advance, so there's no way she'd become free in that situation. For cases like Rulitora and I, where the employer had no relatives, the raver would typically be returned to the market.

The documents would immediately be sent to the raver market in Junopolis, where Clena got Roni. Between returning to the family she had abandoned and having me take her in, she'd rather have the latter. It was insurance.

I told her not to be so pessimistic, but considering how much she cared for her dear Roni, I couldn't blame her. Of course, I told her I'd protect her before I'd let anything like that happen. I wouldn't be able to call myself a leader, otherwise.

After finishing up the procedure, we went to pick up our preserved food and departed from Ceresopolis.

Ceresopolis' main preserve was a bread akin to dry biscuits. They were baked at a lower temperature than you would normal bread, and were less likely to grow mold thanks to the high amount of moisture that evaporated from them.

In addition, they had given us pickled vegetables which were very similar to sauerkraut. And we also had dried noodles, spices, and an assortment of vegetables that could keep for a while. As long as we had Roni's cooking skills, every meal was something to look forward to while on the road.

Naturally they were all wheat and vegetable-based products, coming from the country of agriculture. All local, all organic.

Dried meat, on the other hand, was on the expensive side compared to Jupiter. Unlike Jupiter, Ceres had very few battle ravers who could hunt monsters for meat. Sweep dog jerky was cheap, but we decided against ordering it because we were told it wasn't very tasty, and had a pungent smell.

As for equipment, I wore my usual brigandine and metal armor combination. Clena wore her metal-reinforced hard leather armor.

We would arrive at the void after traveling east for two days. Once there we'd need to change into our hard leather armor that we got in Ceresopolis, but until then our defensively stronger metal armor would do the job.

Our carriage was a one-horse covered wagon. When I imagined a normal covered wagon, a white canopy came to mind, but this one was tan. Apparently the canopy had always been this color, so it wasn't just because it was secondhand.

The horse had a chestnut coat with white markings on its legs. It had a sturdy physique and seemed strong.

The carriage itself was on the smaller end. We could store all of our luggage inside the Unlimited Bath, so there was no need for a large one. I bet the carriage merchant would've scratched his head at the thought of us going to the void in such a small carriage. In that sense, it made for good camouflage—were it not for the door we had packed to act as a bridge for crossing the fissure along the void, which made us seem anything but inconspicuous.

Rulitora would walk beside us with his glaive in hand, keeping watch of our surroundings. Roni was in charge of driving the carriage, while I was on lookout in front and Clena in the rear.

When we exited the gates of Ceres, we were greeted by a sprawling rural landscape. The sight was completely different from when we had first arrived. Ceresopolis was situated atop a small hill, so we could see all around us to the far off horizon.

The early summer fields were lush with green, almost as if it were one big prairie. A gentle breeze blew across the fields, creating waves among the sea of green. The sight had left me awestruck, thinking how I never would've seen anything like it had I not been summoned here from my daily life in Japan.

"What's wrong, Sir Touya?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Let's get going."

Roni noticed my expression and inquired me as she held the reins. I shook off my daze and laughed it off as I patted Roni on the head, then gave the order to depart.

As we traveled along the dirt road surrounded by fields, we saw many farmers tending the crops, their backs bent. We also spotted many boys and girls around our age, probably helping their parents. As tranquil a sight this was, they weren't to be underestimated. The main reason Ceresopolis had few battle ravers was because these farmers were at least capable enough to handle the likes of sweep dogs.

As the story goes, even Akechi Mitsuhide, who defeated Oda Nobunaga at Honnouji, ruled for a mere 13 days before he was killed by a peasant who was hunting the runaway warriors. People who worked outside the walls of civilization like them had to have some measures of self-defense.

Even the village we passed had a youth organization patrolling the streets at night, who'd likely be exposed to the threat of monsters while working in the fields as well. And of course, they ate whatever monsters they managed to defeat.

Farmers were scary.

We kept traveling as I noted the brutal implications of this idyllic atmosphere, and after one day, no farmlands were left in sight.

All four of us took turns keeping watch that night. Rulitora said he'd be fine doing it all himself, but I insisted, saying I didn't want to rely on him too much.

The next day, we continued traveling even farther east. We encountered a few monsters along the way, but they were nothing we couldn't handle. In fact, we'd come across a lesser boar which was practically like hitting the jackpot.

Draining its blood out in the open would attract other monsters, so we decided to use the Unlimited Bath. We could even close the door on it, since it wasn't alive anymore.

And then, that evening, we arrived at the border of the void.

"The hell is this...?" I couldn't help but blurt out at what I saw before my eyes.

I mean, it kind of figured. But I still couldn't believe what I was seeing.

When we first left the void, we had to cross a fissure across the earth. The fissure stretched from north to south, reaching all the way the ocean, but now it had become a rapidly gushing river. The void had entered the rainy season.

Which was fine, and a natural reaction from all the rain. The problem wasn't the rain itself, though, but the fact it was practically storming on the other side, while our side of the fissure remained dry as a bone.

The sudden temperature change had taken me by surprise when we first exited the void, but this unnatural phenomenon made me even more aware of this artificial border.

"Clena, is there a spell that can do all this?"

"...You can't do this with spirit magic, I know that much." Clena paused before answering my question. It had left her dumbfounded as well.

"The fissure along the void becomes a river during the rainy season."

Rulitora was the one who told us that. This boundary line was one of several fissures, and they all collected rain water that eventually flowed into the ocean.

There was no better source of information on the void than Rulitora, who had lived there. I'd heard that hunters avoided the place during the rainy season, but now I knew why. It was almost summer, but this area was chilly now.

Rulitora was also the one who told us to buy a door in order to cross the fissure. Having lived there for a long time, he'd become adept at dealing with the rainy season.

"We should probably camp out around here for tonight."

"You're right. We should cross after we're better prepared."

"Good idea."

Clena and Rulitora agreed with Roni's suggestion. Of course, I had no objections either.

We tied the horse to a stake so that it wouldn't run away, then began setting up camp. Today's dinner was grilled lesser boar meat. Normally cooking this

meat would make it tough, but it was said that a true warrior would chew through it with delight. When I asked Rulitora about it, he said he got the gist of the saying, but felt that the meat wasn't actually that tough. I guess sand lizardmen were used to worse.

"Here, lesser boar stew!"

To think that that tough meat could transform into something so delicious in Roni's hands!

According to Roni, the amount of ingredients and spices she could carry had grown significantly thanks to the Unlimited Bath. Normally, travelers did well to shave off every last bit of excess cargo, making do with just basic salted, cooked meat. People who traveled long distances typically used pack horses, with carriages being one rank higher, and aristocrats would even employ their own transportation crew. One of the ways to determine social status in this world was how much luggage you could carry. Maybe I was reading too much into it, but I thought the "a true warrior would chew through it with delight" saying was just overcompensating.

In any case, Roni's cooking was delicious. She'd cooked the lesser boat meat until it was tender, and the savory taste had melted into a stew that almost made it feel like demi-glace. I wasn't averse to grilled meat, but I was sure grateful for this body-warming stew today.

Roni figured as much and decided to put some extra effort into today's stew. She really was a good girl.

I took a break from eating to thank her, which kind of startled her at first, but she quickly returned a smile to me. The way she wagged her tail was pretty adorable.

Such a good girl. She was so nice, I said it twice.

We finished our peaceful dinner and put the leftover stew in a pot inside the Unlimited Bath. I was carrying the dishes inside to wash them, when I heard Clena let out a yelp from outside. I put the dishes down and looked outside to see what was going on, then noticed everything outside began shaking.

It was an earthquake. It wasn't affecting the Unlimited Bath, but everything outside was shaking. Clena was caught off guard by the sudden tremor and had fallen on her butt.

Roni nervously looked outside from behind me. I grabbed Clena's hand and pulled her into the safe confines of the Unlimited Bath. Rulitora had his feet firmly planted on the ground, withstanding the shaking, so he was probably fine.

The sleeping monsters might be startled by the earthquake and grow violent. Not to mention Rulitora was acting strange. He wasn't just trying to withstand the shaking; he had his glaive in hand and was looking around restlessly.

Something's coming. I deduced, ran toward the carriage as soon as the shaking started to subside, and grabbed my round shield and broadaxe. The door to the Unlimited Bath was still open, since Clena and Roni were still inside.

I apprehensively looked at Rulitora from inside of the carriage until the rumbling stopped. I then jumped down from the carriage, calling out his name as I walked toward him, until he responded, blinking far more than usual.

"Rulitora, is something wrong?"

"Be careful. The tremors just now... remind me of last time."

"Last time? Do you mean—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Rulitora grabbed me up in his arm and leaped out of the way.

A moment later, there was an explosion where we had just been standing. No, something came bursting out of it.

A giant creature loomed over us. We were covered in its shadow as it blocked out the moon.

"A sandworm...!"

I wondered what it was, but as soon as I heard Rulitora's muttering I understood. This gigantic being was the desert monster that attacked the Torano'o tribe, the sandworm.

I couldn't believe how big it was. The hole it had left in the ground was several

times Rulitora's size.

Its body shone pale in the moonlight. Its shape resembled an earthworm. It had a small mouth on one end, but that was only relative to its overall size. It was still large enough to swallow someone whole.

"Hm?"

As Rulitora let me back on the ground, I noticed that the sandworm's body was glistening. I squinted to figure out what it was, and saw beads of light falling to the ground.

Suddenly it hit me.

That was water.

Drops of water were falling from the sandworm's body, bathed in the glow of the moonlight.

We stood there, silently facing each other. The heavy rainfall in the void was practically deafening.

I understood now. This thing was trying to escape the rain.

It had rained so much that it must have soaked into the ground, too. And this sandworm was trying to get away from that..

Perhaps another reason why hunters avoided this area during the rainy season was because they knew sandworms would appear.

"I'm assuming it's not just going to go back because it's lost..."

"The only time they ever show their heads is when they're hungry."

"I thought as much!"

The moment we started talking, the sandworm turned toward us and came swooping down. We dodged its attack by leaping off to the sides.

"Summon spirit!"

Not only was it hungry, we weren't going to get out of a fight, either. I sent out ten light spirits to brighten the surrounding area. Then I took up a stance, axe in hand, facing the sandworm.

Thanks to the light spirits, I could now see my surroundings clearly. I had actually hoped the sudden brightness would scare it off, but unfortunately it just stayed there, writhing about. It probably had poor eyesight, living underground for the most part.

“Clena, the stake! Roni, the carriage!” I shouted as I ran toward the Unlimited Bath.

The sandworm reacted to my voice and lunged down at me. So it did answer to sound, at least.

I continued running, the sandworm’s body barely grazing me as it once again crashed into the ground.

It was huge. It was probably wider than I was tall. I felt like I was losing my grip on reality seeing this colossal monster plunging into the ground with that much raw power.

“Touya! Stop spacing out!”

Hearing Clena’s shout snapped me back into it, and I saw Roni leap out of the Unlimited Bath toward the carriage. The horse was frightened and trying to escape, but it was still tied to the stake in the ground.

Roni tossed a sheathed sword from inside the carriage to Clena, who caught it and sliced the rope tying the horse in place. The horse noticed there was nothing holding it back anymore and started galloping in a frenzy. Roni tried to keep her balance, keeping a grip on the reins as they ran off.

The horse neighed and the wheels of the carriage clattered loudly. I stood perplexed for a moment, but soon realized that the noise would lure the sandworm to them.

“Roni! Don’t stop!”

I forcefully swung my broadaxe into the ground.

“Spirit summon!”

And then poured every last ounce of MP into summoning spirits of the earth.

Countless giant black spears—or rather, cones—popped out from the tracks the carriage had left behind. The cones were compressed to be as tough as

steel, all pointing in the same direction. Not up at the sky, however, but toward the ground.

A shrill cry resounded as the sandworm's head burst out from right behind the carriage.

Bullseye.

I was right in surmising it was following the carriage from underground. I had channeled an enormous amount of MP into the creation of a long strike zone for the cones to attack the sandworm underground. It had required a lot of MP, but since I wasn't able to pinpoint its exact location, this was my only option.

Thanks to that, several cones had pierced the sandworm's body, keeping it pinned in place. It was writhing around in pain, but couldn't move. In the meantime, the carriage was creating more and more distance between us.



Rulitora noticed that the sandworm emerged and sprinted past me, brandishing his glaive above his head.

“Yaaaargh! Huaaah!!”

And then with his built up momentum, he sliced through that body, which was wider than I was tall, as if it were butter.

It was an all-in-one attack. It sounded like two heavy things crashing into each other, with the sandworm’s body getting sliced about halfway through. If it were me on the receiving end of that attack, I’d be split in two, armor or no armor.

“I’ll finish it off!” Clena unsheathed a thin sword from an ornately decorated scabbard, set the tip on fire while chanting a spell, then dashed off. The flames from the fire enveloped the sword, forming a sheath around it.

“O fire serpent!” She waved it around, shaking off the flames, which then took the shape of a serpent.

It gave off a dazzlingly bright, hot light, even among the light spirits, and flew off toward the sandworm with a gaping jaw. It was aiming for the opposite side of the place Rulitora had sliced— the remaining tissue that kept it connected to the rest of its body. The serpent’s large mouth bit into it, burning the flesh as it tore it apart.

The sandworm’s body shook violently, then as the remaining flesh was burned through, its giant head fell to the ground, creating a large tremor.

“The final blow!” Without a moment’s delay, Rulitora darted forth, swinging his glaive down with the full weight of his body, and crushing the sandworm around its mouth.

I didn’t know if the thing had a brain. It was still squirming around, but couldn’t do anything now that it had lost its means of survival.

“Did we do it...? That was over pretty quick...”

“Its most terrifying trait is how it hides underground and catches its prey off guard.”

Rulitora had noticed the sandworm and managed to predict its attack. I had struck it underground to stop it from moving around, thus sealing off its main means of attack.

I breathed a sigh of relief at our victory. But just as I was about to relax, Clena's scream pierced my eardrums.

"Touyaa! Behind youu!!"

I flipped around at the sound of her voice, spotting a sandworm in the distance drawing an arc in the night sky as it flew toward me.

A second sandworm.

We hadn't even thought of that.

Both Clena and Rulitora were behind me after defeating the first sandworm. My broadaxe was still stuck in the ground after I'd used it to channel my MP into the earth. Though even if it wasn't, I still couldn't face such an enormous enemy with this tiny weapon. My round shield was pretty big, but not nearly enough to stand a chance.

I had no choice but to abandon the broadaxe and run. So I decided, and prepared to jump away.

"...O spear, go forth."

Suddenly, a giant silver spear came flying down from the starry sky and pierced through the second sandworm. The spear propelled the sandworm into the ground and stopped its movements for just a second. But it soon pulled itself out and came flying toward me again.

It all happened in a flash, mere seconds, actually. But it had given me enough time to try a different strategy.

"Summon... spirit!" I grabbed the handle of the axe I was about to forsake and channeled my MP into the earth again.

This time, I didn't summon cones. A giant enemy called for a giant axe.

Using the edge of the axe that was stuck in the ground as its core, I created a

giant black blade by condensing the earth around it.

The blade was bigger than my entire body. It was an earthen blade, compressed using every last bit of my MP.

Of course, there was no way I could carry it. Even if the blessings had given me a little more physical power.

I embedded my arms and legs around the handle sticking out of the ground, then braced the blade against the sandworm.

The sandworm didn't react to the giant axe that suddenly appeared before it and flew straight at me. Upon which the giant blade sliced the even larger body right in two.

"Urgh!"

I could feel the impact reverberating through the axe's handle. I poured all my MP into the blade so it wouldn't break.

Red blood came raining down from above as I kept enduring the attack, until the momentum eventually dwindled. I remained there in place for a while, keeping an eye on the sandworm, but it didn't move again. We managed to defeat the second sandworm, too.

I let out a sigh in relief, and cut off my MP. The blade of the axe which was now bigger than me bulged out, then returned back to the earth it came from. The bulging soil opened up the sandworm's body, and moonlight shone down on the place I was standing.

"...Uuugh." I got out of there as soon as I could after getting a crash course on sandworm anatomy.

"It's so damn long!" I had cut it lengthwise, so it took me a while to run all the way past its head.

We offered our prayers to the two sandworms, and after absorbing their blessings into ourselves, a girl descended from the sky sitting on what looked like a large plate.

She was a petite girl with cocoa-colored hair—it was Rium, who should have

been traveling with Haruno right now.

“Rium?!”

“It’s been a while.”

I raised my voice in disbelief, but she remained calm and responded quietly. She was as aloof as ever.

As I watched her land from her disc onto the ground, I remembered. She always wore a large cloak, which must have been to shield her from the wind as she flew through the air. In any case, seeing as how she came from the sky, she must have been the one who shot that silver spear.

“Oh yeah, that spear.” I looked over at the sandworm, but couldn’t spot the spear anywhere on its body.

“That was a one-use item, so don’t worry about it.” Rium said, then showed me a thin silver spear in her hand. It was about the size of a pencil.

“I can make these bigger using magic, but I can’t return them to their original size. They just turn into powder after I stop using my magic.”

“Come to think of it, you did save Haruno back in Jupiteropolis...”

I’d heard the story, but she must have used this silver spear back then, too. And the plate she was flying on was called the “flying disc.”

Nevertheless, the mass of the small spear and the big spear were totally different. This was just a theory, but she might have made up for the remaining mass using MP. If that were the case, the original spear would turn into particles that spread out among the larger one, and then when you’d stop using magic they would disperse. I applied the concept of atoms and molecules, assuming the powder worked in a similar fashion, but I didn’t think I was too far off.

As I thought that, Clena came rushing over.

“Touya, do you know her?”

“She’s one of the party members of the other Hero of the Goddess I told you about.”

“Ohh, Haruno.” Clena stared fixedly at Rium.

Rium hid behind my back, maybe shy about meeting someone for the first time. Even though I was completely soaked in the blood of the sandworm.

“Rium!”

“...Long time no see, Rulitora.”

Rulitora followed soon after, and Rium seemed a bit relieved at another familiar face.

“Clena, can you call Roni back?”

“No problem. Wait just a second.” Clena said, then went to light her sword in the fire again, and launched a fireball off into the night sky. She waited a beat, then fired three more in succession.

“She should be back shortly.”

“Alright. Rulitora, should we leave this area after Roni comes back?”

“There’s a chance that others will appear scavenging for the sandworm corpses. We should leave as soon as possible.”

“Is there anything you can scavenge from these things?”

“Just their fangs, at most.”

I expected as much. Its large, worm-like body wasn’t covered in any hard scales, nor did its flesh seem edible.

Rulitora and I split up duties to retrieve anything still intact, when Roni came back in the carriage.

“Lady Clenaaa!”

Roni stopped the carriage and leaped from the driver’s seat onto Clena. She was protecting the horse and carriage, but having to escape by herself must have made her so worried.

Unlike Rulitora and I, who had been fighting at close range, Clena was a long-distance spell-caster and thus wasn’t covered in blood and still perfectly huggable.

And then there was Rium, who was clinging herself around my waist. I couldn't tell at the moment, but her cloak was probably soaked in blood.

In any case, Clena and Roni hadn't met Rium before. Since I was acquainted with both parties, I needed to be their mediator.

"Let me introduce you, Roni. This is Rium. She's part of Haruno's party, who I mentioned to you before, and she really helped me out of a pickle just now."

Rium peeked out from behind my back and gave a slight nod.

"And these two are Clena and Roni. They're the two party members I met in the Torano'o settlement that I mentioned in my letter to Haruno."

"It's nice to meet you, Rium."

"Nice to meet you!"

"...Nice to meet you, too."

Clena slouched herself slightly and reached a hand out to Rium, who looked between it and her face for a bit, then timidly reached her own hand out from behind me and shook it.

"Aww, how cute~!" Roni proclaimed as she watched. She was the youngest of the group and we regarded her as our little sister, so she must have been glad to meet Rium, who was even younger than her.

Rulitora called out to us, having collected all the fangs. I had accidentally left all the work to him as I busied myself introducing the girls to each other.

"Sir Touya, we should depart as soon as possible."

"You're right. I want to hear why Rium is here, but that can wait until later."

We needed to leave before another sandworm appeared.

"Before that, the two of you need to wash that blood off. We might leave a scent trail."

"Oh, good point."

Following Clena's orders, I started taking water out from the Unlimited Bath to wash off the blood.

“...Correction, the *three* of you.” Her gaze was directed at Rium, whose cheeks were as beet red as her cloak from clinging on to me.

We set off on the carriage again after rinsing off most of the blood, creating a distance between us and the corpses. They detected their prey through sound, so we made sure to keep alert and move as quietly as possible.

We moved south.

We headed in that direction to get as close to the spring as possible.

Our first destination, the Sage’s Spring, was a little further to the south from here. The remains of the gate, which we hypothesized were connected to the desert kingdom, were located to the southwest of that spring.

I gazed up at the night sky from the driver’s seat and saw a myriad of stars and a full moon. It was a seldom seen view back in my world. I knew the saying “million-dollar view,” but you couldn’t put a price on this.

As I held the reins, Clena peeked out from over my shoulder and inspected our surroundings. Her voluptuous breasts were brushing against my cheek, but unfortunately, the only thing I could feel was the smooth fabric of her surcoat and the hard leather armor underneath. The metal reinforcements on the armor felt particularly cold.

“Can we see the Sage’s Spring from outside the void?”

“I heard there’s a tall tree near it, but I imagine not in this rain.”

Considering it was nighttime, we’d likely have some trouble spotting said tree.

We came across a large boulder and decided to camp there for the night. The boulder was large enough that even if all five of us wrapped ourselves around it holding hands, we still wouldn’t be able to form a full circle. Even a sandworm shouldn’t be able to fit a rock this size in its mouth. And if one reared its ugly head, we’d just take refuge on top of the boulder.

We immediately parked the carriage next to the boulder and started setting up camp.

“All right, we’ll take a bath after dinner, then we’ll take turns keeping watch _”

“No, please rest inside for tonight.”

All four of us looked at Rulitora.

“...Why do you say that?”

“I can handle a surprise attack from a sandworm by myself. That monster is in a class of its own,” he said confidently.

We had taken turns keeping watching since leaving Ceresopolis, but from Rulitora’s perspective, Clena and Roni were still inexperienced, to say nothing of me. Rium was experienced enough in traveling to journey from Athenapolis to Jupiteropolis on her own, but I wasn’t planning on making her stay up late.

“...Well, I can’t argue with that.”

“I guess even my nose can’t detect a monster that attacks from underground.”

Clena and Roni agreed, so we decided to sleep inside the Unlimited Bath that night.

Meanwhile, Rium was still clinging on to my waist. Back in Jupiteropolis, she’d stuck to Haruno or Sera, but now that they weren’t around, I had to fill in for them.

Speaking of which, she was currently wearing my spare cloak. Hers had gotten dirty and was now inside the Unlimited Bath. Roni said she’d wash it later.

Tonight’s dinner was the usual vegetable soup. We’d have a round flatbread made by kneading flour and water, which we filled with salted and peppered beans and potatoes and cheese on top, making for a simple sandwich. Roni whipped up the soup and sandwiches like a pro, while Clena and I made the bread with Rium’s help.

We made the bread so it could be baked without fermentation, so it would be done in no time. It was similar to the Indian bread called chapati. You could even compare it to a puffy okonomiyaki.

I started a fire while kneading the dough. Clena had gone over to assist Roni after she finished kneading her share. Normally we’d have Rulitora help with

physical jobs like this, but sand lizardmen weren't exactly known for their dexterity, so we figured it best not to ask. He stayed away from cooking duties, instead tending to the horse after his bath.

Right, I'd better make his chapati twice as big.

I squatted down and cooked the chapati like pancakes on a frying pan, and then mumbled to myself,

"I should buy a griddle next time we stop in a city."

"For a shield?"

Rium responded, squatting next to me with her eyes locked on the chapati.

"No, not that. I was thinking that it'd be nice to have a big griddle for cooking. Then we could cook several of these at once, right?"

A griddle with raised edges and a thin bottom like a frying pan that we could use for barbecues would be great.

She turned her gaze up slightly, and after giving it some thought, nodded as if her mind had connected the dots. She may have been imagining a huge griddle with stacks of chapati lining up to be baked.

"But it'd be heavy."

"I can just leave it in the Unlimited Bath. Fortunately, things don't rust in there."

"...It can do that?"

"Yeah, though I only realized that after we started traveling."

Come to think of it, this would be something Haruno and her party didn't know yet.

I explained other features I had learned about the Unlimited Bath during the journey to Rium while grilling the chapati. She sat there, squatting next to me the entire time, often nodding in sincere interest.

After we finished cooking dinner, we all sat in a circle and ate. Rulitora and I both ate our sandwiches with our bare hands. I had made his twice as large as ours, but it still looked small in his hands.

Our meal was modest compared to the ones we had at the temple, but personally, I preferred these. It was like fast food, simple and informal.

Rulitora, who had gulped down his meal and was licking the cheese off his claws, asked Rium, who was still munching away.

“Oh yeah, Rium. What are Haruno and her party doing right now?”

“They’re staying at my master’s residence and working with the pilgrims to eliminate the monsters in the city.”

Rium paused from eating for a second and looked up to give him a reply.

“She’s probably trying to gain practical battle experience while also establishing her reputation as a hero,” Clena said. Rium bit down on her sandwich and nodded in response.

Haruno had chosen a way to gain battle experience that helped people at the same time. Unlike me, who was heading straight for the old base of the demon lord, her methods were logical and steady.

Rium finished eating her sandwich and inquired me.

“Why are you here, Touya? Do you still have business in the void?”

She was sharp. Considering how she had gone out to look for me and appeared right before we entered the void, she was probably already on to something.

“...Is it the desert kingdom?” Rium tilted her head.

Which one of them had noticed? My bet was on Haruno, the only one not accustomed to this world’s common sense.

I glanced at Clena, who sighed and gave me a nod.

“Though we’re on separate journeys, I’ll trust you since you’re Touya’s friend. If you’ve already found out that much from the little information we gave, then I can count on you.” Clena laughed while saying that, but Roni was fidgeting nervously. She had every right to be worried.

“Actually, you giving us little information was a big hint in itself,” Rium said nonchalantly.

“...I see.” Clena drooped her shoulders hearing such an unexpectedly simple reply.

I knew where she was coming from. The legend of the “desert kingdom” was treated as just a fairy tale here. Hardly anyone actually believed it.

There were people who chased after get-rich-quick schemes in this world. Those were the battle ravers. Large-scale battles weren’t especially frequent, so this was all they had to make money. Tired of the daily grind and wanting to find riches, they would scavenge their way around ancient ruins, abandoned mansions in the countryside, and subjugated thief hideouts.

And yet, even *they* ignored the desert kingdom. That was how much the legend lacked credibility.

However, practically all information on the void had been erased. Thus, if one were traveling to the void, that was the only likely destination.

Come to think of it, I had written in my letter that I had met Clena and Roni in the Torano’o settlement. If she had guessed from that that our next destination would be the void, it wasn’t unreasonable to presume we’d set our sights on the desert kingdom, since it was the only legend worth chasing down in the area.

“Well then, I’ll begin. The desert kingdom is where the demon lord and demon race were born. We’re making our way there to investigate it.”

“The demon lord...!” Rium’s eyes opened wide. Even she hadn’t predicted that. “I get why Touya is helping you out now. Haruno was right.”

“Haruno? What do you mean?”

“That’s what she said. Touya must be helping them for a very important reason, and they need the assistance.”

“An important reason...”

“She said you weren’t the type to abandon those in need.”

“.....”

It was true that I couldn’t leave Clena and Roni to travel through the desert on their own, but I was both happy and embarrassed that she had seen through

me. No, I was mostly just embarrassed.

“Heh, she believes in you so much, Sir Touya.♪” Roni cheerfully teased me, like she was the one being complimented.

Rulitora also nodded along, his arms folded.

Rium was acting proud of herself for some reason.

Clena, however, had her hand over her mouth, trying to keep herself from bursting into laughter.

You’re acting like that knowing full well how embarrassed I am, aren’t you? Oh, I’ll make sure to join the fun next time Roni gives you a compliment.

Oh yeah, I should ask what Rium was doing here now that we’d settled down.

“So what are you doing here, Rium? Oh, and thanks for saving me earlier, by the way.”

“I came to deliver that.”

“That?”

“The box.”

“What box?”

I tilted my head in confusion, but for some reason all I got in response was Rium tilting her head, too. She wasn’t holding anything box-like, though.

“Oh, there was a box in your cloak. I put it aside in a corner.”

Roni gave us a helping hand. It was apparently left in the Unlimited Bath along with our dirty clothes.

I opened the door, looked inside, and sure enough, there I saw an unfamiliar box. I handed it over to Rium, who took a slab and an envelope out of it and handed them over to me. The slab was a clay tablet enclosed in an excessively ornate metal frame.

“Isn’t this one of the temple’s holy tools? The one that transmits messages?”

“It’s a simplified version of that. It can only communicate with the other one

connected to it.”

She further explained how Haruno had caught on to me omitting information from my letter, and prepared a way for us to communicate without the temple’s involvement.

Good job, Haruno. Now we’d be able to communicate without a problem.

“...So, am I supposed to use this?”

The only problem was that I had yet to learn the spell to properly utilize it. Apparently it was a basic spell that I could find in my textbook, so I should start learning it as soon as possible starting tonight.

The envelope contained a letter from Haruno. She had drawn a heart in red ink on it, since she of course couldn’t find a heart-shaped sticker here.

Yup, this was a love letter. I immediately opened the letter and read it.

“...What’s wrong, Touya?”

“N-no, it’s nothing.”

For the sake of preserving her dignity, I wouldn’t get into the details of what was written in that letter. She conveyed her feelings loud and clear, but some of the contents were so bold I found it hard to believe it was really her. Though I was still truly happy about it.

She had ended the letter with “Once you’ve settled down, please contact me.”

Right, we’d be able to exchange love letters after I learned the spell. I’d have to practice hard so that I’d be able to send one back as soon as possible.

After dinner and a short break, the four of us retreated into the Unlimited Bath. Rulitora would be resting on top of the boulder with the fire still going.

“It’s windy out. I’ll move this fire up on top, too.”

Clena dipped the tip of her sword in the fire and drew a flame to it. She was probably using spirit magic. Roni nimbly climbed up the boulder with a branch in hand, then waved it around and caught the ball of fire that Clena had shot off

from below.

“Rulitora, take an extra blanket.”

“Are you sure? We have Rium here now.”

“We already have a few spares. You’re keeping watch all by yourself, so don’t worry about it.”

“Then, thank you.”

I watched Rulitora effortlessly make his way up the boulder with the spare blanket. *He really is a lizard,* I thought.

As we entered the Unlimited Bath, Rium’s eyes began to sparkle. She had been wanting to try out the bath since we were in Jupiteropolis, so she finally saw her wish granted.

“Did it... get bigger?”

“It was a combination of me getting stronger and receiving the Earth Goddess’ blessing. Look, we have a new washing machine, and the tub got a makeover, too.”

“Ohhh...!”

Rium, filled with curiosity, scampered over to the washing machine and started prodding it with her staff. After she realized it wouldn’t bite her, she put her staff down and started groping at it all over.

Her reaction was in stark contrast with Clena and Roni’s. They had been more apprehensive of it at the time. In Rium’s case, her curious streak had taken the upper hand.

While she was prodding about, she hit the button that opened the washing machine door, which slammed open right into her nose. For a moment she saw stars in her eyes, then rushed right over and clung on to me. She was completely taken by surprise.

“It’s okay, Rium. Don’t be afraid of the washing machine.”

Roni came over with a crate for the laundry. She had a prim and proper expression, giving off the air of an older sister.

“Here, take off your clothes and put them in. I’ll show you how the washing machine works.”

“O-okay.”

Rium meekly took her clothes off. The leather cloak wasn’t meant to be washed, so I took it from her and put it on the hanger.

I glanced over at Roni and Rium tossing their clothes into the bin, while I also stripped down and put on a men’s yuamigi. Clena had also stripped down without me realizing and walked over to me in her yuamigi. Roni picked up all of our clothes and put the ones that were safe to wash inside the washing machine.

“Um, uumm...”

Still not used to it, she was trying to remember the next step, so I whispered “detergent” from beside her. Roni perked her ears up and cheerfully went to grab the detergent. There was a place to put the detergent in on the upper right side of the machine. Rium was watching Roni with keen eyes all the while. Learning about the unknown was a thrill for her.

Roni started up the wash cycle, her tail wagging. The machine started making noises and the drum filled with water. When the drum started to spin, Rium gasped out “Ohhh!” in astonishment. As I gazed upon these girls, peering into the washing machine like two kids in a candy store, I turned my attention toward Clena.

“Clena.”

“What’s wrong? Though... I might be able to guess.”

“Teach Rium how to wear a yuamigi. And tell Roni to wear one, too.”

My gaze fell upon their butts—one a healthy tan and the other small and pale.

The two noticed they were butt-naked. Roni looked a little embarrassed, but Rium was unaffected by my observances. She looked like a middle schooler, but in this world, she was already considered an adult.

“Um, now we’re even, I suppose.”

“I-I guess so.”

Roni fidgeted as she talked. She was probably referring to the incident back at the temple. I didn’t know if my naked body held the same value as Roni’s, but at least she seemed to forgive me for now. I was just relieved things didn’t become awkward between us like last time.

Now that we were all in our yuamigi, we headed for the bath.



“...It’s made from wood now.”

Those were Rium’s first words after she put on her yuamigi and entered the bathing room. The room itself was larger than before, but the first thing that stood out was how the bathtub had changed into a Japanese cedar wood tub.

“It became like this after I was blessed by the Earth Goddess.”

“What are you doing, goddess...?”

That’s what I wanted to know.

The higher-end bathtubs in this world were all made of stone. This was the case for the bathtub back in the temple in Ceresopolis, as well. The nobility would use tubs made of marble. If a person from this world were asked to picture a wooden tub, they’d probably just imagine a small bucket used by someone who couldn’t afford a bath.

“I was hesitant about it at first, too, but it has a nice smell.”

“Like sandalwood?”

“Personally, I like this more than sandalwood. It smells like you’re inside a forest.”

It was a description befitting of Roni, a lycaon with a keen sense of smell.

In this world, it was a matter of course for nobles to use sandalwood. Clena said she hadn’t used it much, but that was because Roni wasn’t very fond of the smell.

“But we only enter it after cleaning ourselves first,” Roni said, then grabbed Rium’s hand and led her to a stool near the wall. Roni wanted to play the older sister and wash Rium.

Rium hadn’t quite gotten comfortable with the new faces yet, but she forced herself to stay there and let Roni do as she pleased. Roni had gotten used to the bathroom by now, so I could leave it to her.

“Alright, then I’ll wash Clena’s back.”

“Don’t touch me anywhere weird, okay?”

“You mean your stomach?”

“...My stomach is fine.”

Apparently she was okay with that.

I had noticed something after we grew close and started taking baths together. Or rather, it was something I’d picked up on from hearing Clena talk about it here and there while soaking in the tub together.

She was pretty curvy overall, but she seemed to be particularly concerned about her waistline. She had told me this was due to being constantly compared to other nobles’ daughters who were raised like princesses. It wasn’t that bad, and at worst you’d call her a little plump. She hadn’t been told much outside of “Are you eating okay?” I didn’t know what played in the minds of aristocrats, but it was nothing I myself would mind.

Ever since Clena set her sights on the desert kingdom a few years ago, she started training with Roni, and grew more distant from the noble daughters she’d been friends with before. From those days, Clena thought of herself as fat and brawny. It was some sort of PTSD to her.

If you asked me, it was the most normal thing in the world that she’d gain muscle from all that training. In fact, retaining your womanly charms despite that was something to be commended for, not criticized. I’d continuously let Clena know that through my words and actions, and the result was her telling me that I could touch her stomach just now.

Clena sat on the stool beside Rium. The upgraded bathroom now had multiple faucets and shower heads, enough for all of us to sit down and wash ourselves like this.

We couldn’t properly clean ourselves with the yuamigi on, though, so Clena took hers off. Her pale, seemingly transparent white skin leaped into my vision.

I looked over to Rium, who had also taken off her yuamigi to wash herself. She was smooth and flat.



“...I always notice this, but you really are pale. Even more so than Rium,” I mumbled while lathering body soap on her back.

“It’s because Juno is a northern country. Though I’m considered pale even up there.”

She had hardly tanned since birth. I wondered if people from the north were all like that.

“At least your skin won’t peel from getting too sunburned.”

“I do get a little red. But that goes away after a few days.”

“Oh yeah, that’s true.”

“...Were you thinking of something just now?”

I was thinking about the burns I had healed. *Those* probably wouldn’t have gone away after a few days.

“...And what are you doing, Roni?”

“Hmm?”

“What do you mean? I’m just washing us~ Bubbles, bubbles~”

I looked over past Clena to see both Rium and Roni covered in pure white bubbles.

“Rium, did it get in your eyes?”

“...This is fun. Haruno won’t go this far.”

I was worried about her being covered head to toe in soapsuds, but she seemed fine.

“It’s amazing how much this stuff lathers.”

“My MP is pretty wonderful.”

Clena and I were both astounded.

“...Now what are *you* doing?”

“Well, I was wondering if I could get it to do that, too...”

Soon after, Clena and I were both covered in soapsuds. She wanted to join in

on the fun.

It went without saying that all four of us ended up going from simply washing ourselves to fooling around, covered in lather. When Rium started to lose her footing I tried to grab on to her, but we were far too slippery for that to end well. I tried wrapping my left arm around and under her armpits. Clena and Roni were still enjoying themselves, but the suds were making them look wobbly, too. Just as it seemed they were about to stumble, I reached my right arm over to them.

“Hey, what’s the big idea...”

“N-now wait just a second, I got lucky but that was a coincidence!”

I wouldn’t call it a misunderstanding. I had trouble supporting them so I ended up touching them in a variety of places.

We washed the suds off and moved on to wash our hair. I was usually in charge of washing the girls’ hair. Apparently I was the best at that.

“Make sure you close your eyes, Rium.”

“...Nn.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She seemed a little frightened about this new experience. Maybe it had scared her when I told her it’d hurt if it got in her eyes.

“Good luck, Rium!” Roni, who was sitting next to us, cheered her on, to which Rium nodded silently in response. They were so adorable together.

I glanced over to Clena, who also had a smile as she was watching the two girls, and our eyes met.

We were thinking the same thing. I felt bad for poor Rium, but Clena and I couldn’t help but share a laugh over it.

“Alright, we’re done.”

I had finished washing her hair and used the shower head to clear the suds. Rium shook her head like a wet puppy, splashing drops of water all around her.

“Did you ever wash your hair while you were with Haruno?”

“...Not with shampoo.” Rium said with a pout. She had apparently only washed her hair with warm water before. Perhaps she’d been scared of the shampoo.

“You did a good job.”

And yet she held out and used shampoo for the first time today. I pet her head in appreciation.

I washed Roni’s hair, then Clena’s after that, all the while Rium was clinging to my back, watching with a keen eye. Clena and Roni would usually take turns washing my hair after this, but it looked like Rium would be joining the fray, too.

After we washed our hair, it was finally time for us to enter the cedar wood tub. The tub had grown in size, and there was a lowered step around it that we could sit on. Though it was bigger, it still felt a little cramped with three people. And so Rium ended up sitting on my legs while we soaked in the tub. I had my arm wrapped around her torso, so we wouldn’t lose our balance.

“.....” Rium was staring straight at Clena, who had also taken a seat on the step.

“What’s wrong, Rium?”

“W-what is it?” Clena was confused at the continued stare, while Roni kept looking between the two of them.

Rium’s gaze was entirely concentrated on Clena’s chest. She then moved her eyes down and said,

“Compared to Haruno you’re... smaller, bigger, bigger.”

What was she talking about? Well, I didn’t have to ask.

Based on Rium’s behavior it was a mere observation, not something said out of spite.

“...Uh-huh.” Clena squinted her eyes. Her voice was soft, but it resonated clearly in the bathroom.

“Touya... is that true?”

“Don’t ask me. I’ve only seen her with her clothes on.”

It was the truth. Though I also knew that Rium was right.

“As for the butt... Sera’s is bigger...”

That was also true—Sera’s was massive. She and Haruno wore matching armor, but she always had a skirt on that went down to her ankles.

But I knew. Just once, I had seen them in a pair of wet and transparent shorts. Though she didn’t dress like that due to a butt-complex, it was simply dress code for female clerics.

On that note, Rium, who was sitting on top of me, was “small, small, and small.” She honestly was petite and looked even younger than her age. Though because of her decision to pursue studying magic from a young age, she was still young in mind, which struck a perfect balance with her outward appearance.

Roni was “average, average, and average.” She had the most balanced physique.

Clena, who appeared to be sulking a little, let out a sigh and sat down next to me. She normally wouldn’t come this close to me.

“...Well, whatever. Touya says he likes my body anyway.” She said, then flipped her silver hair to the side and rested her head on my shoulder. I couldn’t see her face, but it didn’t seem like she was forcing herself.

Rather, I tried to look at her face, but instead saw her cleavage peeking out from beneath her yuamigi. Haruno was a special case, but Clena was plenty big herself.

“I love you too, Lady Clena!”

Roni sat herself across from us. When the tub was smaller it could only fit two of us at once, so this was the first time we were bathing in such close proximity. Clena lifted her head, moved toward Roni and grabbed her hand.

“Thank you, Roni.”

“Heheheh.” Roni giggled sheepishly after being complimented by Clena. This endearing sight made me grin as well.

“Hm?”

“.....” I realized Rium was grabbing my hand as well. She wasn’t looking at me, but at Clena and Roni. Maybe she was jealous of them.

And so I wrapped my other free arm around her, and gave her a big hug. She shivered and stiffened up in surprise at first, but then relaxed and decided to trust me.

Our cheeks were at the same height, so Rium rubbed hers against mine. Rium happily squinted her eyes as I responded by rubbing back.

“Oh, no fair, Rium!” Roni noticed us immediately and latched on to me.

Clena watched us with the same gentle expression she’d had when she was watching Roni and Rium earlier.

This I could get used to. We continued leisurely soaking for a while after that.

We finished up a long bath session and changed into our pajamas, but we kept the flirty mood up until bedtime.

“Oh yeah, we gave an extra blanket to Rulitora, but do we have enough here? Though I guess even if we don’t, it’s not like we’ll catch a cold in here.”

“Don’t worry. We can store them in here, so we have plenty of extras.”

“...Ah, I see.”

I pulled an extra blanket out from our luggage, while Clena snuck a peek in admiration. Travelers in this world did everything they could to avoid excess luggage, so the very thought of having spares didn’t come easily. Thanks to my Unlimited Bath though, I didn’t have to worry about that. If it weren’t for that, I’d probably be thinking the same way Clena was right now.

“So yes, we do have enough for four people.” I said as I pulled out the extra blanket, but then felt a tug on my pajamas. I turned around to find Rium holding on to me a little.

“What’s wrong, Rium?”

“.....”

But she didn’t say anything in response. I peered at her, wondering, and then she looked straight at me and began to speak.

“...I want to sleep together.”

I was caught off guard for a moment.

I looked up at Clena and found the same expression on her that I had. I then looked at Roni, whose eyes were sparkling with excitement. Finally, I looked back at Clena as we smiled at each other.

“...Well, there’s no reason for us to sleep separately just because we have enough blankets.”

“Alright, let’s all sleep together tonight.”

One blanket definitely wouldn’t be enough for all of us, but two could work if we huddled together, and another two for the floor.

Rium wasn’t expressive by any means. But her cheeks looked a bit red now, and she had the faintest of smiles. It made me happy just looking at her.

That night, Clena, Roni, Rium, and I slept all huddled up next to each other.

As I lay down, Rium spoke up from beside me.

“Touya.”

“What is it?”

I tried to look in her direction, but before I could do so, I felt something touch my cheek. They were Rium’s small lips.

“...A goodnight kiss.” She said, then turned her cheek over to me. I immediately returned a peck on it.

“Hm?” I felt a gaze in my direction, so I looked past Rium to see Roni, who was looking at me with expectant eyes. I deduced what she was waiting for and sat up, and she also got up with a beaming smile.

“A goodnight kiss for you too, Roni.”

“Yes, please!”

I leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek, and she gave me three firm smooches on my cheek in return. Then she blushed while squealing in a high-pitched voice. It was so endearing.

“...And for you, the one who’s pretending to be asleep.”

Clena had turned over in the meantime and had her back to us. But her shoulders quivered in response to my words, so she was definitely only pretending to sleep. I didn’t want to leave any of my friends out. I wanted to give her a goodnight kiss, too. So I decided to tease her a little.

“If you don’t wake up, I’ll kiss you someplace else~”

Clena instantly sprung up, her face bright red.

“Wha, where in the world are you planning to—?!”

But I didn’t answer her question, and instead crawled toward her from underneath my blanket. She didn’t even move when I put my hands on her shoulders, and she squeezed her eyes shut with her face still beet red. I didn’t stop my approach, drew my face close, and gave her a passionate kiss.

“...Huh?”

On her forehead, not her cheek.

Clena let out a shriek. Where in the world was she thinking I’d kiss her?

“I said someplace else, not necessarily a weird one.”

“Wh-wh-wha...!”

Clena became even redder, until she was blushing all the way to her ears.

“!!!!!” She looked like steam could start spouting out of her head at any moment.

So I pushed her down and smothered her face with kisses.

The incessant downpour continued into the next day. It was less like a steady rainfall and more like a waterfall that had escaped the clouds.

At least it didn’t go on all day. There were distinct periods of time when no rain would fall. Though that didn’t necessarily mean clear skies—it was still cloudy and somber. It was about fifty-fifty overall.

When it was raining, we used stakes and a large tarp for a makeshift tent to rest ourselves. When it was cloudy, we focused on moving forward.

If it were just us, we could retreat inside the wagon, but we needed the cover to shield our horse from the wind and rain as well.

“Back in the settlement, we’d go hunting when it was cloudy.”

“This must be a tough season for sand lizardmen, since you’re so sensitive to humidity.”

“Maybe so, but our reservoirs rely on rainfall, so it affects us in more than one way.”

They disliked it, but couldn’t live without it. The Torano’o tribe and the rainy season had a complex relationship.

Fortunately, monsters were less active during this season. Sandworms were averse to the water too, but they hardly ever appeared within the void.

So whenever it was cloudy, we would continue traveling in our carriage, whether it was day or night. Rium had to sleep at night, but that wasn’t an issue in our carriage.

It was night at the moment, too. I was in the driver’s seat, but unfortunately it was too cloudy to see the moon or stars. There was hardly any greenery around us, only a wasteland of dirt and rocks. The darkness, too, made it a lonely sight. I summoned ten light spirits to illuminate our carriage and the surrounding area.

It had been three days since we entered the void. It had gotten much colder, but also soggier, since the last time we were here.

From where I sat, I could see Rulitora as he walked beside us, surveying our surroundings. During our travels, he kept himself mostly outside the carriage. He was faster on foot than on a horse, after all. Even though there was less monster activity now, we had only Rulitora to thank for being able to travel

both day and night.

I glanced inside the carriage to see Rium using Roni as a lap pillow.

“You’re surprisingly alert at night, Roni.”

“Well, I’m used to it~”

Back when it was just Clena and Roni, they had a strict master-and-servant relationship, so Roni must have been on night guard duty more often.

Clena had found a bag among our cargo that made for a comfortable pillow and was taking a nap. We rotated driver and rear guard duties, and it was currently Clena’s turn to sleep.

“Sir Touya, rain is coming.” Rulitora informed me from outside the carriage, twitching his nose.

“Is there any place we can stop?”

“How about that boulder over there?”

Rulitora pointed in the direction of a long, rectangular rock. It seemed big enough for us to make a simple tent with.

“Alright, let’s go. We should set up the tent before it starts raining.”

“Understood. I’ll go on ahead.”

No sooner had he stretched his tail parallel to the ground, leaned forward, and dashed off with impressive momentum. And just like that, his figure had all but vanished into the distance.

“Roni, we’ll be picking up speed too, so hold tight.”

“Got it.”

Roni wrapped her arms around Rium, who was still sleeping on her lap, then made sure to support Clena’s weight with her own, and I sped up the carriage.

When we arrived at the boulder, I was speechless. We had to check whether or not it was big enough to set up camp, but that had nothing to do with my reaction.

“...Hey, do these things appear naturally?”

The boulder was a perfect rectangular prism. It definitely didn't look like something you'd find in nature. It was slightly taller than Rulitora and long enough to fit both the horse and the carriage.

Clena had woken up and stepped out of the wagon, and ended up with the same expression as myself.

"Maybe it's... some sort of chiseled rock?"

"Like for construction purposes, you mean?"

"Right now most buildings are made from concrete, but I heard that in the past, they would use chiseled rocks like this."

She wasn't referring to the modern reinforced concrete I was familiar with, but something similar to what they used in ancient Rome. After studying all she could about the desert kingdom, she must have picked up some stuff about ancient architecture, as well.

In other words, this rock might have been used to build some structure long ago. It looked like a normal rock at first glance, but this could serve as evidence that the desert kingdom once stood in the center of the void.

"Well, we won't get anywhere by just looking at a rock. Let's leave the speculations for later," Clena said to me.

"Oh, you're right."

I remembered that we still needed to set up a tent before the rain arrived, so Rulitora and I took out a large tarp from the wagon. It was too big to keep inside the wagon, so we'd put it in the storage compartment underneath.

The tarp was made of monster fur and repelled water. It had four metal rings, one on each corner. Normally it was used as a divider for bathing and changing clothes on the road, but we were using it as a makeshift tent now.

"Okay, I'll be right back. Summon spirit!"

I pressed my hand against the rock and summoned spirits of the earth. Several protrusions, compressed to be pure black, formed a vertical column up the rock. It was an impromptu ladder. I used it to climb the rock, and Rulitora handed me one corner of the tarp by hooking his glaive through a ring.

“Summon a few more spirits!”

I rested the ring on top of the boulder and shot a black stake through it. I made the tip of the stake wider than the ring so it would stay in place as long as I didn’t cut off my MP or run out of power.

I took another ring to the top and secured it in the same way, before returning to the surface. I stretched the opposite edge of the tarp out so that it formed a triangle with the rock and the ground, then rooted the remaining two rings to the ground. This was our makeshift tent that would be shielding us from the rain.

“It’s so convenient to be able to summon earth spirits.”

“A normal person wouldn’t be able to compress it as much as you do.” Clena replied in exasperation to my sincere words.

It felt like a waste to have these spells be so underutilized, but seeing how the amount of MP was the only thing deciding their effectiveness, I couldn’t say much more.

“Anyway, about how far are we from the Sage’s Spring now?”

“I believe it’s only a little farther to the east,” Roni replied.

The travelers of this world used the stars to guide their path. They didn’t have the North Star to guide them, but they could derive their general direction from the locations of various constellations.

Having the sky be so cloudy that it covered all the stars was particularly inconvenient. The last time we had seen a star was the day before yesterday.

Since the positions of the constellations changed between seasons, this field of knowledge had advanced to become its own science. Of course not everyone was an expert, and for a traveler it was enough to just be able to figure out which direction was north.

In addition to that, we now had Rium, who could fly up on her flying disc when it wasn’t raining to check the whereabouts of the spring in the distance.

“We can even check our direction through flight, so we don’t need to worry about getting lost,” Rulitora laughed.

To be honest, I was apprehensive about traveling without a GPS, let alone a compass or map, but it was nothing out of the ordinary in this world. I just wrote it off as a culture gap.

Still, Rium even had a telescope that looked like opera glasses which she could use to make out the direction of the Sage's Spring, so it wasn't likely that we'd stray off course.

"Hm, the rain started."

"Wow, it's pouring! I wish it'd just rain until morning and then stop for good after that."

"Hahahah, that'd be great!"

And it wasn't like it was a gentle drizzle, either, more like a loud and unrelenting torrent. We rushed underneath the tent as we talked.

"It's pretty strong right now... looks like it won't clear up for a while."

"That works for us. Let's use the opportunity to rest up."

Traveling through the night put a greater toll on us, though we had no choice at the moment because of all the rain. Now that it was raining during the night for once, we should use the chance to get some rest.

"Let's dig a trench around us so that the rainwater doesn't seep in."

"That's a good idea. I'll help."

Clena and Roni were bluffing their way through the exhaustion, but I could tell they were tired. The time had come for me to be a man and let them rest. I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath and entrusted the sleeping Rium to them, while Rulitora and I got cracking.

"Ah, you should make that a little deeper."

"About this much?"

Geez, this journey had no intentions of letting up on me. But I felt a sense of accomplishment from all the effort we had put in together so far, a feeling I had never experienced in my old world.

The rain didn’t stop until just before noon the next day. Thanks to that, we were well rested and picked up the pace until we reached the Sage’s Spring.

The outer edges of the void weren’t so much a desert as they were a wasteland, but what we saw before our eyes was just like an oasis in the middle of the desert.

The spring was about the size of an elementary school pool. It was surprisingly big. Vegetation and colorful flowers in full bloom surrounded its edges, and right across from us stood two trees.

“...Isn’t it awfully clear around here?”

Astonishingly, the sky above it was bright and clear despite it being the rainy season.

It couldn’t have been a coincidence. Dark and gloomy clouds filled the sky all around it. There was a hole in the sky right above the spring, as if it were the eye of a typhoon.

“Is there a spell that can do this?”

“N-no, I mean, I’ve never heard of one that could...” Clena was at a loss for words, her eyes wide open in disbelief.

To me, this kind of weather was just as mysterious as the concept of magic, but for someone well versed in magic like her, the only thing that stood out as unusual was this particular phenomenon. Just another one of those culture gaps.

“The water is so clear...” Rium stepped out of the carriage and peered into the spring, impressed.

I stood next to her and looked into the water, which was clear enough that you could see all the way to the bottom. This would be a rare sight back in my world.

Clena, Roni, and Rulitora followed. The five of us stood before the spring.

“A normal traveler would be scooping this water up right around now.”

“But we have Sir Touya’s gift.”

“So who cares about spring water!”

Could you guys read the mood a little better?

That reminded me, I’d heard before that fish couldn’t actually live in water this clear. I wondered if that applied to this spring as well?

We were pretty set when it came to our water supply, so we had no reason to try our luck here.

“Oh yeah, there are a few other Sage’s Springs besides this one, right?”

“Yes. It’s part of the legend of the first sacred king, so I think they created a bunch of dupes to hide the location of the real one.”

According to legend, the first sacred king found the demon lord’s castle thanks to the guidance of a sage in a spring.

“So if we assume that the demon lord’s castle is in the desert kingdom, we can assume that this spring is the real one since it’s the closest?”

“That sounds about right.”

So we were currently standing on the site of the legend. Thinking about that kind of moved me.

“I wonder where the sage might be?”

“Uh, this story is 500 years old.”

You’d think he’d be long gone by now, but this fantasy world had me consider the fact that he might still be alive depending on his species. This was the only area where it hadn’t been raining, so it was perfectly reasonable to consider some power would still be at play here.

“Oh, a fish.”

“Huh, where?”

Rium pointed to an area below the taller tree, where a small fish was jumping out of the water.

The fish was so tiny, I was impressed that she even noticed it. And that there was still life, even in this spring in the middle of nowhere. It really took me by

surprise.

The fish leaped in and out of the water as it made its way toward us. Looking more closely, I could see that it had pretty large fins despite its small body. I couldn't tell what species it was, but its appearance reminded me of a fancy goldfish. The pseudo-goldfish made its way to us, popped its face out of the water, and...

"What's the matter, young'ns? Ain'tcha gon' drink the water?"

...started talking to us in human language.

Thanks to the Goddess of Light's blessing I was able to understand this world's speech, but judging by how flabbergasted the others looked, I guess he really was using actual words. Rulitora looked over our heads into the spring, amazed.

"I guess this really must be the Sage's Spring, with something so strange living in it."

"Hmm? That'd be me."

"What?"

"The sage."

"....."

"....."

"W-wait... This tiny fish is the sage?!"

"The very one."

The pseudo-goldfish—er, sage, rather—snapped his head to the side. Was that his way of trying to look smug?

"Come now, I bet yer knackered from travelin' through this wasteland. Take a sip from the spring, travelers!"

"Oh, no thank you, we have plenty of water," Roni responded politely, even though she was talking to a fish.

After hearing that, the sage looked away and muttered. "Pft! If ye'd just drank

the water I would've turned ye into my loyal puppets."

Well that was dark.

"Guess that leaves me no choice!"

"...Summon spirit."

I didn't know what was going on, but I could feel that he wasn't on our side. I quickly summoned earth spirits, raised the floor of the spring, and launched the fish-sage onto the shore.

"Hack... can't breathe..."

The self-proclaimed sage was flopping about on the ground. Now then, what should we do?

"Let's put him in a bucket for now. We don't want him to escape."

"Make it quick. I don't want his death on my conscience."

We figured putting him back into the spring would get us in even more trouble, so we took a bucket from the Unlimited Bath and captured the sage inside. If he tried anything again, we could just flip the bucket over.

"...This thing is the sage who guided the first sacred king?"

Unfortunately, the self-proclaimed sage was in no condition to answer Rium's question.

But would he answer our questions just because we caught him? I had my doubts, but there would be no point to letting him die here, so I rushed to get a bucket from the Unlimited Bath.

"Why you bastards! What'dya put in this water?!"

I quickly filled the bucket with water, grabbed the goldfish sage with my fingers, and tossed him inside. The first thing out of the self-proclaimed sage's mouth was that cry. How rude.

The self-proclaimed... no, pseudo-goldfish is fine. He was struggling and squirming around for some reason, but I couldn't tell why. Naturally I couldn't read a goldfish's facial expressions, so I had no idea what he was thinking.

“Th-this water is loaded with MP, dagnabbit! How’m I gonna use my magic?! What did’ya do, ya scalawag?!”

“Huh? What are you going on about?”

So that flopping around earlier was just him trying to use a spell. Of course, our guards were still up from the first attempt, but I didn’t know his magic would be cut off like this. Because of my Unlimited Bath, no less.

“Maybe the water from your gift is different from natural water?”

“Gift?! Don’t go tellin’ me yer one o’ them summoned heroes?!”

The pseudo-goldfish responded immediately to Clena’s pondering.

“Oh, right, the first sacred king was also a summoned hero. So he would know.”

“I see, so ye were summoned here... figures...”

I hadn’t given him a direct answer, but it looked like the pseudo-goldfish had connected the dots. So all that talk about being the sage wasn’t a bluff.

I didn’t know if the pseudo-goldfish would answer my question, so I turned it to Clena.

“What’s different about the water from my gift?”

“Magic works by channeling your MP into your surroundings and interfering with the spirits around you.”

I nodded. That much was clear to me. To give you a simple example, cleric magic worked by finding a path to interfering with those spirits through a blessing from a goddess.

Clena’s spirit magic granted her paths beyond the ones a goddess blessing could give. For Rium’s crystal magic, she could substitute spirits with specialized crystals and cause interference through items with crystals attached to them. During our battle with the sandworms, she had used MP to cause interference and transform her pencil-sized spear into a larger spear. The crystals were an alternative to finding a path to the spirits, so the tools made for the temple were called holy tools. Rium seemed to have a few more of them on hand, but since we had been traveling through the raining void ever since that battle, I

had yet to see any of them.

Either way, it appeared that the pseudo-goldfish couldn't use any magic right now.

"But right now, this guy is in water created with Touya's MP. Basically, your MP stops him from interfering with surrounding spirits."

"So even if he tried to use magic... Touya's MP water keeps him from doing so." Rium, who was kneeling next to Roni, staring at the pseudo-goldfish in the bucket, continued explaining.

"I had no idea the water from my Unlimited Bath could be used that way..."

"Magic-sealing water, huh..." Rulitora mumbled.

That pretty much summed up what he had to say about interference blocking. It wasn't all that convenient, though.

"It can't block my crystal magic." Rium showed me another one of her silver spears with a proud look on her face.

The way to conduct crystal magic was by holding the object in your hands, so it would still work even when surrounded by my water. Even if you called it magic-sealing water, it could only seal certain types of magic.

"Bah... Why'd you lot have to come here? It's jes an empty wasteland. Ain't no place to wander around all willy-nilly-like."

The pseudo-goldfish became a little more cooperative after realizing his overwhelming disadvantage. Though I couldn't say his attitude improved.

"First I wanna ask—are you the same sage who guided the hero 500 years ago?"

"You betcha! I tell ya I get no respect at all!"

Why should I show you respect?

"I have a question, too. What do you do to the people you brainwash after drinking your water?"

"Ain't it obvious?! I take 'em outta the void! Wipe their memories clean!"

I sort of expected the first part of his explanation, but that second part bugged me.

“Which means there’s something hidden in the void.”

“And that might just be the demon lord’s castle, considering how this guy was the one who guided the hero.”

“It’s the only possibility, when you think about it.”

“So this is the desert kingdom.”

“Hadesopolis!”

Everyone prodded him at once.

You could tell he wasn’t expecting the name Hadesopolis to come up. The pseudo-goldfish couldn’t hide his surprise. Or, is it right to say he was surprised? It seemed that way from the atmosphere, but I’d never seen the face of a surprised goldfish before, so I couldn’t say for sure.

“Hah, hahahahahah! Right y’are, I brainwash and chase off anyone who comes near Hadesopolis.”

So that was it. Since he knew the name Hadesopolis, he must have been a former resident there, or at least had some connection to it.

“Why shouldn’t I go there? I was summoned here and told to defeat the demon lord as soon as he revived... Is he still asleep or something?”

“That shouldn’t be the case. It’s said that one of the demon lord’s surviving generals carried their corpse away.”

“What, really? Who was it?”

“Don’t ask me. But this is a famous story, you know?”

I did find out about it after all our research on the first sacred king, but it seemed this pseudo-goldfish wasn’t clued in. He probably had no means of getting that information.

“...What are you lot after? Treasures?”

“Well, that too, but like I said I was summoned here to defeat the demon lord, and since we’ve found evidence of history being tampered with, you can’t

blame us for wanting to dig deeper.”

“Hmm...”

The pseudo-goldfish swam in circles in the bucket. It looked peaceful on the outside, but with this guy we knew something ugly was rearing inside.

“...Alright, if ye must know, I shall tell you what I know.”

“What’s the catch?”

“I do have one condition... Ye hafta take me along to Hadesopolis.”

“I see...”

I had no idea why he was here in the first place, but there was no place for him to go in that goldfish body. So his request to take him to Hadesopolis was perfectly reasonable.

“Sir Touya, what should we do?”

“Let’s see...”

Still, we had no reason to lower our guard just yet. He seemed like someone who’d take a mile after being given an inch. I replied to him, trying to uphold any and all assertiveness.

“Everything depends on the information you give us. We’ll get to the desert kingdom with or without you.”

“Whut the...! Hah... Hahahah! You jackanape! D’ya think ye can get to Hadesopolis just by wanderin’ around the desert?!”

“This guy seems awfully confident...”

Clena had a point. He seemed particularly sure that we’d never find the place at the rate we were going. There was a secret to be uncovered here. I could feel it.

And so I thought. What could we conclude from the information we knew so far?

“Not a single person has been able to find the desert kingdom in the 500 years since the demon lord’s defeat, right?”

“Yeah, though I don’t know how many have gone to search for it in the first place.”

“The mere fact that it exists is hidden, so treasure hunters usually don’t even bother.”

“Ah, but they do show up! The bloodsuckers!!” The pseudo-goldfish rattled on, agitated. Huh, so his fins stiffened when he got emotional.

“Even crystal mages have tried locating it from the sky, but they couldn’t find a trace of it.”

“...Maybe the desert kingdom really doesn’t exist.”

“Sir Touya?!”

I blurted that out after thinking about Rium’s comment. Roni practically screamed, unable to ignore me.

“No, I meant that maybe it doesn’t really exist *in the desert*.”

“What do you mean?” Clena asked me dubiously.

“You remember how the Torano’o elder said they destroyed the gate that ran underground?”

“Yeah, he said they destroyed it to block off the demons that kept emerging.”

“They destroyed that?!” The pseudo-goldfish screamed this time, but we ignored him and continued talking.

“So we’re heading there right now because we think it leads to the desert kingdom, but does it really?”

“I-it’s true that our ancestors never went to check what was inside...” Rulitora said, troubled. But he was a bit off the mark from what I was getting at.

“It’s called the desert kingdom, but is it really located *in* the desert?”

“We don’t know that until we’ve...”

“.....”

Clena looked troubled now, too.

The pseudo-goldfish was silent for once. I wanted to see his reaction, but it

was hopeless trying to discern the facial expressions of a goldfish.

“It’s said that the gate leads to an underground tunnel, but that tunnel doesn’t necessarily lead back up to the desert.”

Alright. I’d have to ask a trick question now.

“Clena, do you remember the library in the temple at Ceresopolis?”

“Huh? I do.”

There were two options, but I chose the one I thought more likely and continued to talk.

“There was something written in a book in there. About how the desert kingdom was already submerged deep underground.”

“What the devil?! How much d’you know, you fool?!”

“So it really is submerged.”

“...What?!”

He let the cat out of the bag. I looked at the pseudo-goldfish with a victorious smile. He peeked out of the water, flapping his lips in disbelief. He looked like he was waiting to be fed.

“You mean it’s an underground city...? Would that really exist?”

“No, I think it’s more likely that the city was above ground at first, and then sunk.”

It just seemed more plausible from a practical standpoint. The void hadn’t become like this naturally—something must have happened in its center.

Mountains in the north, a fissure running along the west, and an ocean to the south. We could only assume that there was no large obstacle that kept it from spreading in the east. We had surmised that the desert kingdom was at the center of it all, but it was hard to imagine that the kingdom had remained intact after what happened to the rest of the region.

“This is just my theory, but what if the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was the root of all this? That would explain the reservoirs around the Torano’o settlement.”

If those craters were the aftermath of a fight, then the rest of the region could have easily been wiped out if they'd used their full power. Assuming that were the case, I could understand why they wanted it covered up. The aftermath of the damage was too severe.

If you think about it that way, it's no wonder you wouldn't be able to find anything by looking down into the desert from the sky. And I could understand why nobody had seen a trace of it for all this time.

If I was right, then the next question to arise would be whether the underground tunnel lead to the desert kingdom, but that was something we would have to find out for ourselves.

"...It's possible."

Everyone else agreed with me and our gazes gathered at the pseudo-goldfish in the bucket. He popped his head out of the water, flapped his lips, then briefly dipped back in the water and drew a circle. He then reemerged and opened his mouth with a pensive look on his face— not to flap his lips, but to speak.

"...Lemme jes say yer not wrong." He acknowledged it. A witness from the legend itself.

The pseudo-goldfish spoke to me with perhaps a resigned expression.

"Alright, alright. Take me with ya. I'll guide ye to the nearest gate. If that one ain't it, I'll tell you the location of another one."

The nearest gate must be referring to the one the Torano'o tribe destroyed. It was possible we couldn't cross it any longer, but I was grateful for the information. I looked over to everyone else to discuss the matter.

"Will this be okay?"

"He'll be fine away from the spring as long as we have the Unlimited Bath, right?"

"We have to be careful in case he tries pull a fast one on us again."

Roni was worried about the pseudo-goldfish's health, while Rulitora was still wary of another surprise attack. Both of them had valid points.

"He'll be fine. I mean, it's not like we're hurting for water. But just in case,

let’s not put him inside the Unlimited Bath.”

“As for the surprise attacks, we should be fine as long as Touya’s water can prevent him from using magic. But let’s make sure to change the water frequently.”

Clena was wondering how long my MP would remain in the water after taking it out from the Unlimited Bath. I had no answer to that, so her idea of changing the water was the best plan.

“Looks like everything’s settled.”

“Yup. He’s a valuable source of information, as an actual witness.”

“I’m sure he’d have difficulty making a move from there, but I’ll keep a close eye just in case.”

“We’re keeping him in the bucket, right?”

We all voiced our opinions after deciding we’d be keeping the pseudo-goldfish. I turned around to convey the information to him, but found Rium, who hadn’t participated in the conversation, squatting in front of the bucket.

“Can I feed him bread?”

“...Well, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Her mind was in a completely different place than ours.

Third Bath – Trip Through Hades

It had been 36 hours since we left the spring with the self-proclaimed sage/pseudo-goldfish in our bucket, but it hadn't rained once. The area around the Sage's Spring was mysteriously untouched by the rain, which was apparently the pseudo-goldfish's doing. He might have not wanted the spring to be contaminated by rainwater. Or perhaps the spring water was filled with the fish's MP just like how my Unlimited Bath water was filled with my own, and he didn't want the rainwater to mix with that. Considering he was planning to brainwash us after we drank the water, my bet was on the latter.

The pseudo-goldfish was now resting in a bucket placed inside a hemp-woven basket, which was hanging beside the driver's seat. The shaking shouldn't be so severe compared to if we'd left the bucket on the carriage floor.

"Straaaange... we should be seein' it by now," said the pseudo-goldfish as he peered out into the distance from the edge of the bucket, cocking his head to the side. At least, that's what it looked like he was doing to me.

I called out to Rulitora, who was walking alongside the carriage, from my driver's seat.

"How much of the gate did the Torano'o tribe destroy, exactly? Was there anything left at all?"

"I wasn't aware of the gate enough to ask that much, so I can't say..." Rulitora had a perplexed expression as he mulled my question over.

At least I could understand *his* expressions. Even more so if I looked at his tail. It slowly undulated whenever he was lost in thought.

Back in the settlement, I had witnessed some of the lizardmen discussing something, all waving their tails up and down as they were wracking their brains. Now that was a sight.

"Hmm, I think the place the Torano'o elder told us about is still a little farther from here."

“Correct. I saw a bunch of rocks piled up flat ahead.”

As I grumbled from the driver’s seat, Rium came back down from surveying the area on her flying disc.

It must have been hot out there. As soon as she came down, she went inside the carriage to sip the water Clena had given her.

It wasn’t uncommon in this world to follow a map to a village deep in the mountains, only to find that said village had been long abandoned. The maps here were far less accurate than modern Japan’s, so in the end you could only rely on your own eyes.

Besides that, we had Rium, who could scout our surroundings from the sky. The sun may have been harsh on her, but her skills were indispensable.

“Looks like they destroyed it pretty thoroughly. Alright, let’s check it out. Go rest for now, Rium. And Roni, make sure the goldfish doesn’t fall out.”

“Got it! I’ll protect Goldfish!” Roni replied with an energetic voice even though the inside of the carriage was far from cool.

It seemed that goldfish didn’t exist as a species in this world, so everyone started treating “Goldfish” as the fish’s name. I once heard that the goldfish were actually a mutation created from breeding crucian carp for display purposes, and thus weren’t a natural evolution. That would explain why they didn’t exist in this world.

In any case, we should hurry to the place that Rium spotted.

“I’ll go on ahead.” Rulitora said, then assumed his forward-bent stance and sprinted off.

I sped up the carriage so that we wouldn’t get too far separated from him.

We arrived at a giant pile of rubble that was hard to imagine used to be a gate once. They had done a thorough job destroying it, leveling it to just a smidge below my own height. If it weren’t for a piece of rubble that looked like it used to be a man-made pillar, we would have never guessed that this used to be a structure.

“Yeah... we can’t exactly enter through this.” Goldfish looked agape from inside the bucket Roni was holding.

Even if there was a tunnel underneath all this, it’d be an immense amount of work to clear all the debris.

“Well, we have no choice. Leave this to me.”

“I’ll help, too.”

Rulitora stepped forward, followed by Rium. She’d puffed up her chest. Perhaps she was in possession of an item in her crystal magic collection that we could use for this task.

Roni started talking from beside me.

“Sir Touya, there’s a tunnel under here, right? How about we dig a hole above it and enter from there?”

“Oh yeah, we could do that. And we do have some digging tools in our cargo.”

“...Touya, what about your earth spirit summoning? That spell was originally supposed to be used in these situations.”

“...Oh.”

I had completely forgotten. Clena gave me an exasperated look.

“Bwahahah, fools! This ‘ere tunnel was put together usin’ every last one o’ Hades’ magic techniques! As if some measly spell from yer Earth Goddess temple would put a dent in it, hah!” Goldfish laughed heartily, scoffing at our conversation.

Though I didn’t really have a comeback, since it *was* a stupid conversation, I could, however, say one thing.

“But this gate is still destroyed, isn’t it?”

“Well...” Goldfish’s laugh faded instantly.

That’s right. This tunnel was created using the magic techniques from Hades. The gate should have been part of the tunnel, but the Torano’o tribe destroyed it long ago.

“This is just a bunch of rocks now, so why don’t we try?”

“Grrr... Well maybe the weather just did a number on it over the years?!”

I disregarded the peeved Goldfish, summoned some earth spirits, and started clearing a hole from within the mountain of rubble. More specifically, I used the spirits to change the overall shape and pushed the debris in the center to the sides.

It took a bit of time, but eventually a slope made from a strange material began to show itself from under the dirt and debris. So this was the underground tunnel that was made using the magic of Hades.

I tried changing the shape of the slope using my earth spirits, but it wasn’t quite working. So Goldfish wasn’t all talk, after all.

“Y... Y’ain’t half bad, for a brat...”

Goldfish couldn’t hide his surprise, perhaps from seeing the tunnel open up for the first time in hundreds of years. Or maybe it was from my magic, having cleared such a large hole in the ground.

“I’m glad it’s a slope and not stairs. The carriage could pass though it if it were a bit wider.”

“Hmph, what did’ya expect? The army used this tunnel for transportation.”

“So the demons came out from here as well...” Rulitora muttered as he stared inside.

After hearing that, Clena started looking uneasy.

“That doesn’t mean the demons are still there, right?”

“No idea. I dunno what it’s like these days.”

“Should I take a look by myself first?”

“No, I bet there’s no light in there. I’ll go, too.”

We left the carriage to Clena and the rest, while Rulitora and I took the lead and entered the underground tunnel that supposedly lead to the desert kingdom, Hadesopolis. I summoned five light spirits around us, we equipped our weapons, and made our way inside while staying alert of our surroundings.

Inside was an arch-shaped corridor made from stone. It was wide enough for

two of our carriages to pass each other with room to spare. The ground was paved in stone, made from the same material as the slope behind us.

I was afraid of a gas buildup inside, but Rulitora's nose hadn't detected anything unusual, so we decided to continue on. We walked for another 100 meters or so but didn't detect anything living, much less any demons.

"There's nothing here."

"What if the tunnel is also blocked up at the other end, making this an enclosed space?"

"...That's possible."

It was easy to imagine if Hadesopolis had really been destroyed.

"We should continue with everyone instead of scouting by ourselves from here."

"I agree. At this rate, it'd be more dangerous to leave Rium and the others by themselves."

Especially with Goldfish around.

"Alright, let's go back."

"Yes. We still need to be on guard, but we should go on as a group."

We ended our investigation there and returned to get the rest of the gang.

"I was wondering what it'd be like after all the years underground, but..."

"It's much cleaner than I expected."

Those were Clena's and Roni's first words after seeing the tunnel illuminated by the light spirits.

It was indeed much cleaner than I had imagined, too. I thought it'd at least be covered in moss or something.

"Oh yeah, Clena. Can you use spirit magic to ventilate an area?"

"You mean run air through it? I can keep the spirits around us, but that's about it."

"Could you do that for us? We're fine right now, but if the tunnel is sealed off

on the other end, then the air might have stagnated deeper inside and we won't be able to breathe."

"There might also be a gas buildup." Rium responded to my worries in kind.

Even if there wasn't any gas, if the tunnel wasn't ventilated, there would be less oxygen the further we went. We couldn't exactly carry an oxygen tank with us, so we had to ensure some other way of keeping the air flowing. And the other solution I arrived at was Clena's spirit magic.

Maybe Goldfish could do something about it, but I was too afraid of letting him use magic to ask.

"It would use a lot of my MP, but I'll try."

"Sorry about this."

"Don't worry. If I do it right, then I might get a crazy amount of MP like you."

I couldn't relate, but I knew that it took a lot of stamina to keep using MP. I apologized to Clena, but she gave me a smile in return.

Rulitora took the lead, while Roni and Rium stayed toward the back of the carriage and kept watch behind us. Clena concentrated on maintaining her wind spirits, and I stayed in the driver's seat as we progressed through the tunnel.

It was chilly inside since the sun didn't reach, so we all had our cloaks on. I also changed into my metal armor for its higher defensive capabilities.

Naturally, Goldfish would end up my conversation partner as he hung beside the driver's seat. But since everyone else was working so hard, I was willing to surrender myself to the fish's ramblings.

"How much do you lot know about the demon lord?"

"I only know what's been recorded in the first sacred king's biographies."

"Well, at least ya done yer homework fer someone who got summoned here."

"I've been researching what I can."

"I s'pose ya weren't just gonna submit to the wishes of yer summoners, huh?"

“...I guess not.”

What with information on the desert kingdom having been sealed off and all. And us not knowing anything about the demon lord’s true form, either.

If the desert kingdom had a sacred king like Jupiteropolis did, then this might end up in a war between two kingdoms.

“Oh yeah, the Goddess of Light summons people who’re still alive, right?”

“...What?”

“Hm? Or were you dead?”

“No, I never died...”

It’s not like I had any memories of a truck about to hit me before I got summoned.

“The Goddess of Darkness doesn’t forcibly summon beings that’re still alive. Her summoning gives new life to already deceased souls.”

“Huh? Wait, so you’re saying... that there’s such a thing as heroes of the Goddess of Darkness?” I asked, dumbfounded, but Goldfish looked at me like I was a fool.

“This brat, I swear... What d’ya think the demon lord is?”

“...Huh? What do you mean? So, the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was a battle between two summoned heroes?”

“That’s right. And here you say ya studied up? You don’t know jack.”

In my defense, the temple had covered all of this up.

I turned to Clena, but she only looked back and shook her head in silence. It seemed she didn’t know this, either.

“Don’t tell me you lot don’t know about the 16 demon generals, either?”

“I know that the living ones took the sealed demon lord and fled.”

“Sayin’ they fled... Why, it’s an insult to their greatness.” Goldfish took offense as he continued talking.

This was all information on the demon lord that no one else knew. I perked

my ears to his story.

“The Hadesopolis army—or the demon lord army, as those Jupiter wretches would call ’em. Among ’em were 16 generals who’d managed to achieve great feats.”

“So they were called the 16 demon generals? Huh, so you guys called them demons, too.”

“No matter how ya feel about it, that title was a highly honorable one to followers of the Goddess of Darkness. ’Twas proof of havin’ received the blessing of the Goddess.”

Another one of those culture gaps.

“Anyways. There were 16 demon generals working under the demon lord. The Dragon General. The Storm General. The Silver Sword. The Golden Armor. The Guardian. The Enchanting Jester. The Tyrant Saint. The Queen of Night. The Laughing Lion. ...Well, all of ’em shoulda died 500 years ago.”

“What, they’re all dead?”

“Some were attacked on expeditions by those Jupiter bastards. Others were caught in the crossfire during the battle between the demon lord and the first sacred king. Well, a lot happened.”

So those were all nicknames. Some of those names piqued my interest, but I kept any questions to myself.

“Aside from the ones who died, the Beast King, the Masked Cleric, and the Five Great Demon Generals should all still be alive. ”

“Five Great Demon Generals?”

“They were all summoned from another world like the demon lord. Along with the other eleven generals that used to be part of the Hadesopolis army, they formed the honorable 16 Demon Generals of Hades.”

Goldfish looked proud. Every other nation, including Jupiter, only spoke ill of the demon lord, but to a resident of Hadesopolis he must have been someone they looked up to and revered.

“Speaking of which, I got a visit from the Beast King soon after the battle. It

was then that I learned of the demon lord's defeat at the hand of the first sacred king, and how many of the generals had their lives taken."

"....."

The Goldfish stared distantly. He must have been through a lot.

"Um, did the five great demon generals have nicknames as well?"

"Hm? 'Course they did. The Dark Prince. The White-Faced Ogre. The Dark Giant. The Demon Dog. The Flame Devil. All of them were summoned from another world like the demon lord and given new life."

They all had pretty strong-sounding names.

"When you say they were given new life, does that mean they were raised from the dead?"

"No, they became a part of the demon race thanks to the blessing from the Goddess of Darkness."

"The demon race..."

Though it had been 500 years, I wanted to know if they were fellow humans from my world—but it seemed like they had given up their humanity. That was the only way they'd still be alive now, 500 years later

Besides the five great demon generals that were summoned, the other generals had also been blessed by the Goddess of Darkness and achieved power surpassing that of any ordinary human. It was the same basic concept as the Goddess of Light granting us our gifts. I wonder if there was a general who could summon baths?

"By the way, that Prince, is it who I think it is?"

"Aye, he was the demon lord's kid."

"So they were summoned as parent and child, huh."

"I believe one o' the generals even died by takin' up the role of the demon lord's rear guard, givin' him the chance to escape unharmed..."

If that was true, then the demon lord sure had a loyal army. I mean, it's not like I suddenly thought the demon lord's army was full of good people, but it

did change my impression of them somewhat.

Nonetheless, Goldfish's stories were packed with new information. He really was alive 500 years ago. Or maybe he had even been blessed by the Goddess of Darkness? That would explain how he had stayed alive for 500 years.

This tunnel was so devoid of life it was almost unsettling. It wasn't the worst thing having to listen to Goldfish reminisce while we made our way.

"Oh, and the demon lord..."

It had been three days since we entered the underground tunnel. Goldfish had continued telling his stories whenever we weren't sleeping or eating. The only times we were freed of it were when we were inside the Unlimited Bath.

We hadn't encountered any other living beings, so Rulitora kept watch on Goldfish during the night. I apologized to him, but he laughed it off, saying it was a good way to kill time. Though he probably couldn't stand listening to Goldfish all day long, so during the day he'd stray a short distance ahead of us to scout out the area.

The majority of Goldfish's stories were just bragging. Almost none of it contained any notable information. All we'd learned could be summarized by saying that the demon lord army was a bunch of gallant, determined warriors.

The battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord took place about 500 years ago. More accurately, it was somewhere between 400 and 500 years ago. At the time, Japan was nearing the end of the Muromachi period and entering the Sengoku period. People summoned then would have had plenty of battle experience.

"By the way, what was the demon lord's name?"

"That would be Lord Amann Naga."

If I remembered correctly, Naga was the name of an Indian deity whose upper half was human and lower half serpent. The demon lord had been blessed by the Goddess of Darkness and granted superhuman powers, but maybe he also had given up his humanity and become half-serpent as well.

There was a "Demon Dog" among the Five Great Demon Generals as well, but

maybe they were literally a dog, or a demi-human with the head of a dog.

Rulitora suddenly came back holding his glaive, which had a light spirit attached to the tip. We'd applied this technique to create a portable light source for him.

"Sir Touya, the path ahead is blocked."

"I knew it."

Apparently there was rubble blocking the road.

The tunnel was being ventilated thanks to Clena's wind spirits, but without that, the stagnant air would have had us gasping for breath by now.

"Alright, let me open up a hole."

There was no choice but for me to remove the rubble blocking our path. I stepped down from the carriage and approached the rubble. It looked like it was an accumulation of sediment and the materials used to build the tunnel. It should be a piece of cake with my earth summoning. I summoned the spirits as I placed my hand on the rubble.

"Follow behind me." I said, and Rulitora, Clena, Roni, and Rium all nodded.

I used the spell to burrow our way through the rubble, but no matter how much I dug, we were only met with more rubble. I figured just one portion of the tunnel had collapsed, but that might not have been the case.

Come to think of it, there was the story that Hadesopolis had sunk underground. Maybe the road leading to it had also completely collapsed and was gone now.

Even if we kept going like this, we might not be able to reach Hadesopolis. I was doubtful, but we kept progressing through the tunnel as I dug.

After a while, my hand suddenly lost contact with the dirt and I lost balance as I hit an air socket. I pulled my arm back, and light shone through the hole it had left behind. I thought we were underground this entire time, but it looked like we had connected back to the outside world.

My spell had cut off since losing my balance. I summoned the earth spirits

again and widened the hole so our carriage could pass through.

“What in the world...?”

After I opened the hole, an unbelievable sight leaped into my vision. A city... no, more like a castle?

The ground was sloping downward like we were inside a vortex, and the hole had led us to the outer edge of it. The buildings on the outer edge had collapsed and were slanted downward, but from what I could see in the distance, the buildings near the center were still fine.

“Ah, yes... that there building is the demon lord’s castle.”

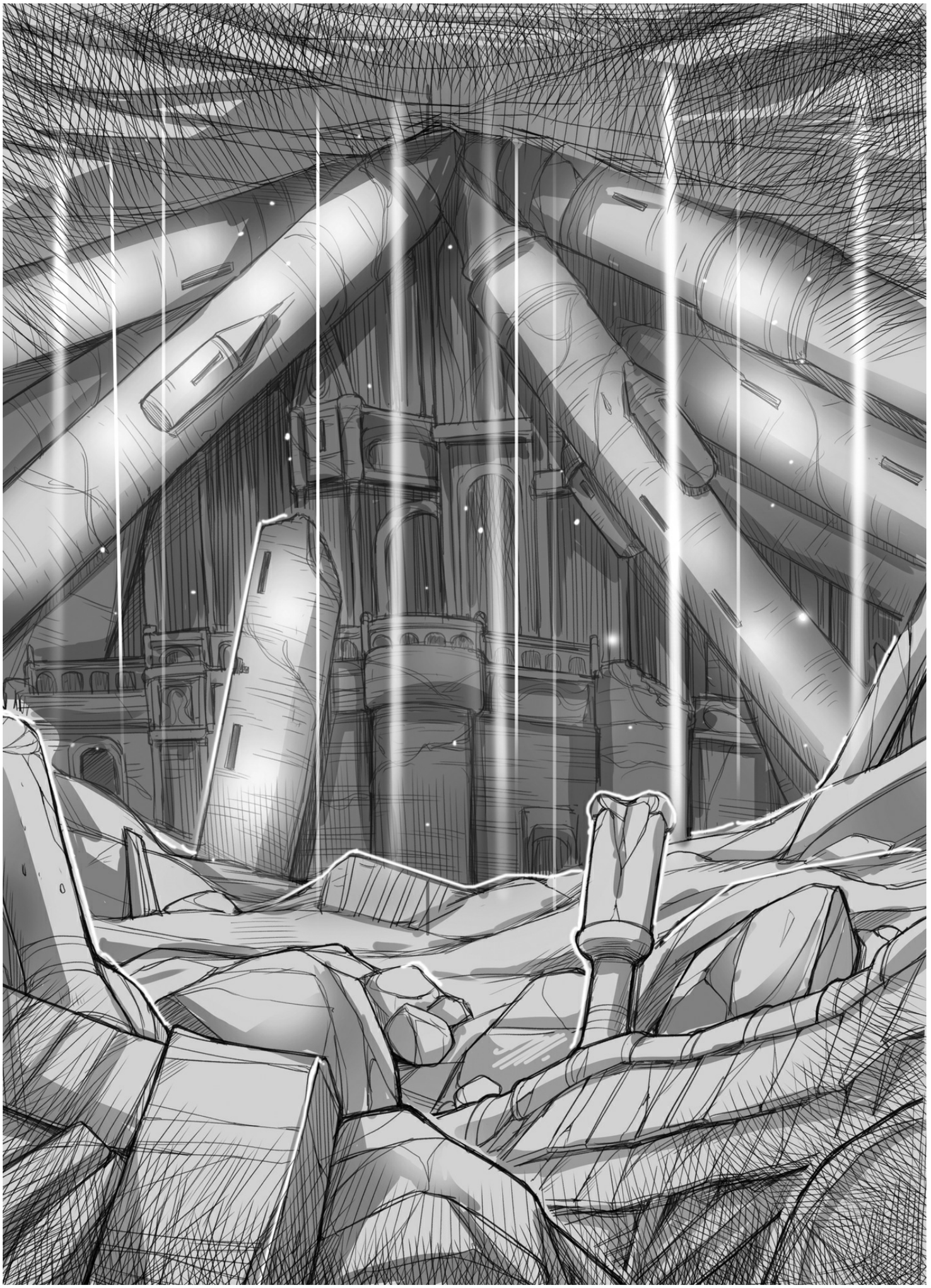
“So this is definitely Hadesopolis?”

“Aye, aye. This here’s Hadesopolis’ city center. It’s all still here...”

“By city center, you mean that there are other parts of the city outside of this?”

“Sad to say, but this seems to be the only part that survived,” Goldfish answered Clena’s question. He seemed so occupied with the sight, though, that his reply felt only halfhearted.

Looking up, I saw something like a dome made of stone, streams of sand seeping from its cracks. Somehow a tall tower had fallen from the outer edges toward the castle in the city center, and now both of them were keeping each other in place, creating a space shielding everything under it from the sand.



“The tower of the 16 demon generals. That tower had a barrier that protected the city center. Huh, it continued protecting the demon lord’s castle even after it withered...” Goldfish muttered in earnest.

I had thought it was an awfully tall tower, but now I knew why.

After the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord, the center of Hadesopolis—the demon lord’s castle—sunk into the earth, and the desert in the void enveloped it all. The collapsed tower had formed a dome, protecting everything under it from the sand above. It was still fulfilling its original purpose.

No wonder no one had been able to find it from above ground. The streams of sand probably looked like quicksand from the other side.

Sunlight was filtering down from the spots where the sand fell. The demon lord’s castle, faintly visible from that light, felt unreal to me, like a dream or an illusion.

I instinctively pinched my cheek, but it just hurt. I wasn’t dreaming. The reality of it all started seeping in.

We had finally reached it— The demon lord’s kingdom, Hadesopolis.

“Hey, brat! Move it!”

Stupid fish, just let me bask in this for a while longer.

Though I described it as a vortex, the slant wasn’t too harsh, so we were able to continue in our carriage without too much trouble. I let Roni take charge of the driver’s seat, while Rulitora and I walked outside the carriage, armed to the teeth. Rium was hovering above us on her flying disc.

“Clena, is your MP alright?”

“I should be fine... but don’t expect me to use any more spells.”

The outside air was flowing in along with the sand, so we didn’t need the wind spirits for ventilation anymore. But Clena had been keeping those spirits around the entire time until we arrived here, so she had drained her MP to the point of exhaustion. We’d decided to let her rest inside the carriage for now.

Our first order of business should be finding a place to rest ourselves. I asked Goldfish, who was still inside the basket by the driver's seat,

"Hey, Goldfish. Do you know any large buildings we could enter with our carriage?"

"The demon lord's castle."

"Besides that."

That was our final destination, so we wanted to take a breather before that.

"The temple, then. It's got a wide gate and there's a courtyard within."

"You don't mean... The temple of the Goddess of Darkness?"

"I don't see any other ones around, do you?"

"Ceresopolis had temples for both the Goddess of Light and Goddess of Earth."

"This kingdom ain't that blasphemous."

"...Is blasphemy the issue here?"

"You tell me..."

I looked at Rulitora, confused, but he just cocked his head at me. I mean, I didn't think Ceres was blasphemous.

"Anyway, just lead us to the temple."

"...Fine, fine."

We proceeded through the ruined city, led by Goldfish.

"It's not as run down as I thought it would be."

Once we entered the city, I was surprised by the good state most of the buildings were left in. The area under the dome must have been pretty well shielded from the weather over the years. Though that also meant human bones hadn't eroded either, and were scattered all over the place.

I glanced behind me to see if the girls were doing alright. Clena noticed me and sat up straight, hiding any apprehension. Roni over in the driver's seat, however, looked nervous. Rium was stoically drifting above us, but looking

closely, I noticed that she was avoiding looking down. I couldn't blame her for being scared.

Another thing that caught me by surprise was the aqueduct running beside the street—or rather, what used to be one. I looked inside to find sand running through it instead of water.

According to Goldfish, magic had been used to circulate water throughout the city. That spell was still active today, and it was now circulating the falling sand instead of water. Goldfish theorized that this might have been preventing the streets from being buried under sand.

Roni asked timidly from the driver's seat, "Do you think the temple might be buried in sand?"

"The temple's completely roofed, including the courtyard, so it's probably fine."

"It's an indoor courtyard?"

"Do ye think the temple of the Goddess of Darkness would allow sunshine into its gardens?"

"...I guess not."

So that was how they showed their faith. When I thought about it, it made sense.

Rulitora, who had taken the vanguard, called out to Goldfish without turning around.

"With the state of these buildings, I can't tell which is which... Are we on the right path to the temple?"

"Dunno."

"What?!" Rulitora spun around, his voice in disarray.

Rium came back down on her flying disc, and I impulsively faced his direction as well.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"All's I know is the way these streets were before everything came crashin'

down.

I couldn't tell ya where we are with the city like this."

"....."

Rium was speechless. Though when I thought about it, we should have expected as much.

I approached the carriage and asked Goldfish, "Then where are we headed now?"

"If we head down the main street toward the demon lord's castle, we should reach the city plaza. I should be able to remember how to get to the temple from there."

"Does the plaza have some sort of landmark?"

"There's a statue of the demon lord."

"I see."

In other words, if we didn't know where we were right now, we just needed to get to a place we *did* know. I was uncertain whether the statue was still in one piece or not, but as long as the pedestal was still there, it should work as a landmark for the plaza.

We advanced down the road for a while, but then a number of figures appeared before us.

"...Residents?"

"Of course not." Clena took a jab at my inane question.

Those figures weren't humans, but human *bones*. They were armed with rusty hatchets and moss-covered clubs.

"It's my first time seeing something like this. Are they skeletons?"

"Maybe they're ghosts?"

"There are spells to reanimate skeletons, but nobody's around to do that here, so they must be ghosts."

So they were ghosts. I tried convincing myself that this was at least better

than encountering zombies.

As a Japanese person who believed that the deceased became “buddhas,” these guys would be tough opponents, but of course they wouldn’t be going easy on me.

About a dozen skeletons slowly approached us, their jaws rattling. They were staring at us through their vacant eye sockets.

Well, they probably couldn’t see us. But either way, they were definitely heading for us.

I was worried about Clena. I had to take charge here.

“Clena, stay inside the carriage. Rulitora and I can take care of this!”

“...I understand. I heard that skeletons are pretty tough to beat, so be careful.” She knew she was in no condition to fight, and reluctantly nodded.

“Let’s go, Rulitora!”

“Understood!”

At my words, Rulitora took up his glaive and sprinted forward. He closed the distance between him and the skeletons in no time, then smashed his glaive into several of them with the same vigor and blasted them to bits.

Our opponents weren’t that strong. The only problem was their numbers.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t bring myself to slice through human bone with my broadaxe, so I opted to use magic instead. It was time to summon some light spirits.

I released the spirits of light, praying that they would guide the ghosts along the path to the Goddess. I may have just been meddling from the perspective of these former Hades residents, but I didn’t care.

I launched a light spirit in an arc over Rulitora’s head and it circled around the skeleton, then attacked the skeleton’s skull. Of course, that wasn’t enough to beat it. I launched another five light spirits in its direction.

The skeletons had their strength in numbers at first, but now they were trapped between my light spirits and Rulitora.

“Yaarrgh!”

Rulitora waved his glaive once more and sliced several more skeletons in half. They weren’t down yet, though, and their upper halves started crawling toward Rulitora.

Meanwhile, the skeleton whose skull I had cracked from behind remained on the ground, only twitching. I immediately shouted to Rulitora after seeing that.

“Aim for their heads!”

Instead of replying to me, Rulitora used his fist to slam into a nearby skeleton’s face. The skeleton’s skull met his fist with little resistance and broke into several pieces. The rest of its bones fell to the ground, clattering. It lay there completely still.

So the skull was their core. I couldn’t even begin to figure out how it worked, but whatever controlled their movements was inside their skulls. Maybe it was the will of its former inhabitant, but they had attacked us without a warning, so I decided not to think too hard about it right now.

“Let’s finish the rest of them off!”

“Alright!”

Rulitora flipped his glaive around so as to attack with the butt instead of the blade. I matched him by launching my remaining light spirits at the skeletons’ skulls. But then, perhaps lured by the sounds of battle, more skeletons appeared from behind the carriage.

“Leave this to me...!”

“Don’t step out of the carriage, Clena! I’ll go!”

I couldn’t push Clena to fight while she was still recovering, but she probably wouldn’t have let herself stay put.

I left the remaining skeletons in the front to Rulitora and dashed behind the carriage, broadaxe in hand. Fortunately, this broadaxe was built for smashing things. I swiftly crushed the skulls of the skeletons with surprisingly little recoil.

The two of us kept fighting them off, and in the end we defeated about 30

skeletons. Once they were all gone, Clena jumped out of the carriage and called out to us in a worried voice.

“...Are you alright?”

“Yeah, no problem.”

In reality, I felt pretty sick. I was still in shock from having to destroy so many human bones with my own hands. But I wouldn’t let it get to me since they had attacked us when we were simply walking down the street.

They were monsters. I felt relieved thinking of them that way. Still, I decided to say my post-battle prayers more thoroughly than usual.

“Rium, come down and ride inside the carriage. You too, Clena.”

We needed to change our approach a little. I had Rium descend from her flying disc and sit beside Clena in the carriage.

“Clena and Roni, you two watch the front. Rium, watch our back. You won’t be able to see enemies hiding in the shadows of the buildings from up in the air.”

“I understand.”

“Rulitora and I will walk on the left and right.”

“Roger that.”

We were now stationed in all directions. Roni needed to pay attention to driving and Clena was still exhausted, but we should be fine as long as Rulitora and I stayed alert.

We proceeded in our new positions and encountered more skeletons. Fortunately, there were only five this time. Rulitora wiped all of them out with one roar and a swing through their skulls. We then slipped past the attacks of a few monsters and reached an open area at the end of the road. This was the plaza that Goldfish had talked about. This area hadn’t deteriorated, nor was any sand falling down from above, so the large statue in the center was still standing straight and tall.

“So this is the statue of the demon lord you were talking about?”

“Ah, yes... I know the road from here. Look up there to the right, there’s a shop with a display shelf outside it. Well, the remains of one, anyway.”

“Oh yeah, I think I see it.”

“That shop sold offerings, donated by worshipers. The street to the left of it leads directly to the temple.”

“The earth temple in Ceresopolis had a shop like that, too. I guess it’s pretty common for temples to have a shop like that nearby?”

“Anything wrong with that? It beats havin’ to offer that half-rotten food you brought.”

“Well, you have a point.”

We kept the conversation going as we proceeded according to Goldfish’s directions.

We passed by the demon lord’s statue. The girls peered out from the carriage and looked up at the giant sculpture. It depicted a dignified man, well into his years and clad in armor.

“...He has two legs, huh.”

The first thing I looked for was whether he had a serpent’s lower half, but all I saw was two normal human legs. Maybe he was like those enemies in games who looked normal at the beginning, but changed into their true form in the middle of battle. Like, maybe his name would change from “Amann Naga” to “Something Naga.” Or perhaps Naga meant something entirely unrelated to the serpent deity.

I didn’t know if I was going to get a meaningful answer out of him, but I tried asking Goldfish about it anyway.

“Hey, what does Amann Naga mean?”

“Hm? Well I don’t know every last detail, but apparently the demon lord’s family all used a certain word as part of their names. The ‘Amann’ part is that particular word, translated to the Hades language.”

“And what about ‘Naga’?”

“That was just his actual name.”

So his name was really Naga?!

“In the language of Hades, ‘amann’ means... ‘to believe,’ right?”

“Ya know yer stuff, missy.”

Clena had picked up a few things on the ancient Hades language from all her investigations on the desert kingdom.

“It’s a word they used in rituals for the Goddess of Darkness.”

“Mhmm. In the demon lord’s old world, one word could have multiple readings. So even if it weren’t pronounced as ‘believe,’ it still meant the same thing.”

“Huh, what a complicated language.”

“.....” I was at a complete loss for words as I listened to their exchange.

This was a man who was summoned to this world after his death, 400 to 500 years ago, and with the name “Believing Naga.” The man who was once feared as the “Demon Lord of the Sixth Heavenly Realm” had actually become a demon lord in another world.

We left the plaza with the demon lord’s statue behind, while I was still overwhelmed at learning that the demon lord was actually Oda Nobunaga.

On that note, the Five Great Demon Generals had all been summoned from the same time period, but unfortunately Goldfish didn’t know any of their real names. It seemed that after Nobunaga took the name of the demon lord Amann Naga, the rest of them took up nicknames such as the Dark Prince. The reason the rest of the 16 demon generals had nicknames was because of them as well. The thought of a Sengoku samurai calling himself the “Dark Prince” was a strange one indeed.

He was Nobunaga’s son, but since he had so many of them, I couldn’t guess which one. The most famous three would be Nobutada, Nobukatsu, and Nobutaka.

Putting that aside, we had finally reached the temple of the Goddess of

Darkness—a mere shadow of its former self.

“So this is the Goddess of Darkness’ temple...”

“Choose yer words, mister hero.”

The only temple in this city was the head temple for the Goddess of Darkness. I could picture it once being picturesque, but the light spirits revealed a layer of grime covering its walls and roof. The front gate was standing strong, but the windows were broken and the insides demolished. The windows weren’t glass, but wooden shutters.

“Did the first sacred king do all this?”

“This is the temple of the Goddess of Darkness. Of course he wouldn’t just leave it be.”

“I can’t believe they had the time for that after coming here to fight the demon lord.”

The temple was two stories tall, but oddly enough, only the windows on the first floor were broken. If the windows had shattered from the impact of the city sinking underground, then the second floor ones shouldn’t have remained unharmed. So someone must have done this on purpose... so they could break in.

“Is it possible that people survived after the city sunk, and looted the place?”

The temple must have been storing emergency rations, so it made sense.

“Yer talkin’ rubbish! It’s a temple, ain’t it?!”

“That wouldn’t matter in times of crisis. Not to mention it was after the demon lord was defeated.”

“Bah...”

In other words, the Goddess of Darkness lost her authority after the demon lord’s defeat. Goldfish couldn’t think of a comeback, and grumbled at me in an agitated tone.

“Well, we should take a look to see if we can camp inside instead of arguing. So let’s head in for now.”

“No can do, gate won’t open.”

Rulitora tried pushing the doors, but they wouldn’t budge. Well, if the gate could be opened so easily, then the windows would still be intact.

“Guess we need to go through a window and open it from the inside. If it were just us then the windows would work, but we need to get the carriage inside, too.”

Normally, Rium would be able to cross over on her flying disc, but everything in this temple, including the courtyard, was under a roof.

“Roni and I will go, so wait out here.”

“Y-yessir! Allow me to assist!”

Just in case monsters were inside, I armed myself and chose Roni to come along, since she was the most agile. The desolate air around the temple was making her frightened, but she was still the most suited.

“Don’t worry, Roni. Just hide behind me and let me know if you see anything suspicious.”

“O-okay...”

I patted her on the shoulder in encouragement, and then we crawled our way inside the temple. Rulitora should be able to handle protecting everyone else outside.

The room we entered really looked like it was ransacked. I was reminded of the deserted houses I snuck into as a kid.

Roni clung to my back in fear. But she was still surveying her surroundings carefully, so I trusted her to watch my back.

“Looks like there are no monsters wandering around in here.”

“P-please don’t say that, Sir Touya.”

“Isn’t that a good thing, though? Come on, don’t be scared.”

Her voice, on the brink of tears, sounded out from behind me. Maybe she’d scared herself into thinking there were monsters. I kept giving her words of

encouragement as I opened the door to the hallway.

I briefly looked around and noticed that the building was built like an enclosure. There was a large courtyard, encompassed by the rest of the building. Several doors faced the courtyard, with a stone-paved corridor in between. It looked like the temple ran deeper across the front gate, probably housing important rooms such as the elder's office, but that had to wait. We needed to reconvene with everyone outside, so we headed for the front gate first.

"A latch, huh? It looks pretty sturdy."

"With this latch and this gate, we wouldn't have been able to break in unless we had a battering ram."

The gate we arrived at was barricaded shut with a latch. I surmised that the trespassers hadn't been able to break down this gate, so they were forced to destroy the windows instead. We needed to get our carriage in, though, so Roni and I removed the barricade and opened the doors.

"Okay! All clear!"

Rulitora immediately took over the reins of the horse-drawn carriage, leading it inside. Fortunately, it looked like no monsters attacked while we were gone.

"What a gloomy courtyard..."

I responded to Rulitora by scouting the area, realizing the dreariness of our surroundings.

"And it used to be such a splendid garden, too..." Goldfish mumbled nostalgically.

"Were there flowers here, even though it's all indoors?"

"There are spells ye can use to bring in the light of the moon or the stars. Wanna see?"

"Oh no. We're not letting you use any magic."

"Dirty rotten..."

I bet a moonlit garden would have been quite the sight, but right now not a

single blade of grass was growing in the barren dirt. There was a pungent smell in the air with the place having been blocked from the sunlight for so long.

I sent light spirits to illuminate our surroundings and saw an altar made of marble in the center of the courtyard. Between the altar and walls opposite the main gate was a pond. I took a closer look at it, but the water was awfully murky. This was probably the source of the smell.

“What was this pond used for?”

“...Decoration I reckon? The altar’s the only thing of use here anyway.” Goldfish answered bluntly.

So it was just something to gussy up the garden. There wasn’t a trace of it left now, but I bet the garden and pond used to be stunning.

“Looks like I need to ventilate this place.” Clena stepped down from the carriage after noticing the smell. She would probably be using wind spirits to replace the air inside with fresh, outside air.

“Will you be okay?”

“There’s air flowing from outside right now thanks to the sand, so it’ll be easier than when we were in the tunnel.”

Her complexion had improved after resting in the carriage for a bit. She looked like she could handle it now.

We parked the carriage in the courtyard, closed the gates, and replaced the latch. Considering how the windows were destroyed, the sturdiest thing in this temple was likely these gates. It would offer us protection, while we needed windows for ventilation.

“Rulitora and I are gonna size up the temple. The gate won’t serve much of a purpose if all the windows are open.”

“Are you going to restore all the windows?”

“I’ll seal them off.” I raised my palm toward Rulitora. It was doable with the help of my earth spirit summoning.

We needed to leave a window open for ventilation, even a small one would do the job. And even if there wasn’t, we should be okay leaving just one

window open.

“We’ll be checking out the rooms farther inside too, so we’re bringing Goldfish.”

“We’d better replace his water soon.”

I nodded in response to Rium. He couldn’t make any moves right now because he was in water made using my MP. The magic faded as time passed, so the time had come to switch out the water. I quickly changed the water, left ten light spirits in the courtyard, and summoned five more for Rulitora, Goldfish, and I to survey the inside of the temple.

Every window on the first floor had been demolished, so I summoned earth spirits to alter the shape of the holes left behind and seal off all the gaps. While doing that, we found a hole we could use for ventilation. Only a few of the windows on the second floor were broken, so it really did seem like it was done deliberately.

“Phew...” I breathed a sigh of relief. Seems like I used too much MP.

“Are you alright, Sir Touya?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.” I wasn’t at my limit just yet. There weren’t many windows that needed sealing on the second floor, so we should be able to finish this up.

“Hey, d’you think they’ve got food reserves stored here?”

“If there are they’d probably be in the storage room.”

“I bet all the windows were broken from people trying to get to those reserves.”

“...Blast their hides.”

I had picked up on it some time ago, but this self-proclaimed sage seemed particularly devoted to the Goddess of Darkness. It became even more obvious now that we had entered the desert kingdom.

As we explored the temple, we picked up every book or document that seemed important. Goldfish sneered at me like he wanted to say it was useless since I couldn’t read them anyway, but the joke was on him. The Goddess of

Light let me read pretty much any language from this world.

I picked up one book, flipped through it, and was able to figure out what it was about immediately. I had no intentions of letting Goldfish on about this, though, so I ignored his looks and continued collecting books. I thought for sure Goldfish would be cursing at us for taking things from the temple, but he didn't say a word. Maybe he thought it was better than leaving them here to rot.

"There's nothing here but books."

We had entered what looked like a private room, but there was only a dresser with all of its drawers emptied out. Some of the rooms didn't even *have* dressers.

"I think we were right in thinking that the survivors of the battle between the sacred king and the demon lord looted everything."

"So those skeletons... Were they what remained of those people?" I asked, to which Rulitora gently nodded. It was the only explanation that made sense. Goldfish, however, spoke up in a sour tone.

"Infidels... So ya honestly believe the sacred king wasn't behind this? Sure, sure, the people of Hades pillaged their own temple... Bah!"

"I guess we can't completely dismiss the notion that the sacred king's party did it, but..."

"No, I don't think so." Rulitora entertained Goldfish's idea, but I interrupted him.

"Oh? So yer on the sacred king's side, ey?"

"Not exactly. As far as I can tell, the battle between the sacred king and the demon lord was partly religious, right?"

"...I'm not sayin' it ain't."

"If the sacred king wanted to destroy this temple, then he wouldn't have done it so halfheartedly like this. He probably would have blown it all to smithereens."

"Hmm..." Goldfish sank into silence, unable to deny my suggestion.

If the remaining citizens broke into the temple looking for things that would help them survive, then that would explain why only books were left. In a life-or-death situation, books would only be useful to build a fire. The only explanation in support of Goldfish's theory would be that the looters couldn't bring themselves to use the temple's books for fuel, and thus left them behind.

"The survivors wouldn't have had a way to get out, since the underground tunnel got blocked off. They were completely trapped."

"....."

Going along with Goldfish's argument wouldn't sit right with me, so I tried arguing in favor of the residents of Hades instead, but Goldfish remained silent.

We had completed our round on the second floor, and came across a room directly above the front gate. It gave us a view on the outside of the temple. I asked Goldfish about it, and sure enough, this used to be a lookout station for temple knights.

"If we stay here we can keep an eye on the outside. Let's sleep here for tonight and take turns on guard duty."

"What should we do about the carriage?"

"The courtyard is no different from a stable right now. We should be fine leaving it there for tonight."

"I understand."

We would need to leave food and water for the horse, but other than that, it should be fine for one night. Rulitora found no issues with my suggestion.

Clena had finished ventilating the area by the time we returned to the courtyard, and the smell was nearly gone. She had overexerted herself again though, and was sitting down due to fatigue.

"Clena, are you alright?"

"You're not looking so hot yourself, Touya..."

We gave each other a wry smile. Seems like she wasn't the only one who looked worn out right now.

“We found a room upstairs that the temple knights used as a lookout. Let’s rest there for the night.”

“Oh okay, let me take out the horse feed then. Could you open the Unlimited Bath?”

“I’ll take care of that! Please sit down and rest, Lady Clena, Sir Touya.” Clena attempted to stand up, but Roni pushed her back down.

Rulitora had his arms crossed, looking like he had something to tell me, too. He probably wanted me to take a break as well. Looks like I had no say in the matter here. I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, then sat myself down next to Clena.

“Rium, you come help too!”

“Okay.” Rium shuffled into the Unlimited Bath behind Roni.

Roni looked like an older sister now, even though we always saw her as a little sister. Clena and I watched over this peaceful scene with a smile. The two girls were spent as well, but I could tell that they were smiling.

As for dinner, since the smell from the pond hadn’t completely subsided, we made a fire in what used to be a kitchen to cook our food. Of course, we used our own pots and pans. There was still a table left in the kitchen, so we ate our dinner there.

As I bit down on a piece of roasted meat, I asked Roni about something that was on my mind.

“How much longer do you think our food supply will sustain us for?”

Even though we had found a place to rest inside this temple, we couldn’t stay here forever without any food. We were able to carry a lot more cargo thanks to my Unlimited Bath, but our supply was still limited.

“Considering the time it would take to get back to Ceres... We have enough to stay here for another ten days.”

“Actually make that one week, just to stay on the safe side... That might not be enough time to explore the city.”

The Hadesopolis city center was smaller than Jupiteropolis or Ceresopolis, but from what I could tell since we emerged from the tunnel, it was still comparable in size to a neighborhood in a large city.

“We’ll just need to limit ourselves to whatever seems important.”

“So mainly the demon lord’s castle, then?”

Rulitora and Clena voiced their opinions, then took quick glances at Goldfish.

“...Well, I’d say there ain’t no places more important here than this temple or the demon lord’s castle,” Goldfish replied to them curtly.

I wanted to ask him if there were any other important locations here, but he was never our ally in the first place. He wouldn’t just reveal everything he knew to us.

We could split up and explore, but considering how often we ran into those skeletons, that wasn’t a favorable option. We had no choice but to slowly make our way through.

That evening, I tried suggesting that we take turns keeping watch, but Rulitora wouldn’t have any of it. He said that Clena and I should rest, since we exhausted our MP. I had no choice but to comply, since he included Clena in his argument as well. Rulitora and Roni would rotate guard duty tonight.

We took a quick bath, replaced Goldfish’s water, and spread out our futons. I lay down between Clena and Rium. This wasn’t the case anymore, but when we first started traveling together, our cargo left us little room to sleep and we were forced to snuggle up together. Even though we had some more space now, we still continued sleeping like that.

It was still a little early for bed time, so I flipped over onto my stomach and started reading some of the books we had collected. According to Clena, everything was written in the ancient language of Hades, but thanks to all her research on the desert kingdom she was able to read it, too.

Rium plopped herself down on top of me and was peering into my book. We probably looked like a parent turtle with its kid riding on top of it right now. She couldn’t read the Hades language, so she was probably just playing around.

“There’s a cleric’s diary.”

“This one looks like a history book on Hades. These are really valuable, aren’t they?”

“What’s this one? There’s pictures of food in it.”

“...It’s a cookbook.”

The books we had gathered covered subjects from A to Z. Whether the cookbook itself had any value or not, it was a sign that people once lived here.

I was pretty interested in the cookbook, personally. I wanted to keep reading it because it seemed important, but our time here was limited. We’d have to save the real studying for after we returned to civilization.

“Touya, you use MP to keep the lights on, don’t you? Why don’t we go to bed early tonight?”

“Hmm... you’re right. We can just wake up early tomorrow.”

I usually left them on without giving it much thought, but it’s true that the lights in the Unlimited Bath were consuming my MP. We should head to bed early today, or else it’d be rude to Rulitora and Roni keeping watch.

“Alright. It’s a little early, but I’ll turn the lights off.”

“Oh, let me.”

Rium got off my back and stood up to turn the lights into a nightlight. She came back, lay down, and wriggled herself close to me again. She kept herself proper and respectable while we were traveling during the day, but she acted like a baby at night. Apparently it was the same when she slept with Haruno’s party. Basically, she was using me as a body pillow right now.

“You two sure are friendly.”

“Wanna join, Clena?”

“I’m fine. I’m not so childish that I need a pillow to hug in order to fall asleep,” she said as she was holding my hand under the sheets. I decided not to embarrass her by mentioning it.

“Alright then, goodnight.”

We all gave each other a goodnight kiss on the cheek, and went to bed. I must have been more exhausted than I thought, because it took no time at all for me to fall asleep.

The first thing I did the next morning was fill a bucket with water and exit the Unlimited Bath.

I had filled the bucket to replace Goldfish's water. The MP in the water would keep for about half a day, but changing it out first thing every morning would make keeping track of it much easier.

I looked at Rulitora, keeping watch beside the window, while Roni lay on the ground wrapped in a blanket. Rulitora immediately noticed that I had woken up and turned around.

"Good morning, Sir Touya."

"Good morning to you too. Were there any attacks during the night?"

"No, none."

"Good."

I made my way to the bucket as we conversed. I took a look inside, expecting another one of Goldfish's tiresome rants, but instead I came to a shocking realization.

"What the—! Where'd Goldfish go?!"

"Huh?!"

"Wh-what?!"

Rulitora turned around at the sound of my yell and Roni jumped up, still half-asleep.

"Goldfish isn't in the bucket!"

"What?!"

Rulitora rushed over and looked inside the empty bucket as well. We had changed the water before sleeping last night, so... the MP inside should still be plenty strong. But nevertheless, Goldfish had suddenly disappeared from the

bucket.

Clena and Rium also woke up upon hearing my voice. We wandered around, looking for Goldfish together, but couldn't find a trace of the self-proclaimed sage anywhere. The prime suspect was the muddy pond in the courtyard. I found a pole and tried churning through the water, putting up with the rotten smell, but all I could feel was the rugged ground underneath.

"Should we try filtering the pond with clean water?"

"Do you think we'll find him that way?" I folded my arms, contemplating Clena's suggestion.

Even though his fins were relatively big, he was still about the size of a goldfish. It was a pretty small pond, but I could tell from swishing the pole around that the bottom was uneven. If he was hiding underneath something, we'd have a hard time finding him even if the water was clear. Not to mention if he was swept away along with the water, there's no telling where he would end up. Also, I'd rather not deal with rotten water everywhere if we were to clean it out. And so I suggested another plan.

"Alright, let's block it up."

"Huh?"

"I'll put a lid on the pond."

Why hadn't I thought of this yesterday? If done right, you could literally say our problem was "water under the bridge," and it would keep the smell from spreading, too.

I went ahead and summoned earth spirits to form a dome. In no time, a semicircle made of dirt covered the pond. It came up to my knees. Was this what they called a burial mound? If Goldfish was really in here, then this would literally become his grave. I kind of wanted to mark it "Rest In Pieces," though.

"What was that guy trying to achieve, in the end?"

"According to legend, that self-proclaimed sage lead the first sacred king to the demon lord's castle, right?"

"That's a famous story. They say that the sage was an ally of the first sacred

king.”

“And yet he was yapping about the demon lord day in and day out.”

Come to think of it, his behavior was pretty inconsistent. He reacted oddly when we were in front of the demon lord’s statue, too. Sure it was just a statue, but he should have reacted more strongly after seeing the demon lord for the first time in several hundred years.

In any case, it was too late for those thoughts now—Goldfish had disappeared from under our eyes. To be honest, I didn’t believe he was in the pond. We had no options but to keep searching for him while staying on guard, assuming he was still hiding somewhere.

“Roni, let’s make breakfast a quick one today. We’ll search through the temple after that, and then head to the demon lord’s castle.”

“Understood. I’ll make crepes, then.”

I would describe the crepes as thin, unsweetened pancakes. In this world, pancakes were a desert while crepes were a breakfast food. The ingredients were pretty similar, though. A good substitute for bread, it was a popular meal among travelers, since all you needed was a frying pan and a few basic ingredients. You’d usually eat it wrapped around a sausage, or a thick slice of ham. Pickled vegetables worked as a filling as well. This morning we had it with ham and cheese, like a pizza. I folded it in half and started digging in.

After we finished our quick breakfast, we went searching through the temple, when Clena noticed something.

“This temple... It’s been constructed to reject anything that isn’t the Goddess of Darkness’ magic.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Magic from other goddesses is weaker here. Take a look over there.” Clena was pointing at one of the pillars in the temple. On it hung an elegant relief.

“Wait, so you mean this....?”

“Yeah, that relief is creating the effect.”

I faced Clena, and she gave me a solemn nod in response. I had completely

overlooked it yesterday, assuming it was just decoration, but this was canceling out powers from any goddess other than the Goddess of Darkness.

“We can use cleric magic here, so I think it’s only weakening the effectiveness.”

“But that’s still a pretty big deal.”

“The MP in the water was probably affected, too...” Clena mumbled.

So my MP had drained more quickly than usual, including the MP in my water. Goldfish took the opportunity when the magic ran out to cast his own magic to escape. Maybe he had been planning this ever since he started leading us toward the temple.

“Let me reinforce that grave a little more.”

“...Good idea.”

Just in case, I made the pond’s cover thicker and stronger. The burial mound, which didn’t reach higher than my knees, sprung up in size to about my height, enveloping the walls and dirt around it.

We then gathered our luggage and rode our carriage directly to the demon lord’s castle. It was such a quiet city. Not only was it dim, everything felt gray and desolate. The only thing that gave the landscape color was the sand.

The color of sand could be described as “golden,” which sounded fancier than it was in reality. Needless to say it was lifeless, and the only sounds we could hear were from the sand falling from the dome above. The term “ghost town” came to mind. We’d start feeling depressed if we kept silent for too long, so... everyone deliberately made small talk as we advanced. Of course, we made sure to stay on guard as well.

A few groups of skeletons tried to attack us along the way, but they were individually pretty weak, and Rulitora was able to make quick work of them. We didn’t have Goldfish around to guide us anymore, but that wouldn’t be an issue if we were heading to the demon lord’s castle. The castle was one part of the overhead dome that maintained this underground city, after all. We could spot the castle in the distance as long as we had an open view.

On the way, we found a mansion and used their yard to have lunch. There was the remains of a flower bed that must have once been filled with colorful blossoms, but now was just a barren plot of soil. The mansion had a fence, but it wasn't completely sealed from the outside, so we couldn't let our guards down. We had a light lunch and headed out again immediately.

About an hour later, we reached the demon lord's castle.

"It looks so normal." Rium was the first to speak up. She didn't mince words.

She was right, though. The castle before our eyes was an exceedingly normal-looking one, far from the grand image that the term "demon lord's castle" might imply.

The outside showed some signs of fragmentation. Maybe it suffered some damage when the other tower came falling down, or maybe it was collateral damage from the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord. In either case, it looked like a mere shadow of its former self.

"So the castle was surrounded by a moat," Roni mumbled, kneeling next to the moat.

She was using past tense because you couldn't quite call it a moat anymore. The moat was overflowing with sand. The city's circulation magic couldn't take care of everything, it seemed.

"This serves no purpose as a moat anymore."

"I guess it's useless against sand lizardmen."

"Even if it was a normal moat, it'd still be useless against swamp lizardmen."

I didn't know if swamp lizardmen actually existed, but I guess a moat in Japan would be useless against *kappa*, too.

In any case, the drawbridge was still down, so we'd be able to cross over in our carriage without trouble. We carefully crossed the bridge and made our way into the castle.

After we passed the gate, we were greeted by the sight of yet another barren garden. A deteriorated stone pathway, barely visible under all the sand, led the

way to the castle doors.

The only things decorating the garden were the streams of sand falling from the sky. The circulation magic could only handle so much. At least more light was filtering down from above, making the sand glisten and giving it a true golden hue.

“Now then, where should we go first?”

“We should find their library.”

“I guess that’s the obvious choice, if we want to learn more about the demon lord.”

Rium and Roni offered their ideas.

We should definitely start from there if we wanted to collect documents. Hopefully they were in better condition than the ones in the temple. There was one other thing I felt was important, though.

“We have a real world problem, though—if we don’t find anything here, then we’ll be in the red, money-wise.”

It had cost us a pretty penny to fund this whole trip. If we didn’t find something of value here, then we’d have a hard time planning our future travels. It went without saying that we needed to gather information on the demon lord, but we had to fulfill our roles as treasure hunters, too.

“Do you think there’s anything like an armory or a treasure safe left?”

“The demon lord isn’t here anymore, so let’s search every last corner while we still have time.”

“Good plan. But we need someone to watch the horse, and I don’t want to split into two groups.”

The carriage couldn’t pass through the front doors, so we had no choice but to park it here. After some discussion, we decided that Rulitora would be on horse-watching duty. If we had to split ourselves up based on pure fighting power, then it would be Rulitora and everyone else. Even though it was a big castle, it shouldn’t take us a whole week to explore. The question was how much was left in here, and how much we could find.

We took only the bare essentials and armed ourselves to the teeth. I started making my way to the door, but then Rium tugged at my sleeve.

“Touya.”

“What is it?”

“I bet there’s a golem here. Those can easily survive 500 years.”

“I see, so they’d be like security guards for the treasure?”

Rium nodded in response.

Manmade monsters, golems, often showed up in my video games. Since crystal magic involved creating magic items, she must have had some knowledge on the subject.

“Would you be able to identify them?”

“As long as I can detect the magic that’s making them move, yes.”

“What if they don’t move?”

“If I could detect those, then they’d be worthless as golems,” Rium said, quite matter-of-factly.

So they might be disguising themselves as pieces of furniture, even though they were actually monsters. If the castle really employed those things, then we just needed to proceed with caution.

We kept walking along the garden until we reached a wall. I saw a giant set of doors door before me. They looked like incredibly heavy doors made of metal. Since some people had given up their humanity after being blessed by the Goddess of Darkness, they must have had to accommodate sizes surpassing a normal human’s.

Could we open this thing by ourselves? I approached it, a little doubtful.

“Sir Touya, watch out!”

As I reached for the door, Roni pulled me back and onto the ground. When I looked back in surprise, I saw a shadow blocking my view. I couldn’t tell what it was in that instant, since the shadow retreated as fast as it had appeared. I looked over, still on the ground, and saw where it had come from.

“Th-the door...?”

Yes, it was the door. It was currently opened horizontally, not vertically like a set of doors should be. The opening was contorting itself like clay, and soon formed the shape of a smile.

That shadow just now must have been the door extending its mouth to bite down on me. If Roni hadn’t saved me, I’d probably be stuck inside that giant mouth right now.

“Sir Touya!”

Rulitora rushed over to Roni and I, pulling us up and out of the reach of the door. I saw Clena holding Rium, also making their way away from the door. They seemed unharmed.

“Thanks for the help, Rulitora.”

“Do not mention it, I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Are you alright, Roni?”

“No sweat!”

Roni was holding her arm, so I was worried that the door had bitten her, but it was just a scratch from when she’d pulled me down.

Fortunately, the door monster couldn’t move from its position.

“What in the world is that thing?”

“It’s a door golem. Instead of locks, it needs a special amulet to open.”

“So if you don’t have that amulet, it attacks you?”

Rium nodded in response.

I see. Since you had to go through the door to enter the castle, it was an effective trap against intruders. Though it made me wonder what would happen to a person who just happened to forget their amulet.

“Let me handle this!”

Rulitora said, and in the same moment waved his glaive above his head and struck the door golem. The clash of metal against metal rang in the air. Despite

the way it was contorting earlier, the door was still as hard as metal.

Rium also got out one of her pencil-sized spears and transformed into a giant one. This must have been standard practice for crystal magic.

The metallic clangs continued resounding through the air. Rulitora kept striking the door golem as he dodged its attacks, but it was so dense that he wasn't able to deliver any significant blows. That said, he was doing an exceptional job of handling it. If it were me, I'd have my hands full just trying to keep myself together.

"Do you think earth spirits could interfere with that?"

"It depends."

I tried asking Rium, and she gave me a curt reply. It probably depended on the skills of the spell caster. It was a little too risky to approach the door without knowing if I could handle it. So I tried another method.

"Rulitora, don't get caught!"

"Right! ...Wait, what?!"

I ran past the confused Rulitora toward the door—or rather, the place immediately to the right of it.

"Summon spirit!"

I pressed my hand against it to summon spirits of the earth. I wasn't doing it on the door golem itself, though. Instead I used the door's frame, or in other words: the castle walls.

The walls warped so that the frame surrounding the door expanded. The door golem, however, wasn't expanding to fit the shape of its new frame.

"I see!" Rulitora exclaimed as he parried an attack with his glaive.

The door golem tried going after him, but having lost its means of support, fell flat on the ground with a deafening roar. There was no way something capable of warping itself so much to attack would be able to balance on its own. Unsurprisingly, without a building for support, it couldn't make any attacks from its back, which left it flailing around on the ground like a caught fish.

It was honestly pretty off-putting seeing a solid metal set of doors thrashing about on the ground like that. This wasn't exactly the type of fantastical experience I was hoping to have when I came to this fantasy world.

Rium hopped on top of one door with a hammer and chisel.

"Leave the rest to me."

She crawled to the center of the door and tried to kneel down, but since it was still stubbornly writhing around, she fell on her behind.

"Rulitora, let's help push it down as well."

"Understood."

I used my Healing Light to heal Roni's scratch, then rushed over to Rium. Fully clad in metal armor, and aided by the towering Rulitora... who was now sitting on top of the door golem, it wasn't going to budge anytime soon. Total domination.

What was Rium trying to do, though? As I stared at her in curiosity, she used the chisel to try and detach a gem-like object that was inlaid on the back of the door.

"What's that?"

"The golem's power source." Rium said as she swung her hammer down. With a light clang, the gem-like object dislodged itself from the door, and at the same time the door golem stopped moving completely. We repeated the process on the other door, dislodging the gem and stopping the door from moving.

I see, so this must have been a type of crystal that crystal mages used. When I asked her about it later, she told me that crystals that could be infused with magic were simply called "magic crystals." They could be reused if dislodged properly, and fetched a high price.

Rium had managed to retrieve the two crystals from the golems without a scratch, looking rather proud of herself. She was so cute I patted her head.

"Looks like it's full steam ahead from the get-go, huh?"

“I’m not too surprised, this is a castle after all.”

“It makes sense that they’d heighten their security, assuming there are valuables inside.”

“At least I hope there are...”

“Should I accompany you inside?”

We were conversing in a half-eager, half-apprehensive tone, but Rulitora, who would be guarding the carriage outside, was at least 90 percent apprehensive.

“No, if something happens to the horse, then we won’t be able to get ourselves back, much less anything we find inside.”

“Mmm...”

That’s right. No matter how convenient my Unlimited Bath was, we’d never be able to leave the void without our carriage. It was absolutely vital that we protect our horse and carriage.

“Will you be alright though, Rulitora? Something might attack while you’re waiting outside. Shall I stay as well?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine by myself.”

Roni worried for Rulitora in turn, but he softly declined. From his perspective, he’d be even more worried if we lessened our battle strength inside the castle.

Normally the carriage was convenient, but now it definitely felt like a burden. We needed to think of a way to deal with this in the future. But now wasn’t the time to be mulling over that. We had to concentrate on exploring the castle.

“Let’s make sure to let each other know if anything happens. It’ll be pretty quiet in there, so... just shout and we’ll hear you.”

“Not like we have any other options.”

“Don’t try to handle it on your own. Call for help, okay?”

“That goes for you too, Sir Touya.”

“Don’t worry about me. I won’t be the only one in danger, the girls will be too. I won’t push myself.”

“That’s fine, then...”

Rulitora was still uneasy, though. Maybe he was worried that I’d push myself too hard and expose the girls to danger. This wasn’t something we would ever settle by talking about it, though. I’d have to prove it to him by making sure we explored vigilantly and returned unharmed.

“It’s okay, I won’t do something dumb in this situation. While we’re gone, try bringing the carriage around the area and see if there’s any place you can stay. There might be a barn or something.”

“Understood.”

He still wasn’t agreeing with me, but he could also tell that we had nothing to gain by debating more about the issue.

I made sure all my armor was in order and equipped my broadaxe again.

“Are you ready, everyone?”

“Yep, ready to go.”

“Ready.”

“It’ll be a piece of cake, since we won’t even need to carry anything!” Roni exclaimed, smiling. Indeed, we could just shove everything we found inside my Unlimited Bath, which would be a huge advantage for us.

“Alright, we’ll be off now.”

“Please be careful, Sir Touya.”

We entered the castle as Rulitora saw us off.

Ogre or lore, who knew what was in store? Come to think of it, there was a “White-Faced Ogre” among the Five Great Demon Generals. *I’d prefer it if we didn’t come across an ogre, though.* I thought to myself as we entered the demon lord’s castle and began our hunt.

We first went to the throne room. It was something we were all curious about. Nothing but a pile of rubble remained, signifying a fierce battle, but we didn’t see any golems and continued on our way.

I wondered how the door golem survived all of that. Maybe there was another way of getting inside without having to deal with it.

When we investigated other places, knight-shaped golems that had been hidden among statues of knights attacked us, swords in hand. It seemed like the first sacred king's party didn't even give these guys a passing glance when they made their way to the demon lord. They must have been in a real hurry.

All the better for us, though. The chances that treasures remained untouched in this castle grew higher.

"Take this!" I swung my broadaxe—or rather, a hammer that I had formed with sand around the blade of the axe—down and crushed a golem knight. It fell onto the sand-covered carpet floor. We had already fought several golems, but blades did little against their tough bodies. It was easier to smash them down using a blunt weapon.

"Some heavy security, huh..."

Clena grumbled as Rium retrieved the magic crystal from the remains of the knight golem. So far, we had encountered one hidden golem for every five knight statues, but there were no precedents for me to judge if that was a high ratio or not.

"Isn't this pretty normal for a castle?"

"Well, it's true that castles have really strict defense systems. But it's not normal to have this many golems."

"Hm, so you'd say there are too many considering they had soldiers stationed in the castle as well?"

"Normally the purpose of golems is to spot and detain intruders," Rium said, having just finished collecting the magic crystal.

So in other words, golems didn't have to be strong enough to defeat someone. The way they pre-emptively attacked approaching intruders was similar to how a burglar alarm worked back in my world. I could understand what the girls had meant just now.

That still didn't explain why so many golems had been set up here, but I was

hopeful that this just meant they were guarding valuable treasures. Or perhaps Nobunaga was much more on guard about surprise attacks ever since the Honnouji Incident, but we had no way of ever finding out.

So far we had found some home furnishings, decorations, and other paraphernalia. They hadn't been damaged from the battle, but were still plenty worn down from 500 years' worth of erosion. I didn't want to be too greedy, but after all our effort in having come this far, I was hoping to find more valuable spoils.

"Sir Touya! I found a big door!" Roni, who had been using her agility to scout out the area around the corner, came back to me in a frenzy.

"How many statues?"

"Five on either side, so ten total!"

"So a few of them must be golems, huh?"

"If it's someplace important, then they might all be."

"Alright, let's destroy them all before we get too close."

We didn't have to worry about making a sound here. No matter how much of a ruckus we made, there were no longer any guards around to stop us.

According to Rium, in the past decade or so, they had started developing golems that would explode once an intruder got close, rather than outright attack them. That sounded less like a golem and more like a land mine, though.

The four of us bunched up close and peered around the corner. We saw ten knight statues lined up along two walls, and a large set of doors farther in. The knight statues looked exactly like the one I had just destroyed.

"Okay, I'll take the right."

"I'll take the left."

Clena took up her sword and Rium grabbed her silver spear. Clena was probably intending to use magic, instead of fighting head-on with her sword. Rium would be using the same spell she had used to fight the sandworm a while back.

“Alright, Roni and I will handle the leftovers.”

The two of them nodded in reply and started chanting their spells.

“O Wind Blade, cut them to pieces!” Clena launched a piercing wind from her sword and tore through the statues along the right wall all at once.

“...Go forth, o spear.” Rium moved to the left wall and threw her silver spear at the statues like a dart.

The spear was pencil sized when she threw it, but grew to the size of large lance in the blink of an eye, skewered the heads of the statues, then broke apart.

The statues on the right all roared as their heads rolled off. The ones on the left remained silent, their heads destroyed.

Shoot, the farthest statue on the right only had the top part of its head sliced off. The head of the one down on the left also hadn’t been fully skewered. There were cracks in the armor, but it was still fully functional.

“Roni, take the left!”

“Got it!”

Not a moment later, I started to form sand around my broadaxe and rushed in.

The two statues brandished their swords and started moving. The second to last one on the right also tried to move but lost its balance, falling to the floor. That one also hadn’t been properly sliced.

I ignored the golem that just fell and used my shield to block a strike from the other. A metallic clash resounded, grating on my ears, and at the same time Roni smashed the left golem’s head with a dropkick. It was a death blow on the part that had already been cracked, and the golem fell to the ground as its head was smashed into pieces.

The left side was now taken care of. All that remained was the golem in front of me.

I pushed against it with my shield, then struck its sword-wielding arm while it was caught off balance. The golem tried throwing a punch with its other hand,

but I absorbed the impact with my shield and slammed my makeshift hammer against its leg. Its thigh was too sturdy to break from a single hit, but I had managed to crack it nonetheless, stripping it from the ability to support its own weight. As it tried to brace itself to stand up straight again, the leg I had just delivered a hit onto broke apart and sent the golem tumbling to the ground. I drew myself away so that it wouldn't land on top of me.

All I had to do now was finish it off. It couldn't get up again with only one arm and a leg. I smashed down on both this golem and the one that I had felled earlier with my hammer.

After the battle, Rium went to collect the magic crystals while we stayed alert of our surroundings. Clena had sliced through two of the magic crystals inside the golems with her wind blade, but the rest were still intact.

In the end, all ten of them were golems.

"Sorry, I messed up the angle a bit."

"Don't worry about it. That was the best way for you to attack without risking harm."

The golems' sensors were usually inside their heads. Their source of power, the magic crystals, were located in the center of their torso so that power could flow evenly through the rest of their body. That didn't exactly mean they represented the brain and heart of a person—the sensors were their eyes and the power source was simply at the body's center. Rather, all golems needed "eyes" regardless of their shape, and it was up to a crystal mage's individual skill to properly conceal them.

"Huh? Sir Touya, the door is unlocked," Roni, who had gone one step ahead of us to investigate the door, called out to me in a bewildered voice.

"What?" I responded, as baffled as she was.

"Is it really unlocked, Roni?" Clena turned to her to reaffirm.

"That wouldn't make sense," Rium said, puzzled, having just finished retrieving the magic crystals.

Those two had every right to be confused. Having ten golems lined up to

block the path, yet not locking the door, was far too lopsided in terms of security measures.

“B-But it really is open!”

“Any traps?”

“Not as far as I can tell! Honest!”

Roni started getting teary-eyed while our gazes collected on her. I wanted to pat her on the head, but I was wearing gauntlets, so I held back and left it to Clena. There I stood, in front of the door, alongside Rium.

“Is it possible to take anything out of here without disturbing the golems at all?”

“It’s possible for the golem’s master, or someone who already has permission.”

“So basically, there *was* someone who had permission.”

There was a chance that, 500 years ago, someone took the treasures out of this room.

Since there were no traps to be wary of, I went ahead and cracked open the door—then noticed something.

“Roni...” I beckoned her over and whispered something into her ear. Her eyes widened in surprise, but she quickly regained her composure and gave me a serious nod.

I opened the door and looked around the room. It was pretty spacious inside. There was one small window high up on a wall, so the room was only dimly lit. I set out light spirits to illuminate the room.

To the left and right of us were shelves. The bottom of each shelf was lined with large treasure boxes, while the top shelves held many small boxes, weapons, and armor. There were three full sets of armor on the wall facing us. They weren’t knight statues, though. The armor gave off a metallic luster, bathed in the light of the spirits. Looks like this was an armory.

“Sir Touya...” Roni whispered into my ear.

“I see... so that’s where Goldfish is.” I pointed my axe at the black set of armor on the left.

The armor didn’t move or speak a word, though. Maybe he thought we wouldn’t find out if he remained silent. That was naive, though. When I had cracked the door open, I noticed a faint but distinct smell.

“If you want to hide, do something about that smell first.”

Yes, it was the same rotten smell from the pond in the temple. Upon closer inspection, the left shelf was lined with helmets and armor parts. Maybe he had taken apart his original armor and set it on the shelf, then sat himself down wherever there was space.

“Heheheh... I thought I’d gotten rid of all the moss.”

I heard Goldfish’s voice. It was indeed coming from the black armor set.

“Moss? Were you hiding that armor inside the pond?”

“Hiding? That pond used to be my home.”

“So you were from the temple, after all.”

I had suspected as much. Despite all that rambling about the demon lord, his behavior indicated a much stronger loyalty to the Goddess of Darkness.

The jet-black armor used its gauntlet to raise its visor. The sound of clanging metal filled the otherwise silent room. Behind the visor was something that looked like a fish bowl, and there was Goldfish, gently flapping his big fins inside.

Judging by how the gauntlet just moved, I would guess that Goldfish had the power to control the armor like it was his own body. He had somehow escaped into the pond last night, retrieved his armor, and snuck out of the temple. And since he knew that our destination was the demon lord’s castle, he hid himself among the furnishings in this armory.

Goldfish picked up a tall, two-handed broadsword that was next to him. We knew then that he wasn’t intent on letting us out alive. We assumed our battle stances, readying ourselves against his attack.

However, there was one thing I didn’t understand about Goldfish’s behavior.

“Answer me one thing. Why did you lead the first sacred king to Hadesopolis?”

“What are ye getting at?”

“I understand your allegiance being with the Goddess of Darkness, rather than the demon lord. But the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was also a battle between Jupiteropolis and Hadesopolis.”

“More specifically, it was Hadesopolis against the alliance of other nations, with Jupiteropolis at its center.”

“Then wouldn’t you have been committing treachery against the Goddess of Darkness, leading the first sacred king to her head temple?”



“...I may have made some miscalculations.”

“Miscalculations?” I couldn’t see him clearly behind the visor, but he appeared a bit downcast, and likely wasn’t lying.

“Did you ever think it was strange? A hero of the darkness, summoned from another world, was the demon lord. Then who was the lord before he was summoned?”

I looked at the other girls after that question. They didn’t have any answers, though, and only shook their heads.

Goldfish continued to tell his story, maybe feeling a sense of superiority over us now. This was just a part of his raw personality.

“...It wasn’t *you*, was it?”

“Would that it were, but the citizens of Hades never woulda conceded to that. There was a king before. And the Hades royal family.”

“The Hades royal family...”

So basically, when the demon lord was summoned, the royal family was absent for whatever reason. No, I bet that they had all passed away.

“So a hero who had been blessed by the Goddess of Darkness was eligible to become king?”

“Bingo. And you better believe he was capable. He put policies into play that none of us even considered before, and really spurred the development of Hadesopolis... All was good and well up to that point.”

Goldfish pierced his sword into the ground. He was angry. The anger seeping out of him was almost palpable.

“But the bastard started getting full of himself! Even though the Goddess of Darkness had given him new life, he acted like he was god himself and started disrespecting the temple!!”

Oda Nobunaga had gone through years of struggle when he fought against the Ikko-ikki, a religious group, at Ishiyama Hongan-ji. Goddesses aside, I wondered if he just disliked the temple or even religion in general. I read the

atmosphere and kept my mouth shut, however, and continued listening.

“So I started thinkin’—if that bastard died, then a new hero of darkness could be summoned to this world.”

A switch flipped inside Clena at that point.

“Wait a second! So just because you wanted to eliminate the demon lord, you invited the enemy in?! And risk damage to your country?! Go fight him yourself!!”

“Calm down, Clena.”

I held Clena back with my arm, as it seemed like she was about to jump Goldfish any second.

He probably would have had trouble commanding political authority if he attacked the demon lord himself. Akechi Mitsuhide had defeated Nobunaga during the Honnouji Incident, but he ruled for a mere 13 days due to his inability to gather allies. There was also the chance that Goldfish was simply not strong enough to take him on.

“So you took refuge in the spring to avoid getting caught in the battle, huh.”

“That’s right.”

“And your miscalculation was that the demon lord hadn’t been completely defeated.”

Goldfish gave no reply. Bullseye. If he could have had any facial expressions, then he must have looked incredibly frustrated right now.

I understood the gist of it now. He had guided the first sacred king, but by no means was he his ally. He hadn’t exactly betrayed the demon lord, either. He was simply on the Goddess of Darkness’ side.

But in the end, Goldfish’s plans fell through. The demon lord wasn’t killed, only sealed, so they were unable to summon a new demon lord. Hadesopolis sunk under the earth, and Goldfish, having retreated to the spring, could go back no longer.

Well, the first sacred king had also been summoned as well. It wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume that he knew another demon lord would be

summoned if he killed the current one.

After hearing all this, I could make a guess at who Goldfish really was.

“A devoted follower would be ashamed of you right now.”

“What’s that?” Goldfish pulled his sword out from the floor and pointed it at me. I didn’t back down, though.

“Why didn’t you protect the temple when the first sacred king attacked? You’d have plenty of fighting power with that body.”

“I absolutely mustn’t risk death. Not in a million years!”

“See, that’s what I’m wondering about!”

Right, that statement was a big hint to uncovering his real identity. I myself had been summoned by the princess of the royal family and the Goddess of Light’s temple elder. Then who was it that summoned the hero of darkness?

“The one who summoned the demon lord from my world—it must have been you.”

Goldfish remained silent. It didn’t feel like he was trying to feign ignorance, though. He seemed like he was playing along.

“The reason why you lead the first sacred king here, and why you retreated to the safety of the spring, was that you were the one who could summon the next demon lord.”

“Uh-huh... and?”

Goldfish wasn’t denying it. He was definitely stringing us along.

I might as well ride this out now after having come this far. I came at him with my final theory.

“One of generals you had mentioned before... One who was still alive, the Masked Cleric.”

Clena, recognizing the name, looked to Goldfish in shock. Yes, to the full-face helmet that completely enveloped the fish tank.

“You could call that a mask, right?”

“Heheheh... haaahahahah!” Goldfish suddenly burst out laughing. “Good job, I say! I’m impressed you managed to arrive to that! Even the citizens of Hades often mistook me for the Guardian.”

I had considered that possibility as well. If one of those sets of armor had been gold, I might have guessed that he was Golden Armor as well. However, temple knights existed in this world. It wouldn’t be strange for them to be clad in heavy armor like this.

“Heheheh... It’s too bad, though. If only I had been summoned, I woulda made a damn fine demon lord.” He drew back the sword he had been pointing at me, then changed his posture to an experienced battle stance. It seemed the time for talk was over.

The Masked Cleric, one of the remaining 16 demon generals of Hades. One of the leaders of the demon lord army was standing before us.

Fourth Bath – Opening the Lid on Hell's Cauldron

"Fall back!"

We ran out of the armory into the hallway and immediately shut the door behind us. We backed off a little farther, and I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath. His weakness was my MP-infused water.

"Roni, get the hose!"

"Y-yessir!" Roni flipped around on her heels and made way for the Unlimited Bath, but she stopped in her tracks at the sight of something next to the door. "S-Sir Touya..."

"What's wrong...?" I followed her gaze, and what I saw really took me by surprise.

It was a sword—one of the iron swords that the knight statues were holding. Of course, it wasn't the sword itself that surprised me, but the fact that it was floating in the air next to the bath's door.

"Roni!"

"Kyah!"

The moment the floating sword started to move, I lunged at Roni. The sword flew at us. I swiped it away with the back of my arm. If I hadn't been wearing gauntlets right now, my arm might have been sliced through.

"What the hell's going on?!" I shouted impulsively, but I was met with a loud booming sound from behind me. I flipped around to see that something had punched through the door. Behind the dancing cloud of dust, I saw the silhouette of a gauntlet.

"Strike, Lightning!" Clena hurriedly swung her sword, and sparks of electricity shot out from the tip toward the fist. The impact was met with loud zaps and bright flashes.

"That should be effective, with the metal armor and fish tank inside..."

“Wait... that armor isn’t black.”

“Huh?”

“You’re right...”

Rium pointed out this detail to me.

Once the dust cleared, it revealed a silver gauntlet, not black like the one Goldfish wore. Maybe it was an effect of getting fried by Clena’s attack?

“Ya buncha... good fer nothins...” This time, a foot kicked the door down.

Behind the fallen door was a full suit of silver armor. It was the one right next to Goldfish’s black suit.

“If only ya had blown the whole door down, woulda saved me the trouble of doin’ it myself.”

Three full suits of plate armor, two silver and one black, emerged from the armory. So he could control armor other than his own, too? We wouldn’t have enough time for the hose like this. I closed the door to the Unlimited Bath and took up my broadaxe instead.

“Hahahah... it’s no use.” As Goldfish laughed, I started feeling a strange power in my arms. The broadaxe was pointing at Clena before I realized...

No, it wasn’t in my arms. The broadaxe itself forced its blade in Clena’s direction. No way, he couldn’t be...

“Hiyaaah!”

This is bad, I thought, then mustered all the strength in my body to slam the broadaxe into the floor. Next I summoned earth spirits, which took bits of the floor the axe had just broken and formed a hard shell around the blade.

“Whoa, what are you doing?!”

“Watch out! He can control weapons!”

“Oh, just like the armor...!”

The floating sword that attacked us, the two suits of silver armor on either side of Goldfish, and the broadaxe that attacked Clena by itself... Judging by what we had just witnessed, Goldfish could control all the weapons around him.

“My knife...!” Roni’s knife was trying to unsheathe itself from the scabbard hanging from her hips. She quickly grabbed the knife and stabbed it into the floor like I did. “Sir Touya!”

“Leave it to me! Stand back, Roni!” Unlike the axe, the knife could still be dislodged easily, so I stepped on the tip of the hilt and buried the whole knife into the floor.

“Clena!” Clena would be in danger next—or so I thought, but she was holding her sword with a confident look on her face.

“Don’t worry about this sword, Touya.”

“Tch! That one’s covered in magic?” Goldfish clicked his tongue. Seems like he could only control weapons without magic already influencing them. “I can do *this*, though!”

“What?! I’m being pulled...!”

“Lady Clena!”

Goldfish flicked one of the gauntlet’s fingers once, then Clena’s entire body started moving in turn. Roni dove in front of her, wrapping herself around Clena’s waist to keep her from moving.

“My armor!” Clena’s armor was made with hard leather, but it was a high quality product reinforced all over with metal. So that counted as metal too, not just the weapons.

“Am I next?!”

“Bingo, now take *this*!”

“Guh...!” Unlike Clena, my entire body was surrounded with metal—from my metal-reinforced shield to my brigandine, vambraces, gauntlets, and greaves. He was taking control of everything, and I was being pulled along like a puppet. Rium tried to wrap herself around my waist to stop me, but her tiny body didn’t stand a chance against the power.

Damn it. I should have worn my hard leather armor, even though it was weaker.

The two sets of plate armor had their swords drawn. If I kept being dragged

into their range, they would start hacking away at me. I quickly dug my feet into the ground, then summoned spirits to create an impromptu wall between us using the floor's materials. I lost my balance, hovered in the air for a split second, then slammed my back into the wall I just created. Better than being cut into pieces, at least. A rock broke free from the wall and fell on my head. I used the spell while I was still unstable, so the earth hadn't hardened itself properly.

The wall was full of holes, but none big enough for a set of armor to pass through. It was similar to a fence. I wanted to praise myself for the extra caution I took to protect Rium from getting hurt.

"Are you okay, Touya?" Rium asked me in a worried voice.

"Somehow, yeah," I tried giving her a smile in response. I didn't know if I'd succeeded though, considering how my body was still being pulled into the wall.

I could take off all my armor, but that would be a lengthy process. It wasn't a realistic option right now. The only silver lining was that Goldfish's power wasn't strong enough to pull me through the wall. I couldn't fight in this state, though.

I could have just used something coated in magic, but if that was so easy to come by, then I would have bought it back in Jupiteropolis. I could also use a non-metal weapon, but we didn't have any on hand, so I had no options other than to form a makeshift hammer from the floor and walls. In any case, we were at a huge disadvantage. We essentially had no armor or weapons, while he had them all.

I could barely move my arms, so I decided to ask Rium to cut the belts holding my armor in place. That would be much faster than removing it normally.

"Rium, cut my belts for me."

"Okay," she said softly, then took out a knife and started cutting away at the belts on my gauntlets.

I was hiding her with my body, so Goldfish probably couldn't tell what was going on. I looked over at Clena and Roni, who were struggling to get their breastplates off.

“Ye did all that with a basic spell...? I knew I shoulda brainwashed ya.”

“Come to think of it, why aren’t you trying to do that right now? So it was the water after all?” I tried asking Goldfish, but he didn’t respond.

We had thought drinking the water would’ve allowed him to brainwash us back then, and it seemed we were right on the mark. He likely couldn’t brainwash anyone outside of that spring. But honestly, if he could do that to us now, on top of everything else, all hope would be gone. Goldfish—the Masked Cleric, one of the 16 demon generals—was this powerful when he could freely use his magic.

“Y’all are really gettin’ on my last nerves...”

One of the suits of armor approached the wall and banged against it several times. Goldfish sure was playing it safe by keeping his distance. I guess he didn’t have any specific plans to use against us.

“Aye, the MP has blended in like a charm. Shame ye weren’t summoned under the Goddess of Darkness, kid.”

“But I needed to be dead for that.” The Goddess of Darkness only summoned the deceased.

During our exchange, Rium had moved on from the gauntlets to the vambraces. She had cut my arm a little in the process, but it was hardly the time to complain about that now.

“Just imagine... You could become king if I summoned ya. After all, the Goddess of Darkness—” Goldfish started rambling about the demon lord again, like he had all the composure in the world to spare.

Looks like that talkativeness was just inherent to his raw personality after all. I was thankful for it right now, at least.

Rium finished cutting the belts on my greaves in the meantime. My brigandine was the last item, and this one had three clasps with two belts at my hips and chest. Rium started with the belt at my chest that had a small clasp.

“—So it’s a downright shame, y’know... I couldn’t summon ya even if I were to kill ya right here and now!”

I heard a sea of rattling sounds from the other side, so I turned around to find a countless number of swords, spears, and axes floating together. Shoot, the lower belt wouldn't be done in time.

"Rium, run for it!" She had just finished cutting the top belt loose, but I moved away from her and stuck my two gauntlets into a hole in the wall.

"Instant rocket punch!!"

"Hurgh?!"

The power was still trying to draw me in, so the gauntlets, now freed of any constraints, flew through the wall. The gauntlets drew an arc and hit Goldfish's helmet head on. A metallic clang pierced my ears. As if a bunch of strings had been suddenly cut, the three sets of plate armor and the countless weapons all fell to the floor. So Goldfish could lose focus too. The fish tank was sturdy, though, and he began standing the three sets of armor up again.

I used the opportunity to take the knife from Rium and cut my last belt. I removed my vambraces and greaves, too.

"Geez, Goldfish is pretty persistent at full power..."

Clena stood next to me, having removed her chestplate. It looked like she had torn her surcoat off.

She and Roni put their armor next to my greaves, and I buried them all into the ground. I couldn't thank the earth temple elder enough. I had no weapons or armor right now, only earth magic.

Clena also had no armor, just a thin sword that didn't seem too useful against opponents covered in full-body metal armor. Roni had hard leather armor but no weapons. Rium was the only one who didn't wear heavy metal armor regularly, and all her metal weapons were imbued with magic crystals, so they were safe from influence.

We had little chance of winning in this state, but we couldn't give up.

Now that we had regained control of ourselves, I considered using the wall to blockade ourselves from Goldfish, but I was more afraid of losing sight of him. I had to come up with a plan that would give us a chance at victory.

“Rium, do you think your spear can reach him?”

“No. Not enough distance.”

Her silver spear only grew larger once it left her hands. The spear needed more space to grow if it had any chance of doing any substantial damage to our armored opponents.

“...Rium, use your flying disc to call Rulitora here.” I deduced there was no choice but to call on Rulitora, and ordered Rium to do as such. We destroyed all the golems on the way here, so the flying disc would be the fastest way to make contact with him.

“...Understood.” Rium didn’t probe any further, and immediately set off on the flying disc she’d been carrying on her back.

In the meantime, Goldfish had managed to get the three suits of armor back on their feet and lifted the countless weapons back in the air. My gauntlets were among them.

“Yer not gettin’ away!”

“Don’t you dare!”

Goldfish sent a sword flying through an opening in the wall when he noticed Rium, but Roni slashed it away with her bare hands. I knew lycaons had superhuman strength, but I wasn’t expecting *that*.

We can count on her to fight, I thought as I submerged the sword into the ground.

“We’re running out of space to bury everything. Let’s fall back a little.”

“Got it.”

We couldn’t bury much more into the ground here, since the remains of the knight golems were already scattered everywhere. We retreated a little, still guarding against Goldfish’s attacks.

“Hmm...” Goldfish put his hand to his chin, thinking about something as he looked at us. The other two suits of armor were attempting to break the wall with their axes.

“Looks like this’ll take some time... Might as well enjoy the hunt while I’m at it,” he said, waved his left hand, and sent weapons flying through the holes in the wall. “Now don’t you die until I get there, alright?”

His voice was eerily calm. I was sure he was smiling on the other side of the wall. Not a moment later, a number of weapons rained down on us. “Watch out, one wrong step and you’ll get skewered.” Clangs of metal and Goldfish’s joyful voice echoed through the otherwise quiet hallway.

We defended ourselves against the wave, Clena with her sword and me with gloves I formed with gravel on the floor. I was amazed at Roni, though. Even though she had leather braces, she kept striking away every piece of weaponry that came at her using just her arms. Despite the situation, I was captivated by the way she looked so fearless.

I couldn’t afford to get distracted, though. I stayed a few steps behind them and quickly buried all the fallen weapons into the floor or walls. I wanted to submerge them all at once, but couldn’t risk the entire building collapsing on us, so I had no choice but to bury them one by one while only modifying the building structure slightly each time.

Roni stopped a hand axe with her bare hands, but couldn’t stop its momentum, so she deflected it into the floor. Her breathing was ragged. The heavier weapons must have been taking a toll on her.

And then a knife came flying toward the back of Roni’s head. It was at a blind spot to her and she didn’t seem to have noticed it yet.

“Roni!” I immediately reached out for the knife. Grabbing it with my bare hands, a sharp pain ran through me.

“Sir Touya!”

“Keep looking in front of you!” She instinctively started to run toward me, but I shouted at her to stop.

Enduring the pain, I plunged the knife into the wall and stomped the axe into the ground, concealing both. There was a red line running through the fingers of my right hand, with which I’d grabbed the knife. I didn’t have the time to chant a healing spell now, so I stopped the bleeding by forming a gravel shell

around my hand.

This wasn't my only injury, though—all three of us were covered in wounds. If we could get close to him, we had a chance at victory. But right now, all we could do was defend. My wall was on the verge of collapsing, too.

It felt like it had been a while since Rium left. Seeing as how Rulitora had yet to arrive, though, time might have just been passing slowly for me.

I caught a sword that flew at me from between Clena and Roni. I managed to catch it by the handle this time, but my grip sent pain running through my still-open wounds. I didn't raise my voice, though, and stabbed the sword into the ground. The pressure made the pain run from my hand to my head, but it wasn't the worst sensation. It kept me alert while my concentration was currently being tested.

Then, I heard the sound of something crashing to the ground. I looked behind me to see that Goldfish and the two suits of armor had created a large hole in my wall, rendering it useless. This was bad. We already had our hands full with the weapons he controlled, so if the suits of armor were added to the mix, we wouldn't stand a chance.

"What's going on?!" Clena's voice snapped me out of my dumbstruck state.

I looked over to see my gauntlets trying to wrestle Clena's sword from her hands. Before Roni or I could move, an axe came flying toward her arms as she was trying to keep a grip on her sword. She quickly let go to dodge the axe, and the gauntlets returned to Goldfish's side.

"Yer all outta moves, kid. Yer magic ain't from a blessing, am I right? Ye can't use magic unless ye have a medium to channel it into."

"Urgh...!" Clena grumbled vexedly.

He was right on the mark. Come to think of it, she had never used spells without taking her sword out. And now she was completely defenseless. I stepped in front of her, shielding her with my back. Goldfish took the sword from the gauntlets, inspecting it with a curious eye.

"...?! Where'd ye get this, ye scalawag?!" Goldfish cried out when he was about to raise the sword in the air. It looked like he noticed something from the

pattern on the handle.

I stared at Goldfish, perplexed.

“Why, this is the Dark Prince’s sword!”

“What?!” I inadvertently yelled.

The Dark Prince was one of the demon lord Amann Naga’s—rather, Nobunaga’s—sons, and one of the Five Great Demon Generals. Goldfish claimed that Clena’s sword was the general’s.

“...Clena, is that true?”

“I’d heard it used to belong to the demons... This is the first time someone told me it used to belong to the Dark Prince, though.” Clena responded in a strained tone.

I had to keep my eyes on Goldfish, so there was no telling how Clena looked right now, but Roni was looking at Clena and I with a worried expression.

“Tell me how ye got yer hands on this! Maybe a little bit o’ pain will get yer lips movin’?!” Goldfish’s voice trembled with anger as the other two suits of armor started advancing toward us. The blades of their large axes, which had broken down my wall earlier, gave off a dull glow.

If I tried stopping that with my rock-covered hands, it’d probably just slice me in half. My only option was to make a weapon from the gravel and combat it using brute force. I squatted down, placed my hand on the floor, and shouted toward Goldfish...

“Now, Rulitora!”

Goldfish stopped in his tracks, taken by surprise, but in the next moment a glaive came crashing down from behind him. It only knocked his helmet off, though.

Yes, when I shouted at Goldfish earlier, I actually had my eyes on Rulitora, who had somehow snuck behind Goldfish. He must have found a way to sneak into the armory. Goldfish’s magic cut off, the suits of armor and numerous weapons all fell to the floor.

“Curses, where did you come from...” Goldfish quickly raised the black suit

and tried to pick up his helmet, but I wouldn't let him.

"Throw the helmet over here!"

"Roger!" Rulitora ran at the helmet faster than Goldfish could and kicked it over to us.

I picked it up and saw something that looked like a fish bowl inside. There was no physical bowl, though. The water itself formed an orb that remained inside the helmet. And in it was Goldfish. I'd hoped that his bowl would have cracked and broken from the impact just now, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. I secured the helmet under my arm, opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, and ran inside.

"What are ye doing, bastard?!"

"I'm inviting you inside my gift! Show a little appreciation!"

"You fool! Hiding me away will do nothin'! All I need to do is throw those weapons around and your friends will be all sliced up! Just like this!"

I immediately closed the door to the bath, but Goldfish only sneered at me. That last part must have been him using his spell... to make the suits of armor and weapons from outside attack everyone again. I kept the door closed, though, and instead headed toward the bath.

"Hahahah! You dimwit! You tryin'a seal my magic again with that water of yours?! Too bad for you, but as long as I have this water, yer water's not gonna do nothin' to me!"

Goldfish, having spotted some knives and forks, started throwing them toward me. I shielded myself with the helmet, but two knives manages to pierce themselves into my arm and thigh. Since the floor here was wooden, I wasn't able to bury the utensils.

"Heheheh... how long can ye hold on for? Oh, I know. Why don't we bet on who dies first, you in here or yer friends out there?"

He raised the utensils at me again, minus the two that were stuck in me.

"Don't worry, you'll be the first one to go." I jumped inside the bathing room and closed the door behind me as a shield.

We were enveloped by hot steam once I entered the bathing room. The knives and forks slammed against the door, but that was all they did. Fortunately they lacked the power to bust through.

I pulled the knives out of my body and threw them inside the bath before Goldfish had a chance to do anything with them. He shouldn't be able to access them anymore. I then started pushing buttons on the control panel next to the bathtub.

"W-what are ye playin' at?!" Goldfish yelled out. He must have finally caught onto the abnormal situation.

Steam started escaping from the cedar tub and the water inside started to bubble. He must have spotted it now, too—the number "100" on the control panel. Though he might not have been able to read it, seeing as how it was written in a language from my world. A normal bath wouldn't have these extreme settings for safety reasons, but my Unlimited Bath did. It could run up to 100 degrees Celsius and make water boil.

"Y-you bastard... don't tell me..."

"I think you've got something wrong, Goldfish. Nothing can interact with us from the outside right now, so in turn we can't affect anything inside."

"What?!"

"Your magic isn't reaching outside right now."

"Y-yer lyin'..." Goldfish looked suspicious of me, but I wasn't just making things up.

Once I closed the door, we were cut off from all outside influence, but we couldn't do anything from inside as well. That was one of the special traits of my Unlimited Bath. The black suit of armor must be still and lifeless right now, having been cut off from Goldfish's magic.

I approached the cedar bath and hung the helmet over the water. The steam was hot— I couldn't stay here for long.

"So now you know, what happens outside doesn't count. It's a bet whichever one of us dies first. There are still plenty of knives outside, do whatever you

want with them.”

Goldfish tried writhing the helmet around, but I didn’t loosen my grip.

“W-Wait... if I die, then I can’t summon another demon lord...!”

“Then what did you ruin your country for?! There’s not a single citizen of Hades left! Or were you hoping to create a kingdom of the dead?!”

I ignored Goldfish’s plea and aimed a shower head inside the helmet. I sprayed water inside, cutting the helmet off from his control, and the water orb fell out. I made sure the orb fell into the boiling water before throwing away the painfully hot helmet and jumping out of the bathing room. As soon as I passed the door, I saw the knives and forks all pointed at me. Unsurprisingly, he had mustered his strength for one final attack.

“Who will die first, huh...” The moment I spoke, the knives and forks flew at me with great speed. “...Sorry, but there are a million ways I can shield myself in here.”

Instead of me, the utensils ended up piercing a folded up bath towel. I wrapped them all up in the towel and pressed it down on the ground with my feet. I could feel them twitching around under my feet, but they weren’t putting up much of a fight. My victory was sealed if I just kept doing this.

I waited until the utensils stopped twitching, then lowered the temperature of the water using the control panel. The inside must have been a sauna right about now, so luckily I could control the temperature from the outside. I opened the door and hot steam blasted in my face. It wasn’t as bad as when I first started boiling the water, but it was still unpleasant. I then went back to open the door to the Unlimited Bath.

“Touya!” Clena ran over to me once she noticed the door was open. She had her usual sword in her hands, already sheathed. Looks like she got it back safe and sound.

“Where’s Goldfish?”

“Being boiled.”

“I see...” Heat was coming from inside, so she must have been able to tell.

“Are you alright, Roni?”

“Piece of cake!” She must have gotten seriously injured, having taken the brunt of the damage earlier, but she still managed a courageous smile. Her bravery was so endearing.

“Thank you as well, Rium, Rulitora.”

“It’s fine, I only called him here.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe.”

Rium was clinging onto Rulitora’s back.

On that note, when I asked how Rulitora got into the room, he said he simply cut a hole open with his glaive. He might have gotten noticed if he crashed through the wall, so he cut a triangle using the floor as the base, then carefully lowered the cut piece of wall to the ground.

Now that we’d cleared that up, I needed to treat all of our wounds. I wanted to confirm whether or not Goldfish was dead first, though. Maybe we should take him outside and crush him under our feet to be safe.



I reentered the bathing room to find the water back to a normal temperature and Goldfish floating just below the surface, belly-up. I pinched his large fins and lifted him out of the water.

“What?!” I was intending on only lifting him out, but the orb came up with him. It was the same orb that was inside the helmet.

“The bastard’s still alive...!”

“Don’t think ye can kill me off so easily! Curse yer hides!!”

Goldfish fired something at me. I let go and dropped him to the floor. I couldn’t muster any strength into my legs anymore and collapsed onto the bathing room ground.

“Prepare to suffer... ye scalawag...”

I gazed at Goldfish, who was finally on his last breath, gradually fading from consciousness.

I had a dream.

I wasn’t sure if I was standing or lying down. I might have been floating in the sky or buried underground. I was only sure of the pain coursing through my entire body and my shortening breath.

I saw three shadows, though I couldn’t tell how close or far they were. The one that stood out most was a woman with blonde hair tied in a high ponytail. She was tall, clad in a long dress with pure white hems. I thought she was a radiant beauty, but she wore a harsh expression on her face. She had her hands at her waist, reproaching one of the other shadows.

The one being reproached was a woman with black hair. She was sitting down hugging her knees so I couldn’t say for sure, but she looked petite. In contrast to the other girl, she was clad in a pure black dress, with her long straight hair spreading out on the ground and melting into her skirt. She was teary-eyed and

her shoulders trembled as the blonde-haired woman kept condemning her. She seemed kind of ephemeral.

The last shadow was trying to calm the blonde-haired woman down. She had wavy green hair and dark brown skin. She had a larger build than the blonde-haired woman, which combined with her gentle expression reminded me of a towering tree.

The black-haired girl might have noticed me since she looked over through her tears, seemingly about to burst out crying any second. The blonde-haired girl took a glance at me as well, but instead she looked even angrier and scolded the black-haired girl some more. I couldn't tell what they were saying, but I could read as much from the atmosphere. Lastly, the tree girl came over to me with a gentle smile, reached her hand out, and all of a sudden my pain and shortness of breath had vanished like they were never there. I closed my eyes with a relaxed expression.

That was the dream I saw.

"Ugh..." I woke up from that strange dream to find Roni and Rium's worried faces staring down at me. Rium had tears in her eyes, to say nothing of Roni.

"Lady Clena! Rulitora! Sir Touya has awakened!" Roni called out as she waved her disheveled custard-colored hair around. Rium poked my cheek, probably wondering if I was okay. Her cocoa-colored hair tickled my cheek as she drooped her head down.

"Are you okay?"

"...Somehow, yeah."

I tried to sit up, bearing the pain of my wounds, but a twang shot up my arm when I pressed my hand against the floor. That was the wound from when I grabbed the knife. My hand was still in the gravel-cover I had made, so I

removed it and closed the wound with my healing light. I had several others wounds across my body, but nothing worrying.

I looked around to find that we were in the armory that Goldfish had hidden inside. The others had brought out blankets for us to rest on.

I couldn't detect the rotten smell anymore. I guess Clena had ventilated the air in here. The door was closed and Rulitora was sitting at the hole in the wall he had cut, keeping watch outside with his back facing me. He turned around, though, probably curious about me. The carriage was parked right under the hole in the wall.

It was bright outside. Either not much time had passed since I had collapsed, or a whole night had already gone by.

Clena came over to me, her silver hair a mess. From that, I assumed an entire night had passed.

"How long was I out for?"

"Almost a whole day."

So it really was the latter. She probably didn't have the time to do her hair yesterday.

"I'll reheat the soup for you."

My stomach grumbled in response. It was just before noon right now. We had started exploring the demon lord's castle after having a light lunch yesterday, so that meant I had skipped dinner and breakfast.

I noticed that a lot of our luggage had been taken from outside the Unlimited Bath. I had collapsed with the door to the Unlimited Bath still open, which would have consumed my MP all the while and placed a heavy burden on me. Clena must have realized that and took blankets and other things out, closed the door, and had us rest outside. They didn't know when I would wake up. It was a wise decision, considering how they couldn't open the door again until I did.

"What happened to Goldfish?"

“We thought it’d be bad to shut him inside, so we took him out. But as soon as we did, he turned into waste and disappeared.”

“So he’s completely dead now?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Clena replied, drooping her shoulders. Looks like Goldfish had been completely destroyed. “More importantly, how are you, Touya?”

“I don’t feel great yet, but could be worse.” I said, then stood up. My limbs moved just fine. All operational.

If what happened in my dream was real, then I had reason to believe I was fine. I couldn’t be sure of anything right now, though, so I left that unspoken.

“Want to go and see what changed inside after all that?”

I assumed I had leveled up after defeating Goldfish—the Masked Cleric, one of the demon generals—not to mention having been cursed by him, as well. I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, fully expecting it to have changed from before. And sure enough, the sight that greeted me was completely unfamiliar.

“...A garden?”

“Hm? Isn’t it too small to be a garden?”

The changing room was always the first thing to greet you, but this time there was a space of around one meter, or one *stuto* in this world’s units. A stone path led to another door, which I assumed was the changing room. But other than that, the space was just scattered with gravel. The door leading to the changing room had an ultramarine curtain hanging in front of it with the word “bath” written on it. I decided to inspect our current one stuto space before opening the door to the changing room.

It was surrounded on both sides by walls. I had thought it was a small garden at first, but after walking around, I discovered that the path formed a loop all the way around the bath. It felt like a building inside a large room. There were windows, but I couldn’t tell what was beyond them since it was dark inside.

“I’d call this more of a pathway than a garden.”

“It’s cramped.”

Clena and Rium, who were following behind me, couldn’t figure out what this

space was for. I had thought this might be a good place for Rulitora to rest, since the steam didn't reach out here, but unfortunately it'd be little too narrow for him.

"Don't tell me..."

It was an intriguing development, but thinking about that dream I had I came up with a possible explanation.

In that dream, a women who might have been the Goddess of Light was reprimanding a woman who might have been the Goddess of Darkness, and then a women who might have been the Goddess of Earth took away my pain.

You could say that my gift was "inside" me, though of course not in the physical sense. The bath inside this box-shaped building was currently caught between the Goddess of Light's blessing and Goldfish's curse. And the gravel pathway at our feet was the "Earth." The Goddess of Earth's blessing enveloped the bath itself, keeping me from taking damage. Thinking about it that way, the dream made sense.

"Sir Touya... Whoa, what's that?!"

Roni had come back with a cup of soup. I took it from her and started sipping on it. It was too hot to gulp down all at once, but it warmed my body right up.

"The real question is what's inside."

"I'll open the door, just in case. Touya is the only one who can use healing spells."

"...I'll leave it to you then, sorry."

I wanted to be the man here, but Clena was right. If this were a game, a recovery spell would heal you right up even if you were on the verge of death. But since this was the real world, I needed to be in good enough condition to cast the spell. I noticed that Clena and Roni were wrapped in bandages all over. Since I fell unconscious, they hadn't been able to heal the wounds they'd suffered from the battle against Goldfish.

"How about I heal those injuries first?"

"This is nothing. Let's go inside first. We won't be able to heal ourselves at all

in the future if anything happens to you.”

“...I understand. I’ll heal you guys right after we check out what’s inside.”

“Thank you.”

Roni stood on guard in front of me, while Clena opened the door from the side.

“H-huh? Hold on, there’s no door knob. Nothing happens if I push it either,” Clena grew flustered, not having seen this type of door before. Come to think of it, I’d never seen sliding doors in this world before.

“...That’s a sliding door. Try pushing it to the side.”

“Huh? Oh, you mean like this?” Clena pushed the door to the side, blushing a little. It opened with a rattle. The sound was pretty nostalgic for me.

There wasn’t any battle between light and darkness going on inside, it was safe—but even so, the view had completely changed yet again.

“More doors?”

“Looks like this was just the entrance.”

It looked like a square building from the outside, but there were a few more rooms inside. There was an entranceway right where we entered, and another door. The inner door was check-patterned frosted glass, and we could tell it was dark on the other side.

We opened the door to find that there was indeed no lighting in there. I looked beside me and surely enough, I saw the faint glow of the keys to a control panel. Inspecting it closer, I found that it was just the light switch. Of course, my bath had always had light switches in the past, but this one had been upgraded with even more options.

I turned on the light to find the biggest room we’d seen yet in this bath. Judging by where our luggage had ended up, the room was about twice as big as it was before. There was a sink and washing machine to the left and right of us. I had thought the entrance was narrow compared to what we had seen from outside, but the sink and washing machine took up those couple extra chunks of space jutting past the door.

Along the wall on the farther side, there were two doors. The one on the left was the same folding door that led to the bathing room. We opened it, looked inside, and saw the same Japanese cedar bath as before.

The doors on the right were actually *fusuma* panel doors. We opened them cautiously to find a room laid out with tatami mats. It was eight tatami in size, with another set of fusuma inside. I opened the fusuma, excited that there might be futons inside, but unfortunately it was a completely empty closet. The room was about the same size as the bathing room, including the size of the closet.

The girls were all flabbergasted at the unfamiliar architecture.

“What is this room...?”

“This is a type of room from my world. Just like the changing room with the wooden floor and the cedar bathing room.”

“Doesn’t it smell like the outside here?”

“The floor... is it made from dead grass?”

“Assuming it’s the same as it was from my world, it’s made from a thing called soft rush straw.” The plant hadn’t necessarily died, it had just been dehydrated.

“I see, so that’s why it smells so nice,” Roni said, then took a deep breath. She was right, the room smelled like fresh tatami. It seemed she had taken a liking to the scent.

“Wow... this is made using some complicated techniques.”

Clena had a stunned look on her face and kept silent. I could guess her train of thought, though. There were a variety of buildings in this world, but the majority of them were made with mud walls, while the nobles would live in houses built from stone.

Only poor farmers lived in wooden houses. These girls probably couldn’t ignore their bias, having grown up in this world. They could tell the tatami wasn’t on the same level, though, after seeing how intricately woven it was. Her astonishment came from the mismatch between her idea of grass flooring and the complex methods used to make the tatami.

“Wow... Amazing...” Rium got on her hands and knees and inspected the weave on the tatami mats.

Fighting off the urge to pat her little protruding butt, I returned to the changing room to get started on healing everyone’s wounds.

“Rium, are you alright?”

“Yes.”

Rium hadn’t sustained any injuries during her call for reinforcement, so I left her in the tatami room. Next, I stuck my head out of the Unlimited Bath and called out to Rulitora.

“Are you wounded anywhere, Rulitora?”

“I’m fine. Nothing to worry about.”

He seemed uninjured as well. Only Clena and Roni needed some healing. I ignored the wounds on my own limbs and started their treatment.

“I just realized, but Healing Light won’t let you heal your own back.”

“Isn’t there a higher level healing spell to make up for that?”

I couldn’t heal my back since I wasn’t able to reach it, but there was a more complex spell for that. I sort of understood the theory behind it, which I suppose was good enough for now.

“...Well, in any case. Show me your wounds, you two.”

“Alright.” Roni took the initiative to undress first, stripping down to her underwear. I couldn’t heal her unless I was touching her skin directly, after all.

“Where are your wounds?”

“Our hands and feet... Roni has one on her back, too.”

“Lady Clena, we’ll need to heal the one on your chest as well.”

“Yeah, I’ll make sure to heal that up really carefully.” I gulped down the last of my soup and psyched myself up.

I didn’t have any ulterior motives, I promise. There was no way I could leave a scar on Clena’s breasts. Sure, I had to touch them to heal them, but I had only

pure intentions. Probably.

“You touched me in a really perverted way.”

“I’m a man, after all!” I wasn’t gonna make excuses.

Besides, I couldn’t heal her properly by just brushing against her skin. I needed to make sure every last nerve ending in my hands made contact with her breasts.

After I finished healing her, Clena stared at me as she put her clothes back on, but she understood I’d completely healed her so there was nothing left for her to say. When I had taken off her bandages, I had seen a deep cut running across the top of her voluptuous right breast. It would definitely have left a scar if I hadn’t healed it myself.

She said she tried dodging a knife that came flying at her, but didn’t make it in time. She’d still been lucky, though, considering how the knife would have gone straight through her chest if she hadn’t dodged at all. She had a few deep wounds on her arms and legs as well, but I managed to heal all of them up without a trace.

I could use my magic without any issues. Rather, I might have had an even bigger supply now compared to before.

“I believe the room got bigger from defeating Goldfish, but the structure inside changed and we have one more room now.”

“Let’s make the tatami room the bedroom. We won’t have to sleep surrounded by luggage anymore.”

I looked inside the room with the open fusuma to see Rium rolling around joyfully. Looks like she discovered how comfortable tatami was. Roni’s eyes sparkled as she watched Rium, so I told her to go ahead and join.

“I wonder what the curse he cast on me really was?”

“...” Clena was silent.

I looked over, wondering what was wrong, to find her looking down at her exposed chest, collar unbuttoned.

“Are you implying I should look?”

“N-No, I’m not!” Clena covered her chest, flustered. She was probably inspecting the area I had just healed.

“Did I heal it alright?”

“Yeah, you did. But Touya, do you really feel okay?” Clena peered up at me with a worried look.

I could see her cleavage since she hadn’t buttoned her collar yet. She blushed as soon as she noticed my gaze, then turned her back to me and buttoned herself up.

I looked at her back and asked, “Do you have any idea what the curse might be?”

“This is just my guess, but I think it’s the blessing of the Goddess of Darkness. The tatami room must have been created from that.”

True, I couldn’t imagine my Unlimited Bath being upgraded from a curse. Especially since this gift was originally from the Goddess of Light. So just like how the bathtub turned into cedar from the Goddess of Earth’s blessing, the tatami room could have been created from the Goddess of Darkness’ blessing.

“So the curse was a blessing?”

I remembered a saying back in my world that went “both a blessing and a curse.”

“Isn’t that how you become one of the demon race, though? Will you really be okay?” Clena asked me again, this time with an argument we couldn’t ignore.

Still, I felt absolutely nothing abnormal in my body.

“Er, but wait. Was his goal trying to turn me into a demon? Really?”

“That would explain why it would’ve been a curse...” Clena muttered pensively.

We didn’t have any proof, though. Goldfish had commented that I’d make a fine demon lord, but was he actually being serious?

“What happens when you transform into a demon?”

“Your physical appearance changes first. Take off your clothes a little.”

“A-alright...” It was my turn to strip now. I decided to heal my own wounds in the meantime.

Clena inspected my body while I healed the cuts on my arms and legs. I couldn’t see my back, but Clena said I had no injuries there. I wasn’t showing any signs of transforming into a demon, either.

“Yeah, you’re fine here, too.”

“...Stop looking at that so casually.”

“What, you think I’ve never seen it before? This makes us even.”

I won’t get into the specifics of what she was talking about, but her stubborn face was bright red at the moment. She didn’t look as composed as she tried to act.

“Y-you’re really the exact same everywhere...”

“Actually...” I told her about the strange dream I had while I had been knocked out.

What if those were the personifications of my blessings, assuming the forms of the goddesses? In other words, the light and darkness blessings inside me were clashing with each other right now, but the earth blessing was protecting me from getting harmed by it.

“So maybe the Goddess of Earth’s blessing is keeping my body from morphing right now?”

“Well, it’s a possibility,” Clena saw the logic in my argument. “But there’s also the chance you become a demon without changing physically.”

“Is that possible?”

“I don’t know... but there might have been demons who didn’t look much different from humans at all. I can think of some off the top of my head.” Clena looked off into the distance.

I was reminded of what Goldfish said when I looked at her. It would be

awkward, but I decided to go ahead and ask her now.

“...Is your sword really related to the Dark Prince?” I asked, looking her dead in the eyes.

Goldfish said that Clena’s sword, which she used as a medium for her spirit magic, belonged to the Dark Prince. She claimed that she didn’t know who the original owner was.

Clena looked back at me for a while, then eventually sighed deeply and started speaking.

“Alright. I’ll tell you everything.”

I stood up straight and perked up my ears. I noticed that the fusuma to the tatami room had shut before I realized it. Roni was probably giving us some privacy.

“That sword used to be my mom’s.”

“Did one of your ancestors steal it from the Dark Prince, or something like that?”

“No, mom said that she got it from the prince himself.”



Now that piqued my curiosity. Her words implied that the Dark Prince gave his sword away of his own accord. What in the world would have brought him to do that? No, I should be asking what sort of relationship Clena's mother had with the Dark Prince in the first place.

"Wait a second...!"

"...Yeah, this sword was a present that my dad gave to my mom. At least that's what I've been told."

"So that means the Dark Prince is your dad?"

"I don't know. The only thing I can say for sure is that my dad, who I've never met, gifted my mom this sword."

I see. Even if the sword really belonged to the Dark Prince like Goldfish claimed, the one who gave it to Clena's mom might not necessarily have been him.

"You're not lying about your age, right?"

"I'm not. I'm really 15."

It had been 500 years since the demon lord and the prince had been summoned to this world. There was a chance the sword had been passed down a few generations, or that it had fallen into someone else's hands along the way.

So Clena was mixed human and demon...? No, I couldn't say that just yet. There was still a chance that some human had stolen the sword from the Dark Prince.

"So I came all the way here to find out more about my identity."

"To find out who your father was?"

Clena shook her head at my question. "That's part of it, but I wanted to know whether I was really a demon or not."

So her claim that there might have been "demons who didn't look much different from humans" was referring to herself. She didn't know who her father was, so she had no idea if she was human, demon, or a mix.

“I thought I’d find something out if I came here... But it was all in vain. Looks like I’ll have to start from the beginning again,” Clena said with a laugh—but she looked frail, like she could burst into tears any moment. “...It’s gotten kind of humid. We should start getting lunch ready soon.” She stood up and quickly exited the Unlimited Bath. I couldn’t help but notice the tears at the corners of her eyes, though.

“...Are you going to be alright?” I called to her from behind as she started prepping for lunch. It wasn’t just my imagination that her shoulders were drooping a little.

“I’ll be fine. Just wait and see, I’ll put everything I’ve got into making lunch.” Clena turned around and smiled at me, but it was plain as day how much she was pushing herself.

Roni was the primary cook in our party, while I was the one who helped her out the most. It was abnormal for Clena to take the initiative to make lunch like this.

I walked over and positioned myself between her and the frying pan so that we were facing each other. She really was looking glum.

“I can guess what you’re about to say, but are you really okay, Touya?”

“Okay with what?”

“You know, aren’t you feeling anything? You might turn into a demon any moment now.”

“Oh, that...”

A human would transform into a demon once blessed by the Goddess of Darkness. We had no proof, but that was likely the curse that Goldfish placed on me. Calling it a “curse” was probably just his brand of sarcasm.

My reputation would definitely take a hit if I became known as a hero summoned by the Goddess of Light who turned into a demon. That was probably another reason Goldfish called it a “curse.” Well, we had no way of confirming it with him anymore, seeing as how he turned into a boiled fish and then evaporated. But nothing other than my Unlimited Bath had changed so far, so I wasn’t feeling the gravity of the situation yet. The possibility that Clena’s

father might be a demon had me a lot more worried. She had come all the way to the desert kingdom, Hadesopolis, in search of clues about her father, yet we had found nothing.

“Don’t worry about me. Even if we don’t find anything here, I’ll just need to keep looking elsewhere. What matters is what you plan on doing after this, Touya.”

“I’ll gather more blessings from other goddesses and... help you find clues about your father. There’s not much for me to think about.”

It hadn’t sunk in for me yet, but both Clena and I might be flesh-and-blood demons now. Though it was only a possibility for her at the moment.

“Can’t we just say that we’ll keep traveling together for the time being?”

“...You’re right.”

It was faint, but she finally gave me a genuine smile. She then returned her focus to the pan and continued cooking.

“Give that to me.”

“Huh?”

“You’re holding it all wrong, it’s dangerous.”

My biggest problem to tackle right now was helping Clena out with cooking.

After we finished cooking, I decided to send Haruno a letter before sitting down to eat. We were on guard with Goldfish around and didn’t want him finding out that we had friends outside our party, so we had held off on writing letters until now.

I might as well take this opportunity to mention that we defeated one of the demon generals. I wonder if Haruno would be happy to hear that? Or maybe she’ll be worried after learning that we were fighting a demon general?

I decided to hold off on telling her about my curse or the blessing from the Goddess of Darkness. We didn’t have any definitive proof yet, so I didn’t want to worry her too much. Of course, I kept Clena’s story a secret as well. I’d be safe telling Haruno about my feelings, though...

“Hmm, you’re writing a letter to Haruno?”

“Yeah, since we can let our guard down now... Don’t look, okay?”

“I’m not the type to read other people’s letters. But...”

“But?”

“Don’t start ignoring us, alright?”

It felt like she returned to her glum mood from earlier. I see, the fact I was contacting an old friend had her worried. I had to make things clear on this topic, too.

“By ignoring, you mean not taking baths with you anymore and things like that?”

“...Yeah, though I guess you’ll never do that.”

“Of course. I’ll never stop as long as you don’t tell me to.” I wanted her to believe that she and the other girls were all important to me.

After hearing my answer, Clena had a relieved, though exasperated smile on her face.

Afterward, during lunch, I was served a bigger helping than usual. Clena, who had set the table, must have been in a good mood.

After finishing a peaceful lunch, we decided to start our investigation in the armory. A few weapons and pieces of armor were left. Goldfish couldn’t control anything with magic cast on it, which meant that every item left in this room was protected by some sort of spell.

“Oh yeah, there was one full set of armor left.”

“Hm? Didn’t all three come out?”

“There was one set that Goldfish took apart so that he could hide himself.”

“...Oh yeah.”

Come to think of it, Goldfish had taken apart one set of armor and put it on the shelf, then concealed himself among the other two suits of armor. So if only three suits of armor left the armory, that meant the fourth had some sort of

spell on it.

“...I can see why he wasn’t able to control this one.”

The remaining set of armor was pure black, just like the one Goldfish used. I didn’t know enough about metal to tell if it was made from the same material, though. The helmet had two ogre-like horns growing out of its forehead, and the rest of the armor felt like it was designed to incite as much fear as possible. If Goldfish could control this, he definitely would have used it to scare us.

“The only problem is that we don’t know what sort of spells have been cast on it.”

“We can’t do anything about that until we have an expert take a look.”

“Let’s put it inside the Unlimited Bath for now.”

No matter what sort of spells were on that thing, we couldn’t just leave it behind.

Besides that, there were plenty of swords, spears, axes, and even a bow scattered around. We couldn’t find any arrows to use with the bow, though. For now, we carried everything we found into the Unlimited Bath.

“Rulitora, help us out with this.”

“What about keeping watch?”

“I’ll take care of the hole.”

We had Rulitora and the horse come inside the armory, and then I resealed the hole using earth spirits. It was quick work since the slab of wall he had cut was still there.

“A full suit of armor would be worth a lot. What should we do about the other three outside, Sir Touya?” Roni asked, tilting her head.

It was easy to imagine that the armor was worth more than my brigandine. I could literally wash away any spells Goldfish had cast with my water, and weight wasn’t an issue as long as we put everything inside the Unlimited Bath. And so we brought all three with us. It’d be a waste to just leave them behind, anyway.

“Let’s bring everything we can, including the stuff I buried into the floor and walls.”

“There were a bunch of cheap ones mixed in there, you know?”

Goldfish controlled everything that hadn’t had any spells cast on them. There might be a famous sword or two in the mix, but most of them were just old and rickety weapons. We had limited space, so we put everything in the one stuto wide area surrounding the bath. Of course, we made sure to handle everything carefully.

We spent the rest of the evening sorting the weapons and armor left in the armory and the hallway outside. I didn’t have an eye for weaponry, so I relied on Clena’s judgment and placed the most valuable-looking ones in the back. The job would be easier if Rulitora could help, but unfortunately he was too large to squeeze into a space just one stuto wide. Thus, the hard labor fell on Roni and I. As a man, I didn’t want to lose to Roni here.

We spent the next two days exploring the castle. We came across a library, but most of the books were tattered and eaten away by insects. However we did find two shelves of books still intact toward the back. The shelves were probably encased in a spell that protected the books inside, so we carried them in their entirety into the Unlimited Bath.

We found five treasure chests filled with gold coins inside the treasure room... as well as dozens of ornaments decorated with gems and precious metals. Of course, we packed all of them away as well. I was worried that we wouldn’t be able to use the gold coins, but after inspecting them, they were the same ones that the Olympus Alliance had in circulation since long ago.

So far, we had more than made up for the funds we used to travel to the desert kingdom. Besides that, we also collected whatever furniture and accessories hadn’t deteriorated too badly. According to Rium, anything that hadn’t decayed in 500 years likely had some sort of spell cast on it. We carried everything into the Unlimited Bath, just like the weapons and armor.

“What’s this?”

While we were exploring the castle, we came across a strange room—no, it

was just an open space. There were no walls or ceiling left, so you couldn't call it a room anymore. It was a crater with a diameter of about 100 stutos.

"There used to be something here, but it was all blown away," Rium said as she stroked a piece of rubble that she picked up at the edge of the crater. "...It got melted, but then it cooled and hardened again."

"Really?"

"Really."

Come to think of it, all the rubble facing the inside of the crater was awfully smooth. What in the world happened here? The battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was the only thing I could think of. So we'd eventually be fighting against an opponent who could make this much of a mess? While I mulled that over, Rulitora noticed something and pointed to the center of the crater.

"Sir Touya, look over there."

"Huh, where?"

I looked to where he was pointing and saw some sort of black stick at the center of the crater. I approached it and found that it was a black plank sticking out from the floor. The plank was engraved with red lettering, and the sides were sharp and jagged. It was sticking out from the ground in a slant, but it'd probably reach up to my chest if it weren't. The surface was glossy and gave off a black luster. Looks like it was made from some sort of metal.

Clena came around from the other side and peered at the letters. The engraving was the same on both sides.

"This isn't the language of Hades..."

"It's cursive kanji, huh... I think the bottom part reads 'of the Sixth Heaven'... Including the part buried underground, it might read 'Demon King of the Sixth Heaven.' It's written upside down."

"Sixth Heaven?"

"It was sort of the nickname of Oda Nobunaga... I mean, the demon lord Amann Naga. Basically, that's what he was called back in my world."

“So he was a demon lord even back there?”

“In a different sense, but I guess so.”

I recalled learning that they started calling him that after the Siege of Mount Hiei. I thought he even referred to himself by that nickname in his letters, but I bet he never expected to truly become a demon king in another world.

Anyway, the plank must have had something to do with someone who was summoned from my world, since the engraving spelled out “Demon King of the Sixth Heaven.”

“This almost seems like an epitaph on a tombstone.” It might have had something to do with the first sacred king, considering the writing.

“But Sir Touya, didn’t a demon general escape with the demon lord?” Roni asked from behind me.

If Goldfish had been telling the truth, then a demon general should have taken the demon lord and escaped from Hadesopolis. So if this was a grave, then whose was it? Well, there was a chance this was a grave, but the possibility put me off from finding out by digging it up.

“Was this the cause of all this destruction? What in the world...” I mumbled and traced my finger along the red engraving, wondering if it was made using some sort of paint. Not a moment later, the letters started to glow, and I instinctively grabbed my round shield to cover my eyes. The light grew brighter and brighter, and soon enough the entire plank started to shine. It was so intense that I couldn’t keep my eyes open even while shielding them. Rulitora yelled out my name and I replied that I was fine, since I hadn’t been physically hurt. But the moment I said that, I wondered if I’d really be okay. I moved back a little so that I could guard the three girls.

“What did you do, Touya?!”

“I just touched it!”

We waited it out, and eventually the intense light started to dim. I lowered my shield and looked toward the metallic blank plank, but surprisingly it was now floating in the air. It was still shining, though not as brightly as before.

“Ah...” I finally realized. It was upside down, but this was a grave marker that you’d commonly find in Japanese cemeteries. Instead of wood it was made from metal, plus it was all black, so I hadn’t connected the dots until I saw the entire thing removed from the ground.

“Why a grave marker...?” I looked at the palm of my gauntlet. The metal board was sharp, but I figured I’d be fine if I had a firm hold on it, and reached out to grab the plank. As soon as I did, it stopped giving off light and fell into my hands. It felt dense and heavy.

“I-is that okay?”

“I think so...” Nothing was happening now that I was holding it, so I figured we’d be safe. What was that light, though?

A moment later, Rium pulled on my arm.

“Touya, there’s a strange person.”

“...What?”

I looked at Rium, then followed her gaze and saw a pitch-black mass crouching on the floor. I quickly let go of the black plank and drew the dagger I had on my waist.

Roni moved as well. She took a battle stance next to me. Right when Clena was about to draw her sword, the metal plank I had dropped made a loud clanging noise against the ground.

“Eek...!” At the same time, the pitch-black mass squealed a bit and started trembling.

That voice made all the tension vanish from my body. Roni had a silly look on her face.

Now that I looked more closely, the pitch-black mass was actually a pile of hair. She was wearing a black dress and crouching on the floor. I could see small pale hands wrapped around her knees.

Between strands of hair, I spotted her fear-tinted eyes. She was looking right at us, so I put my dagger away and walked toward her. The mass started

shivering more, but when I parted her hair I found a pair of tear-ridden eyes staring back at me like a scolded puppy. Her face was neat and elegant, prettier than a doll could ever be. She appeared to be a bit younger than me. She had a clearly frightened expression, her pale white skin turning almost blue.



I was at a loss for words after seeing her face. It’s not that I had fallen in love at first sight... But I had seen her before.

“Could you be... the Goddess of Darkness?!” Yes, she had the same face as the Goddess of Darkness that I had seen in my dream.

“You... you won’t bully me?”

“...No, we won’t bully you.” I could only sigh and droop my shoulders at her shaking voice on the verge of tears.

Looks like her personality was the same as in my dream, too.

Post-Bath – Author's Booth

Long time no see to everyone coming from volume one, and nice to meet you to everyone who picked this title up starting from volume two! My name is Nagaharu Hibihana. It's all thanks to your support that I managed to get volume two out. I'd like to thank Masakage Hagiya, who had to put up with weird art directions like "emphasize her butt more here," my editor K, the editorial department at Overlap Bunko, and everyone who was involved in the publishing and selling of this book.

It's getting hotter outside as I write this, but it'll be even worse by the time this book hits the shelves. I actually love cloud-watching, and summer is perfect for watching tall cumulonimbus clouds float by. But I cannot stand the heat! Make sure to stay cool and hydrated in the coming months.

I hope to see you all again in volume three of Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension!

Nagaharu Hibihana, July 2015.



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Translated by Sophie Guo Edited by C. Vanstiphout

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