Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension

The Chaotic Stone Sauna

3

Volume Three



Nagaharu Hibihana

Illust. = Masakage Hagiya


THE HERO HARUNO
UNCOVERS CRIMES IN ATHENOPOLIS!


ENJOYING
DELIGHTFUL
MIXED
BATHING...
...IN AN
EVOLVED
UNLIMITED
BATH!


"IS THAT...
A DRAGON...?!"
YES, THE SHADOW FORMED THE SHAPE OF A DRAGON. IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A DINOSAUR TOO, BUT I OPTED FOR THE MORE FANTASY-LIKE POSSIBILITY.



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!*

AFTER MEETING NEW COMRADES BY THE NAMES OF CLENA AND RONI, TOUYA'S PARTY VENTURES INTO THE LOST CITY OF HADESOPOLIS, BURIED IN THE DESERT SAND SINCE LONG AGO. THEY ENCOUNTER A CLERIC FROM THE TEMPLE OF DARKNESS, WHO THEY DEFEAT AFTER A LONG BATTLE.

TOUYA THEN BREAKS AN ANCIENT SEAL HE FINDS IN THE DEMON LORD'S CASTLE, WHICH SUMMONS A MYSTERIOUS YOUNG GIRL BEFORE THEM.

Pre-Bath – Prologue

My name is Touya Houjou. My name may sound cold when written in kanji, but I'm just an ex-high school student with a heart as warm as a bath. I was summoned to a parallel world as a Hero of the Goddess.

"How'd it get like this again...?"

We had escaped from Hadesopolis and were currently making our way through an underground tunnel heading east toward Hephaestus. Apparently that was the closest stop from here. Our information source was the black-haired girl keeping watch behind us from the carriage. She looked about middle school... no, elementary school age. Her elegant facial features complimented her porcelain skin. She had suddenly appeared after I uprooted a black grave marker.

"You... you won't bully me?"

"...No, we won't bully you."

She was the Goddess of Darkness and had appeared before us with teary eyes.

So why was a goddess traveling with us, you ask? Well, a lot of things happened leading up to the current situation. I gazed at her face from the side as I recalled what events had conspired since then.

"I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I apologize, so please forgive me!"

The girl materialized sitting down hugging her knees, but then jumped up and started bowing repeatedly as she apologized. We were stunned, but tried calming her down so we could hear her out.

"Um, so, who exactly are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry for not introducing myself. My name is Rakti Loa. I'm the Goddess of Darkness."

“So you’re the goddess after all, huh...” I had figured as much since she looked exactly like the girl in my dream, yet I could barely believe it, even after hearing it from the goddess herself.

“I’m sorry for being such a worthless goddess...”

“Uh, it’s okay, you don’t have to be so self-deprecating.”

While trying to soothe her, we learned that the black grave marker had kept her sealed away. Clena, who knew quite a bit about such matters, said that the first sacred king had used a few trump cards during his battle with the demon lord. The black grave marker being one of them. Of course, we brought it along with us since it’d be useful against demons.

That aside, why had the goddess been sealed away and not the demon lord? There was definitely a story behind that.

During the final battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord, the demon lord had attempted to conduct some sort of ritual inside his castle. The first sacred king had thrown the grave marker like a lance to stop the ceremony. But the grave marker had missed and landed dead center inside a magic circle. That shot had sealed away the power source of the magic circle—in other words, the goddess. Her memories were a blank ever since.

“The first sacred king was in the wrong there no matter how you look at it.”

The demon lord had fallen into a slumber after being defeated, and the surviving First Great Demon Generals had escaped with their lord in tow. Had the first sacred king not missed, however, the demon lord would have been properly sealed. That in itself was hard to believe, but it got even crazier from there on out.

“Um... what’s become of my country now...?” The little goddess timidly asked with upturned eyes.

I felt sorry for her and almost wanted to keep it a secret, but the truth should have been obvious once she took in her surroundings. She became speechless after I told her the country had collapsed, and then she started crying.

“I knew it, I’m a worthless goddess after all! I’ll just crawl into a hole and be sealed again!”

“Wait, was that how you got sealed originally?!” I hoped it was a figure of speech.

On another note, the reason Hades became the “void” was because it lost its blessing from the Goddess of Darkness. Meaning it was because the first sacred king had missed his mark. The goddess wasn’t at fault at all.

On top of that, the Goddess of Darkness wasn’t just the goddess of demons, but of demi-humans such as lycaons and sand lizardmen as well. Demons were just a subcategory of demi-humans.

According to Clena, during these 500 years the Goddess of Darkness had been sealed, all of the demi-human nations under the Olympus Alliance had been taken over by humans. That fact had been hidden just like the existence of Hades, and the process had been carried out in the shadows by the sacred family and the temple of light. You could say it was just the course of history, but I felt as if my initial impressions of the battle between the hero and the demon lord had been turned upside down. The events could be considered post-war, assuming the eradication of the demi-human nations had been carried out not by the first sacred king, but his next of kin. If the Goddess of Darkness also ruled over demi-humans, they couldn’t have left the demi-human nations be. From the perspective of the sacred family and the light temple, at least. It made sense that the chain of events would lead to the eradication of the demi-human nations. The first sacred king probably hadn’t sealed the Goddess of Darkness on purpose, but the events after that were carried out so that the sacred family and the light temple wouldn’t lose power. That was the conclusion we came to, at least.

On a more personal note, we learned from Rakti that Clena’s father was indeed a demon. She did, in fact, have half-demon blood. We didn’t know who exactly her father was, but the most likely suspect was still the Dark Prince, the demon lord’s son. Clena could very well have been the granddaughter of the demon lord.

Clena was surprisingly collected after hearing that. It was something she had suspected all this time, so finding out the truth actually lifted a weight off her chest.

Also, we confirmed that the curse Goldfish had unleashed on me in his dying moments was indeed the Goddess of Darkness' blessing. A person would normally transform into a demon after being blessed. In my case, however, the blessing from the Goddess of Light prevented me from transforming, and the blessing from the Goddess of Earth protected me from its backlash. I wouldn't be transforming into a demon just yet, thank goodness.

"Would the demon transformation be completely subdued if I received blessings from the other goddesses?"

"I think so, yes. Also if you received the blessing from the head temple of sister Earth... I mean, my power would be nothing compared to all my big sisters combined... ahahah..." The Goddess of Darkness started laughing vacantly for some reason. She must have gone through a lot as the youngest sister of all the goddesses.

I looked over at Clena, who nodded at me with a docile expression. We'd finished exploring the desert kingdom, our main destination. Next was visiting all the head temples of the various goddesses and receiving their blessings. The remaining ones were the goddesses of fire, wind, and water, but I also needed to redo my Goddess of Earth blessing at her head temple.

"U-um, I'm just a worthless goddess, but... let me atone for everything I've done!"

"A-atone?"

"Yes, please take me along with you! I'll do everything I can to serve you! I can be of assistance to you!"

"Whaaat?!"

We hadn't been planning on leaving her here in the first place, but how far offtrack did her mind go to think a goddess should serve a human? While I was still stunned by her suggestion, she spoke again.

"Sir Touya, was it? Until you receive the blessings of my sisters, I can at least make sure you don't transform into a demon!"

I see, so that was what she meant by serving.

“But I know that’s not enough! I’ll do anything, so let me serve you!”

“What do you mean by that?!”

She was completely willing to serve us in any way possible.

“Well then, would you be able to fight with us?”

“This body is only a temporary one, so I don’t have an ounce of fighting power in me...”

Rulitora proposed a suggestion, but the goddess shook her head. She could only do so much in her current form. Right now, she could only be a servant, like Roni was for us. I wondered if it was okay to treat a goddess that way, but she seemed perfectly fine with it, so I said no more. It wouldn’t be so bad to have her tag along as long as she agreed to it, so I accepted her proposal.

“Please call me Rakti!”

“A-alright, Rakti.”

She gave me a cute smile after I said her name. Maybe she was happier being treated like a normal girl, since she disparaged herself so much as a goddess. I was happy enough treating her that way as well.

We wanted to rest ourselves before leaving Hadesopolis. I took Rakti’s hand and led us away from the area. Her hair sure was long, though. Her nails, which were resting in my hands now, had also grown out. Apparently they had continued growing while she was sealed. They were kind of short for 500 years’ worth of growth, in that respect. And as I was lost in thought, Rakti tripped over her own hair.

“Kyah...!”

“Whoa there.” I immediately reached my arm out so that she wouldn’t fall.

I couldn’t let her keep walking like this. I ended up carrying her in my arms the rest of the way.

“I-I’m sorry... I wanted to repay you, but I’m just being a bother...”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re part of the group now, Rakti.”

“But...”

“You can assist Roni as part of your service, but friends should help each other out, right? You’re one of us now, Rakti.”

“...Thank you!” She looked a little embarrassed, but she smiled at me like a blossoming flower.

I should make sure we cut her hair and nails during our break so that she wouldn’t trip again and lose her smile.

“Rakti, would it be okay if we cut your hair and nails?”

“Oh, yes, that’s fine.”

“Alright, have at her, Roni.”

“Got it!”

I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath, letting Roni inside. She emerged, grinning, with a pair of scissors, nail clippers, and a nail file in hand. Recently, Rium and I had been letting Roni cut our hair in addition to Clena’s.

“Oh, I have one request... would you mind collecting the cut hair and nail clippings?”

“Hm? Sure, no problem.” Roni laid out a sheet on the bathroom floor according to Rakti’s request.

Roni took care of Rakti’s hair and nails while the rest of us gathered our belongings for the road ahead. Rakti scampered out from the bathing room, without the risk of tripping this time. She had wanted to keep it long, but just short enough to not get caught in it.

“Um... does it look weird?” she asked timidly. She looked a little happier now, thanks in part to her newly cut bangs.

Haruno looked similar to her with her black hair, but she was on the pretty side, while Rakti gave off a young and cute vibe. I wasn’t sure if I should be thinking of a goddess like this, but I wondered if she and Haruno would look like sisters if they stood next to each other. I really wanted to line them up now.

“You look great.”

“R-really...?” she smiled, blushing.

I unwittingly smiled back at her. She had such a soothing atmosphere about her. I couldn't help but be drawn in. Before being a goddess, she was just a little girl. A shy, crybaby girl who I just had to protect.

Right, I should treat her like a normal girl just like Clena and the rest. Well, she was a bit of an odd one. We'd be protecting her from now on.

Rakti trotted back into the bathing room, maybe embarrassed after being stared at so much. She started kneading her cut hair together like it was a ball of dough or clay.

After a while, it started losing its form and became a solid black clump. She tightly gripped the clump inside her palms, and a black light started seeping out from between her fingers. She opened her hands, revealing a crystal sphere the size of a fist within. It was black and gave off a glossy luster, but was completely opaque. It was a black crystal... no, a dark crystal. That term came to mind.

"It's not much, but... please accept it."

"What is it...?"

"I crystallized a portion of myself to create a dark spirit stone. Now that you have the blessing of darkness, you will be more susceptible to malicious spirits. However, this stone shall grant you protection from them."

"I see... thank you, Rakti." So this was to protect me after I gained the blessing of darkness. In that case, I should go ahead and accept it.

It was very light in my hands, almost as if it weighed nothing at all. She called it a spirit stone, but it might not have been a literal stone. It was a little too big to carry around on me, so I placed it on a cushion inside the wooden-floored room. It was an offering, in a sense. I should buy a red cushion and a pedestal for it once we reached Hephaestus.

"By the way, Roni. Did you shampoo her hair after you cut it?"

"No, I figured I'd best leave that to you, Sir Touya."

"In that case, why don't we take a bath together now? I'll wash your hair for you, Rakti!"

"Look forward to it! Touya is the best of all of us at washing hair!"

“The best?! O-okay then! Please take care of me!!” Rakti gave us her biggest smile yet.

“...I won’t let you take a step farther.” Rium muttered, clinging to my waist.

Rakti noticed her presence and they both stared at each other for a while. They looked like two kittens trying their hardest to intimidate each other. I should put them in the bath together. I patted both their heads, then left them to Clena and Roni as I started prepping the bath.

Oh yeah, I had invited Rakti to bathe together pretty casually, but she didn’t seem bothered by it at all. I glanced back at her, and she looked really happy.

She slipped out of her black dress in one go. Her underwear was all black, too. My eyes were captivated by her porcelain, almost transparent-looking white skin.

“Here’s a yuamigi. Cover yourself up a bit.”

“Oh, thank you!”

Well, it’d be a little more pleasing if she showed the slightest bit of embarrassment. She said her body was a temporary one, so maybe she had little sense of shame about it as well. In any case, I started by washing Rakti’s hair.

“P-please be gentle.” She seemed a little frightened, but couldn’t keep a smile from forming on her face in anticipation.

“Don’t worry... it won’t hurt as long as the shampoo doesn’t get in your eyes,” I said, which made Rakti’s shoulders tremble. I hadn’t meant to tease her, but her reaction made me feel like I did something bad.

“Just make sure you close your eyes, okay?” I soothed her in the gentlest voice I could muster, and Rakti squinted her eyes shut. She was like a little kid trying her best. It was such an adorable sight.

I poured warm water over her head, then washed her hair carefully and thoroughly. She leaned back on me, feeling relaxed from having her head massaged. She was getting suds all over me, but I was happy to be spoiling a cute little girl like her. She really did have a tiny back, though. I felt like I gained

a new little sister as I continued washing her long, shiny black hair.



After we finished washing our hair and bodies, we all soaked ourselves in the cedar wood tub. In the past, the bathtub was so small that it could barely fit two people. But with the Goddess of Earth's blessing, the tub had grown large enough to fit all of us with room to spare. It might grow even bigger after gaining more goddess blessings.

I was lost in thought as I leaned back inside the cedar wood tub, staring at the girls in their yuamigi. I could tell a lot about them from how they were sitting. No, I didn't mean in *that* sense, though the water made the cloth a little transparent.

The one closest to me was Rium, who clung on to me, leaving zero distance between us. She was incredibly shy, but once she opened her heart to someone, she proactively sought physical contact with them. At first, she would only stare at me from the side of the tub like she was some cat I was babysitting, but she soon closed the gap between us.

She was like this with everyone in her party and not just me, but in this party, I was the one she was closest to. That made me happy.

However, if Haruno came into the picture, she'd have to choose between Haruno and me. She had no parents and instead lived with her teacher, who was like her grandmother. Haruno and I might have seemed like parents to her as well. I wanted to sleep with all three of us in the same bed like a family one day.

Roni was the second closest to me. She sat right between Clena and me. She was at just the right distance to assist either of us if the need arose. She was a servant by nature, but she purely enjoyed helping others on top of that.

Despite that, it was adorable how she closed the gap between us when she had me wash her hair or back. There was a side of her I could only see when she put her servant role aside.

Clena sat to the other side of Roni. She had a complex about her fleshy figure, but that wasn't all.

"Clena, aren't you a little too far away?"

"You'll start saying weird things if I get any closer." She said, then flipped her

head away from me.

“Saying weird things,” not “looking at me weirdly.” They sounded similar, but there was a subtle difference. What she referred to as weird was simply me complimenting her, though.

By my standards, she had nothing to worry about. I honestly preferred her plump breasts. I told her as much, and that I thought she was cute, but I think that made her all the more bashful. I wasn’t intending to look at her with lewd thoughts in mind... Well, maybe that wasn’t entirely true.

Thinking back on it now, she must have been thinking about the circumstances surrounding her birth as well. However, we confirmed here in Hadesopolis that she was half-demon. There were still a few things shrouded in mystery, but for now, a weight had lifted off her chest. Our relationship might start changing after this, so I needed to keep an eye on her all the more. I had received the blessing of darkness, so I’d become her comrade in a sense.

Finally, my relationship with Rakti was only just beginning. Right now she was the farthest from me. She glanced over every once in a while, but I didn’t want her to keep a distance between us like this. She wasn’t the type to strike up a conversation, so I called out to her, and she waded toward me with a smile.

Her yuamigi cutely slipped off in the process. But she didn’t show an ounce of shame, standing before me not hiding a thing. Clena and Roni rushed over to put it back on her, but in their hurry, the bottoms of their yuamigi floated up. Clena’s thighs were exposed, as was the bottom half of Roni’s butt, but I kept that a secret from them.

“...ya! Sir Touya!”

I came back to my senses as Rulitora called out to me from outside the carriage.

“The road ahead is blocked. Light is shining in through the cracks, so I believe it leads to the outside.”

So we were close to the exit. We had progressed quite a bit while I had been lost in my imagination.

I stepped down from the carriage, summoned earth spirits, and opened a hole within the pile of dirt blocking the road. A dazzling ray of light shone into the tunnel. Beyond was the eastern tip of Hades, the border between it and Hephaestus.

I looked behind me to see Clena, Roni, and Rium also peering out from the carriage, squinting at the light shining in. We had gone through some tough mishaps in the desert kingdom, the former base of the demon army. But I was sure we'd be fine for the journey ahead.

Rakti popped her head out last and started talking shyly.

"Um, I believe the head temple of sister Fire resides in Hephaestus."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it will be clear after a single glance in the country."

A single glance, huh? I wondered what kind of country it was.

"Alright, let's make our way to Hephaestusopolis!"

Our next destination was the country of fire, Hephaestusopolis. It was the start of a new adventure.

First Bath – The Fire Country's Specialty, Hot Tofu

We arrived in Hephaestusopolis a few days after exiting the underground tunnel.

Roni sat in the driver's seat. Clena, Rium, and Rakti were inside the carriage wagon. Rulitora and I were armed, keeping guard from outside the carriage.

The region was filled with red-tinted mountains as far as the eye could see. The occasional tree dotted the landscape, but despite it barely being the end of summer, they were also coated in a red hue as if it was the middle of autumn. In short, my entire view was colored red. The skies were still cloudy today, so I couldn't see any blue, either.

I initially thought the red mountains stood out here, but they were hardly the only thing colored red. According to Clena, nature here was like this year-round. Unlike the deciduous plants in Japan that would change colors every season, the plants here were red due to all the fire spirits.

I see, so this was what Rakti meant by "a single glance." The pure red color certainly brought fire to mind.

Not to mention it was hot. It wasn't as bad as the void at least, since the sun wasn't beating down on us. But Rulitora was the only one keeping a straight face right now.

Hephaestusopolis was located at the foot of a mountain in this scorching weather. Since the country rested along a gentle incline, I could see sprawling white houses beyond the city entrance. Farther in, I saw stacks of smoke coming from certain buildings.

"What are those? Not a fire, right?"

"I believe those are workshops. Hephaestusopolis is particularly known for its blacksmiths. There are mines close to Mt. Lemnos in the distance, then blacksmith workshops, then houses closest to where we are."

I looked up at the mountain as I listened to Roni's explanation.

Hephaestusopolis. This was the location of the head temple of the Goddess of Fire, as well as the go-to place for blacksmiths. The sprawling white city left a distinct impression in the red landscape. The blocky white buildings resting on the slopes reminded me of tofu.

As we approached the city entrance, we spotted a crowd of people outside. Rulitora was the first once to notice with his sharp eyes.

“Sir Touya. There is a group of people outside the city entrance.”

“People? Are they armed?”

“I can’t tell from here, but I don’t believe they are...”

I wondered for a moment if they were tourists coming to see the Goddess of Fire’s head temple, but then I remembered that that wouldn’t make sense in this world. Only a few people traveled in this world, since they’d bear the risk of being attacked by monsters. When we drew a little closer, Rulitora noticed something else about the crowd.

“Hmm... the people in the front of the group are clerics.”

“What? They’re wearing cleric robes?”

“Yes. They look slightly different, but they’re similar to the robes we saw at the temples in Jupiter and Ceres.”

Cleric robes were normally white, but could be decorated differently at the hems depending on the temple. The light temple’s robes were embroidered with gold thread, while the earth temple used a plant-like green.

As we drew closer, the rest of us could see the group as well. They didn’t look like they were waiting to get access into the country. If they were, they’d be facing away from us and looking toward the city entrance, but they were looking away from the city—at us. They noticed our presence and a group of them at the vanguard came rushing over to us.

“Three red and one gold.”

Four people were running up to us, all of them clerics. The red most likely signified that they were from the Goddess of Fire’s temple.

I had some idea of what was happening. I had contacted Haruno after we

defeated the Masked Cleric, one of the demon generals. I also told her that we'd be going to Hephaestusopolis. Haruno was staying with the pilgrims right now, so they must have contacted the temple for us. How did they know I was the hero, though?

"I see you have a muscular sand lizardman with you... Might you be the Hero of the Goddess, Sir Touya?"

I looked up toward Rulitora at those words. Of course. He'd be the easiest identifier.

"Yes, I am. Are you the clerics of this country?"

"I represent the Goddess of Light's templ—"

"We represent the temple of the Goddess of Fire, please let us be of assistance!"

The cleric from the light temple came up to me first, out of breath. However, the remaining three from the fire temple pushed him aside. The three fire clerics were middle-aged men panting in exhaustion, but the light cleric was particularly young, skinny, and seemed unreliable. I could tell what the power balance was like in this country just from these four.

I had spread news about the demon general's defeat to boost my reputation. There was no use in hiding it, so I handed them my status card and confirmed that I was indeed the Hero of the Goddess. They opened their eyes wide at my MP and MEN stats, but that made it all the more clear that I was a hero.

"I came to receive a blessing from the Goddess of Fire. Guide me to the fire temple."

"Ooh!"

"No...! Are you casting aside your faith toward the Goddess of Light?!"

Three out of the four responded happily at my proclamation. The fourth let out a cry of despair, though.

"No, no," I responded to him. I was barely pious in the first place. "I already have the Goddess of Earth's blessing, though it's not from the head temple. I'm planning on getting all of the goddess blessings."

“...!” All four of them were speechless at my statement. They were probably reminded of the arch-cleric from the first sacred king’s party, San Pilaca, who had been blessed by five goddesses. I had received the Goddess of Darkness’ blessing as well, but I kept that a secret for now.

“I-in that case...” The light cleric stepped back. He probably figured that he wasn’t relevant to the situation. I was a bit concerned about Rakti, but I had no reason to be cold to a cleric from the light temple, so I tried talking to him.

“Oh, can I ask that you deliver a message to Jupiter’s temple?”

“Wha... Oh, yes! What is the message?” The cleric was caught off guard for a moment, but then leaned himself forward in curiosity.

“We defeated the demon general named Masked Cleric at the ruins of the demon lord’s castle. There are six generals remaining, the Five Great Demon Generals and the Beast King.”

“My goodness, you defeated one too...?”

“...‘too’?” I couldn’t ignore that one word from the cleric’s mouth. What did he mean, “too”?

“We received a message the other day. A hero of the sacred king, Natsuki, defeated the Beast King.”

Natsuki? That was referring to Kannami Natsuki. Back in Jupiteropolis, he had defeated his party candidates one by one, looking for someone to match him in battle. He was the most battle-ready of all the summoned heroes. So he had defeated a general too, huh.

“Okay then, tell them that only the Five Great Demon Generals remain.”

“Understood. Right away, sir!”

In any case, this would give the cleric something important to do. The light cleric ran back to his temple in a hurry, while the fire clerics guided us into the city.

Once we passed the gates, we met with a group of temple knights and temple ravers. All of us headed for the temple as one large group. There was no way we didn’t stand out like this.

“Over there is the temple of fire.” The oldest-looking cleric pointed toward a building with chalk-colored walls. I was worried that the temple might be bright red and hurt my eyes, but my fears were unfounded.

“Is it possible to conduct the blessing ritual right away?”

“Unfortunately not. It takes a day to prepare, so we can do it tomorrow at the soonest.”

“Okay, we’d like to repair our equipment first, then. Would you mind introducing us to a skilled blacksmith?”

“Understood. In that case...” The cleric stopped talking and eyed the other two clerics.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, er...”

The cleric looked at Rulitora, then inside the carriage. I looked back to see Roni in the driver’s seat. They were most likely looking at her.

“...Um, do you mind if the blacksmith is a demi-human, Sir Hero?”

“What?”

“Well, many of the skilled blacksmiths here are demi-human, not human...”

I cocked my head at the clerics, who were awfully hesitant in speaking further. “I’m sure you know, but I was summoned from another world. I have no idea what you guys are worried about.”

The clerics looked at each other again. What were they deliberating over?

“Well... there should be no issues then, if you do not mind.”

“What do you mean?”

“The problem is usually on the customer’s side, you see.” “...Oh, I get it.”

I got the gist of it. The issue wasn’t that the blacksmith was a demi-human, but whether or not the customer disliked demi-humans. I was a Hero of the Goddess, but that was short for Hero of the Temple of the Goddess of Light. After Rakti was sealed, the demi-humans had all their power extinguished. Perhaps followers of the Goddess of Light tended to disapprove of demi-

humans in the past. The temple elder at Jupiter treated Rulitora perfectly normally, though. The prejudice likely wasn't as widespread these days and varied based on the individual. If I hadn't had Rulitora with me, the cleric might have skipped the question altogether and introduced me to a human blacksmith.

"I'm sure you understand from looking at Rulitora here, but I don't mind, so just introduce me to someone with skill."

"Ohh...!" the temple knights exclaimed in response. What were they so impressed about?

"Oh, I have one other request. Could you introduce us to someone who deals with magic weapons, or at least is able to analyze them?"

We had picked up a variety of equipment in Hadesopolis, so this was important.

"Would you mind if it was someone different from the skilled blacksmith we'd recommend?"

"Yeah, that's fine."

The clerics breathed a sigh of relief, hands on their chests. Don't worry, I wouldn't ask you to find some superhuman for me. What was the image of a "hero" in their minds, anyway?

In any case, we didn't want to go straight to the places the clerics recommended. We headed to the temple, dropped off our excess belongings, and separated from the temple knights.

"Ahh, I can finally breathe in the air outside the carriage."

We weren't attracting as many stares now that our group was smaller. There were still a few people stealing glances at Rulitora, but that couldn't be avoided. Sand lizardmen were a rare sight in human civilization.

Roni was in the driver's seat, while Rium was riding on Rulitora's shoulders. Clena had stepped out of the carriage and was walking beside me. Rakti remained inside the wagon, perhaps not wanting to attract stares. I left her in

Roni's care.

We had one young cleric and two temple knights accompany us. The cohort from earlier was them trying to demonstrate their authority over the light temple. Apparently they normally didn't go to such lengths to greet someone.

"By the way, what kind of demi-human will we be seeing?"

"Oh, they're small, but don't be condescending about it. Many of them dislike it if you do."

"So they're short?"

"Yes, you could say that. They're stronger than they look, though."

Blacksmiths who were short yet strong. I could imagine what they looked like.

"Do they have mustaches?"

"Of course."

"Even the women?"

The cleric nodded. Clena cocked her head at our exchange.

"Have you heard of them, Touya?"

"I guess you could say that?" I gave her a vague reply.

From the cleric's description and knowing that they were blacksmiths, the name "dwarf" came to mind. They were a famous race who commonly appeared in fantasy stories. The elf who had joined Cosmos' party was another famous race I had heard of. I grew excited to meet a race I had only read about in the past. I picked up the pace a little as we made our way to the smithy.

"Meowcome to my smithy."

We arrived at the smithy and the owner greeted us like so. I wanted to make a joke, but I suppressed the urge and kept my mouth shut. The rest of the group looked at me in confusion as I wriggled around in my internal struggle.

Yes, he was short. He only came up to my waist. He was wielding a large hammer over his shoulder, so he appeared to be strong as well. And I suppose you could say he had a mustache. The one in front of us was male, but I was

sure females had them as well. I could tell from his face.

“So what brings mew here to my smithy?”

I was staring back at a cat’s face. Yeah, the blacksmith we had been recommended wasn’t a dwarf, but a two-legged cat. Apparently they were a race of demi-humans called ketolts. He didn’t look very muscular, in fact he only seemed heavy-built from the waist down. But he was still waving a large hammer around like it was nothing. He was definitely stronger than he looked.

Come to think of it, Roni was stronger than she looked as well. Rulitora looked strong, but in reality he was even stronger. Maybe all demi-humans were like that.

We entered the smithy, and the sooty walls provided a stark contrast to the chalk-white walls outside. Unlike in Jupiter, the workshop and reception desk weren’t separated by any walls here. There was a counter as soon as you entered the door, and then the furnace and work benches with tools scattered around were right beyond that.

“Purrr, we have some young customers here today.”



The ketolt blacksmith looked up at me, head tilted to the side. He had white fur, but it was sooty from his blacksmith work. He wore a brown leather vest, trousers, and boots reinforced with metal at the toes. The trousers had a hole in them for his tail to go through. His tail was sooty too, no longer its original white color.

He looked adorable, but was actually a middle-aged man in his forties. Honestly, he looked pretty dashing. Was this the vibe an adult man was supposed to give off?

His name was Pardoe Paul. He was one of the top blacksmiths in Hephaestusopolis. Not only that, he was one of fewer than five blacksmiths who knew how to deal with magic weapons and armor. Apparently having a family name in this country was proof that you were a capable blacksmith as well.

“Well, standing ameownd won’t get us anywhere, come on in~”

We were led to another ketolt with pure white fur. She was wearing a skirt and an apron. Her tail peeked out from under her skirt.

Her name was Crissa Paul, and... she was Pardoe’s daughter. So the women grew mustaches after all. If you counted whiskers as mustaches, that is.

On that note, Crissa was apparently well known in the neighborhood as a beautiful girl with a kind personality, and everyone wondered how such a good daughter had been born from such a gruff father. Well, I couldn’t tell the difference between them. I could tell the difference between Rulitora and Dokutora, but I could barely tell cats with similar physiques apart. Pardoe was just a little bigger than his daughter.

Crissa led Clena, the cleric, and me to a table. We had left the other four waiting by the carriage outside. Pardoe sat himself down, arms crossed, and I began talking.

“We found some armor that had magic cast on it, so we’d like to know what sort of spell it is. And if it’s not anything dangerous, I’d like you to tailor it for me.”

“Purr... You sure look like you’ve fought through some tough battles,” Pardoe

murmured as he looked at the brigandine I was wearing.

My armor had been thoroughly roughed up by the flying swords Goldfish had sent at me and was now torn all over the place. Since ruins were being scavenged everywhere nowadays, maybe it was normal to get this tattered up to find magic equipment. I had figured it'd be easier to get a new set of armor rather than repair my current one, and Pardoe probably guessed the same as he nodded along.

"What else did mew find?" Pardoe asked, leaning forward. His eyes were sparkling with keen interest.

"Well... we did find some other things, but could we deal with that armor first? We want to make sure we're properly protected."

"Meow~ We'll save the rest as a treat for later, then. So where's this armurrr?

"It's in the carriage up front. Hey, Rulitora!"

We had taken the armor out of the Unlimited Bath beforehand, so I shouted for Rulitora to come over. Soon enough, he came inside with the full set of armor in hand.

Pardoe and Crissa opened their eyes wide at Rulitora's giant stature. Crissa even hid herself behind Pardoe, frightened. Pardoe quickly collected himself, though, and began inspecting the armor at once.

He used something that looked like a golden magnifying glass, a magic circle drawn on parchment, and a crystal ball faintly tinted crimson. All of them were tools I had never seen before. They were likely helping him determine what kind of spell had been cast on the armor.

He was in his forties, but he was about the size of a human child, so I couldn't help but think he looked like a child playing with his toys. His eyes had sparkled like a kid's when I told him about the magic armor, too.

Anyway, it was the black set of armor with two horns pointing out from the helmet. Rakti had confirmed that the armor had some spell cast on it, but she wasn't able to tell what. The design was enough that I wouldn't be surprised if it was actually cursed.

“Will this take time?” I asked the cleric in a low voice.

“No, inspections can be finished almost immediately. That’s what all those tools are for.” He answered me in a similarly low voice, covering his mouth.

Analysis didn’t take much time by itself, since the tools did most of the work. It was possible to not use tools and cast spells to directly analyze the item instead, but that took too much time and would wear out the practitioner quickly. On that note, the spells used were categorized under “artisan magic” here, not cleric magic.

“Hmm...” Pardoe was deep in thought as he inspected the armor.

“Is there something wrong?”

“Not wrong, but... you could say it’s cursed, in a sense?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if it were, but what do you mean by that?”

“Well, it’s not actually cursed. It’s got a propurr spell cast on it.” Pardoe faced us and started explaining the details on the spell. “This set of armor can deter all attacks.”

“Whoa! That’s like legendary armor, isn’t it?!” Clena jumped up from the table and yelled out in shock.

Even I could tell it was something special. Speaking in game terminology, it was like gear that negated all types of damage. It’d be something you couldn’t obtain until endgame.

“In exchange, it sucks MP from its wearer after every attack.”

“...So every time you’d take damage?”

“The amount it absorbs depends on each attack as well... if I were to give this armor an inscription, it’d be the ‘magic eater.’”

“...Well, I get that this is some pretty dangerous armor, at least.”

I understood why Pardoe said it was cursed in a sense. I could tell why it had been left in the armory unused now. You couldn’t control how much MP it sucked away from you, after all.

“Honestly, you could collapse at any time if you wore this. I wouldn’t

recommend this armor... It would take some time, but I could make a mew set for you as well," Pardoe told us in a worried tone. But in response, I showed him my status card.

"...No, don't worry about it. Work on it for me."

Pardoe and Crissa peered at my status card next to each other, and then their tails whipped upward. Crissa's tail lifted up her skirt. Well, it wasn't a surprising reaction, seeing as how my stats were shooting off the card itself.

"...U-understood. I'll take care of it. So you want me to tailor it to your size?"

I was wondering if it was possible to modify a piece of armor with a spell cast on it, but Pardoe was showing no signs of getting worked up despite being a little baffled. He sure was professional.

"I should call Shakova over for this."

"Shakova?"

"Shakova Remus. He's second to none when it comes to fiddling with magic equipment."

According to Pardoe, he was another ketolt blacksmith good enough to have a family name. Pardoe was at the top in magic appraisals and handling, but Shakova beat him in craftsmanship and ornamentation.

"I see. Please do, then."

"So about the price..."

After we agreed, Crissa came forward holding something in her hands. It looked similar to an abacus with round stones inside the frame.

She was in charge of all monetary matters. What an upstanding lady. Rather, Pardoe seemed like he was the typical workaholic handyman who couldn't be bothered to calculate anything.

In any case, the total cost ended up being quite high, maybe because we were dealing with a magic item. The tailoring itself cost ten times as much as the brigandine I bought in Jupiteropolis. The fee for bringing in Shakova's services also contributed to the final amount. It was like a technical fee.

I looked over at Clena just in case, and she nodded at me in response. So the price was fair.

“Why don’t we have him inspect that black thing while we’re at it?”

“You mean the metal grave marker?”

“Yeah, that. The grave marker.”

We figured it might need some fine-tuning, so we had Pardoe take a look at it as well. He confirmed that the grave marker had been cast with a spell that unleashed tremendous power against demons. It was definitely something the first sacred king had used, judging by the “Demon King of the Sixth Heaven” inscription as well.

This would be proof that Hadesopolis was once the home of the demon lord. I’d tell both temples about this and have them spread the word.

I had some other ideas about the grave marker as well, but I wanted to focus on the armor for now. If this went well, then we would have them work on our other equipment too. I agreed to the price without trying to haggle. I paid a portion of it as deposit.

Clena also suggested we show him one of the chests of gold coins we’d found, and he confirmed that it was the real deal.

After that, Pardoe took my measurements. I wondered how he would do it with his small body, but he took out a stepladder. I knew he was a middle-aged man, but I couldn’t keep myself from smiling as his tail swayed back and forth.

After that, we left the “magic eater” armor to Pardoe and returned to the Goddess of Fire’s temple. The elder greeted us when we arrived. He was a tanned, muscular man with a boisterous laugh. All the other temples were similar enough to each other, but the temple of the Goddess of Fire felt particularly broadminded. They had a fiery atmosphere, you could say.

Of course Rakti entered the temple along with us, but no one took any notice of her true identity. I asked her about it, and she said concealing herself was a simple task.

Since the blessing ritual wasn’t until tomorrow, we were guided to our room

after our meeting with the elder. It was another fancy VIP room reserved for pilgrims. The room itself was similar to the one we had stayed in at the earth temple. There were separate living and bedrooms.

“And of course, there’s this,” I muttered, looking at the relief hung on the pillar above the fireplace. The relief depicted the five goddess—or rather six goddesses, except the last had been cut off.

The bottom of the relief should have depicted the Goddess of Darkness, Rakti, but it had been broken off. Rakti looked at the relief from beside me with a complex expression.

“It’s kind of weird looking at it again, though.”

“What do you mean?” Clena asked from behind me.

I continued staring at the relief and said assertively, “They look nothing like the actual goddesses.”

I had only seen the Goddess of Light and the Goddess of Earth in my dream, but they looked nothing like these depictions. The Goddess of Light looked more majestic and had a harsher personality, while the Goddess of Earth was like a kind older sister. I looked at Rakti, who was nodding in agreement to my words. She didn’t think they looked alike either.

“By the way, are they ordered by age here?”

“They should be.”

“Light, Fire, Wind, Water, Earth, was it? Earth didn’t seem like she’d be the second youngest at all.”

“That’s right. She’s the closest to Rakti in age.”

Come to think of it, she had been soothing Rakti while the Goddess of Light was scolding her in my dream. Maybe she was the motherly type by nature.

“It’s okay to be surprised, Touya. Sister Earth is very mature.”

“...Whoever carved this had never seen the goddesses before.”

“That’s true. We haven’t shown ourselves to humans for a long, long time now. It’s the first time I’ve heard of someone seeing us in a dream, too.”

“Not even San Pilaca did?”

“Oh, the one who received all of my sisters’ blessings... no, I don’t believe they met my sisters either. Also, they kept on ignoring me...”

Rakti had a mix of emotions on her face. They were enemies back then, so not much could have been done about that.

So even San Pilaca never met the goddesses in a dream, huh. What in the world was that dream, anyway?

“What kind of person is the Goddess of Fire?” Roni asked.

“Sister Fire is always really cheerful and energetic...” Rakti looked over to her and replied. She seemed to cheer up a little. She must have been good friends with the Goddess of Fire.

“I bet she doesn’t look anything like this relief either, right?”

“Oh, she doesn’t. Not at all.”

“Now I want to see this relief with all six goddesses on it. Not that it would make them look any more accurate or anything.”

“I don’t remember seeing anything in the temple in Hadesopolis...”

“Actually, there was a relief of just one person in the temple ruins.”

Rium and Rulitora joined the conversation.

“Oh yeah, I think I remember that...” I searched my memories and just barely recalled seeing a relief in the temple.

“I’m sorry. That was me.” Rakti started apologizing for some reason. She had no reason to, though. I wondered if it was just a habit.

“...That depiction couldn’t have been further off, though.”

Rakti wasn’t even that old, for one.

“I’m so sorry...”

“Okay, stop there. The real one is much cuter, so keep your chin up.”

I had to make sure Rakti didn’t fall into one of her holes again.

I woke up in the temple of the Goddess of Fire's VIP room the next day. The layout of the room was mostly similar to what we had seen in the Goddess of Light's temple in Ceresopolis. By the standards of this world, this was essentially a five-star hotel.

My bed was the second from the wall. Rulitora was lying face-down on the bed closest to the wall. His long striped tail was spilling from the edge of the bed as he slept. His posture was as sloppy as ever, like a father who was taking a much-needed break from work on the weekend. The ceremony for the Goddess of Fire's blessing wouldn't be until afternoon. Since we were always relying on Rulitora day in and day out, I let him sleep for now.

Rium had buried herself into my bed. She had originally come here to deliver the holy tool I needed to communicate with Haruno's party. She ended up tagging along during our investigation into Hadesopolis, but still wasn't showing any sign of going back now that that was over. She was hardly being a bother, not to mention we had gone farther east and away from Athena, where Haruno was, after crossing the void, and I wasn't about to let Rium go back on her own. I'd sent Haruno a message last night saying as much, and received a reply asking us to take care of Rium for the time being.

I looked over at the bed beside me to see Rakti's sleeping face. It felt a little wrong to say this about a goddess, but she truly looked like an angel as she slept.

One bed down from her was Clena, who had woken up and was rubbing her eyes, still half-asleep. She had a bit of a bedhead.

Roni should have been sleeping in the next bed, but she was nowhere to be seen. She had probably gotten up already. Though the temple was taking care of our meals, she still had plenty of tasks on her plate, such as mending our clothes. She was as much of a workaholic as ever. I'd need to thank her later.

"Morning, Clena. You look sleepy."

"Good morning. I guess I am, but..."

"What's wrong?"

Clena was staring at me for some reason. Was that a hint of jealousy in her

eyes, or was I imagining things?

“I realized something. Even the VIP room in a temple can’t compare to how secure I feel sleeping in the Unlimited Bath...”

“Oh...” I mumbled, understanding how she felt.

I wasn’t complaining, but now that we knew that the temples were hiding a sixth goddess, this wasn’t exactly a place we could rest peacefully. The fact that we had brought along Rakti Loa, the Goddess of Darkness and the youngest goddess sister concealed by history, wasn’t helping. In contrast, my Unlimited Bath, which blocked all interference with the outside world, was a space where we could rest without having to worry about anybody bothering us. Though I had gotten desensitized to the fact that the Goddess of Darkness was right next to me, there was one thing I couldn’t forget. The Olympus Alliance had made all knowledge and documents pertaining to this goddess taboo.

“Would you rather sleep in there starting tonight?”

“I don’t mind either way. I appreciate having a real bed, too.”

It was exciting to stay in a room in a foreign land, but it was also perfectly reasonable to prefer the Unlimited Bath for its security.

“Oh yeah, who should we go to for new bedding?”

“The Ficus Brand could take care of that.”

According to Clena, the legendary pervert Ficus, who had focused exclusively on crafting women’s undergarments, was also the name to trust for all things sleep-related. It’d be a different story if we had to consider traveling, but they were the best in the business for bedding and garments for indoor use. Now that we had a Japanese-style bedroom, I wanted to get us better bedding instead of sleeping on the blankets we had been using up until now. If it was possible, I wanted a set of Japanese futons.

Clena looked like she was about to change, so I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath. In the past, the girls would change while I stayed outside, but now the Unlimited Bath was divided into a few rooms. There was a big changing room, a bathing room, and a Japanese-style bedroom. Clena usually used the bedroom, so I got dressed in the changing room.

I quickly put on my clothes and washed my face to freshen up, then looked around the changing room, where all our luggage had been piled up. It was filled with the treasures we had scavenged from Hadesopolis. We'd thought about exchanging all of them for gems, but how would we even approach getting rid of so much? It was a crazy amount, including what we had already transported outside. So much that they wouldn't all fit inside the carriage no matter how tightly we packed them. If we were asked how we'd managed to carry so much, I'd have to reveal at least a little bit about my gift. Because of that, we'd need to find someone trustworthy.

We thought about selling a portion of it ourselves as well, but who knew how quickly we'd be able to free up space in our room that way? I wanted to free up some space as quickly as possible, so we'd need to find a way to sell them off all at once.

"Is the sink free?"

Clena finished dressing herself and came back out. She was wearing a clean-looking white dress. The dress looked rather fancy, judging by the complex embroidery around the chest. She had brought it with her after fleeing from home, but didn't have the opportunity to wear it until now. She had wanted to avoid attracting attention when she was traveling, since the dress looked so expensive at a glance. Two girls traveling together, one wearing an expensive dress. That would have indeed attracted some second glances. But now that she was staying in the VIP room of a temple, the light dress was perfect for the hot temperatures in Hephaestusopolis.

I'd already finished washing my face, so I let Clena use the sink. She finished washing her face as well, then clutched the embroidery on her chest and said to me with a shy smile, "I wasn't really fond of this dress in the past."

"Really? I think it looks cute."

"But it emphasizes my chest so much," she said, pouting. The dress was sleeveless.

Oh yeah, she had said that she had a complex about her figure because the other daughters of aristocrats were so much thinner than her. She had probably avoided wearing clothes that exposed her arms. Just how thin *were* those other

girls?

Her reputation had likely suffered since everyone knew her father was missing, and people were more inclined to make fun of her figure because of it.

“...Well, if you say it’s cute, Touya, then I guess it’s fine.”

She said something cute.

“...What are you staring at me so much for?”

“No, I was just thinking you were cute.”

“What? Are you still half-asleep?” she grumbled, but her cheeks flushed red.

Her silver hair was cut into a short bob that curled inward. I might have just been boasting, but the shampoo made from my MP had gradually made her hair glossier and given it a healthy sheen. Yeah, she was cute.

She acted strong and had prim and proper looks, yet had the cuteness of a young lady as well. She was now finally able to wear a sleeveless dress after I kept telling her I liked her physique, and that was something to be proud of. Maybe it was wrong of me to think this, but there was a chance some of the girls among Clena’s bullies were simply jealous of her. Though that might have just been a gap in the way I, a person from another world, thought compared to them, so I opted to keep silent.

I thought she was cute and receptive of those feelings, and now she put on a dress she had never worn before of her own will. There was no problem with that.

Clena and I exited the Unlimited Bath right as Rium and Rakti woke up.

“...Good morning,” Rium tottered over to me sleepily and hugged me.

Rakti was holding her arms out behind Rium, but wasn’t moving an inch. It looked like she was trying to imitate Rium, but was hesitating. I’d be happy if she just threw all caution to the wind and jumped at me, but waiting wouldn’t help either way.

“G-good morning...”

“Morning, Rakti.”

...So I reached my arm out and gave her a hug, and then she greeted me in a flustered tone. I pet their heads for a short and relaxing duration, but they couldn’t get started changing like this. I closed the door to the Unlimited Bath, then headed for the bedroom door and once again opened the bathroom door from there. I left the girls to Clena and moved to the living room.

Once the door to the Unlimited Bath was opened, I couldn’t travel far away from it, but I could at least walk around a neighboring room if the door was close by. I spotted the back of Roni’s head as she sat on a sofa beside the fireplace.

“Oh, Sir Touya! Good morning!”

Her wolf ears perked up at the sound of the door opening, then she turned around and greeted me with an energetic smile.

“Were you mending our clothes?”

“Yes, but these three are a little too battered up.”

I followed her gaze to see three sets of clothing on a small table. They were all tattered and covered in holes. Those were the clothes we had worn during our battle against Goldfish.

“There’s no helping that. Let’s go out to buy more after the blessing ceremony is over.”

“Oh, we need to buy some for Rium and Rakti as well.”

“Oh yeah, we do.”

We had met up with Rium after leaving Ceresopolis, and Rakti during our search in Hadesopolis. Neither of them had much in the way of spare clothing. Rakti aside, Rium had made thorough preparations for her journey. Her possessions were still meager though, compared to how much we had been carrying around in the Unlimited Bath. We still needed to buy our bedding at Ficus Brand, so we’d get more clothing during the same trip.

“Where’s breakfast?”

“It’s already been delivered. On that table over there.” Roni directed her line

of sight at a large table in the middle of the living room. On it were several semicircular lids covering whatever food lay underneath. They were freshly delivered.

Several chairs had also been set up around the table for us, including a large one without a back for Rulitora. This temple must have been used to dealing with demi-humans, considering how they'd prepared this without us having to ask.

"Alright then, the others should be coming out soon, so let's all eat breakfast then."

"Sure!"

The girls should still need a little more time to change. I needed some time to wake Rulitora up, too. I might have to get personally involved in the latter, but I should wait until Clena and the others got out of the bathroom first.

I sat myself down facing Roni and helped her fold the clothes she had finished mending. She was adeptly weaving her needle in and out of the cloth. I had learned to sew a little in school. I recalled learning how to use a sewing machine too, but I had completely forgotten how by now. And yet this younger girl was sewing like it was the most natural thing in the world. There was nothing spectacular about this scene, nothing odd, yet it felt so mysterious to me.

It had been a few months since I was summoned to this world. It wasn't going on adventures or fighting monsters, but rather everyday life like this that brought about this sense of otherworldliness. Right now I was also feeling a sense of nostalgia, almost like I was homesick. This wasn't a bad feeling, either. I let myself soak in the comfortable mood as I waited for the bedroom door to open.

Rulitora returned to the bedroom after we finished breakfast. He'd be sleeping again until lunchtime. Until then, we passed the time by organizing all our loot inside the Unlimited Bath. After excluding the equipment with spells cast on them and antiques that might hold some value, all that was left were just old items we needed to sell off.

We had the option of repairing the items and making them look a little more

attractive, but then we had to consider if it was worth the effort. Roni and I took care of the physical labor, while Clena, Rium, and Rakti were in charge of estimating how much the antiques might be worth. Lunch came around before we knew it, Rulitora got up, and we ate our meal together.

My blessing ceremony came after that, but it was to be conducted in a tunnel inside Mt. Lemnos rather than in the temple itself. I took along a fully armed Rulitora as my bodyguard, then we arrived after a shaky carriage ride to the largest tunnel there was for mining “fire stones.” It was apparently the place with the highest concentration of fire spirits in Hephaestusopolis.

Our guide cleric took a torch, lit it up using magic, and entered the tunnel. He had probably used a fire spirit summoning spell. The dark tunnel gradually grew brighter as we advanced until it became bright enough that we didn’t need the torch anymore.

“Whoa...”

“This is where the ceremony will be conducted,” our guide priest said as he turned back toward us, looking proud. I had been rendered speechless.

We had been guided to a ceremony space with countless crimson crystal pillars peeking out from the stone walls, each of them giving off a light that colored the whole room red. I unwittingly blurt out when I saw the fantastical sight...

“...It’s hot!” I didn’t know if it was fire spirits or if it was just because we were inside a volcano, but the air was incredibly hot. I felt immediately dispirited realizing that the ceremony would be conducted in here. I’d never say that to the cleric though, what with him looking all smug.

And then the ceremony itself was what you’d call a nightmare. Before me were five clerics, including the temple elder at the center, flexing their muscles and dancing wildly. This had been going on for about an hour now. The beads of sweat flying off their bodies glistened in the light, making me downright depressed. And this was all part of the official ceremony to grant me the Goddess of Fire’s blessing.

The Goddess of Fire was also the goddess of passion and enthusiasm, so her

ceremonies tended to inspire a lot of feverish dancing. So naturally, all of the temple elders were buff, wild dancers. I was sure everyone here were elites of the temple of fire.

I mean, the ceremony for the Goddess of Earth's blessing was just the elder reciting ritual prayers in the most soothing atmosphere possible. I had been blessed by the Goddess of Light the moment I was summoned, but I wondered if the princess, who was traveling with the hero Cosmos right now, had danced during the summoning ritual.

Apparently this group of nightmarish dancers included women in the past. The elder didn't necessarily have to participate, either. But still, right now they had been dancing for over an hour in this sweltering heat that had me soaking in sweat just sitting there. It was barely tolerable for me, the observer, but for them it must have been rough enough to be considered torture.

Since it must have been a prestigious job, I was sure many people tried to step up to the challenge, but it wasn't surprising that the few who could survive the harsh environment were men. I'd heard the previous temple elder had chosen female dancers despite that, so it must have depended on each elder's personal vision. Since the current elder himself participated in this torturous ceremony, he must have had a particularly noble heart. That elder was currently dancing before me half-naked, muscles glistening and white teeth sparkling under the red lights. He showed me a smile so fresh that I wanted to punch him in the face. Okay, maybe I was getting a little irritated from the heat.

The clerics danced like mad for another ten minutes or so, and then the ceremony was finally over. The heat was painful enough to deal with, but I was more mentally drained after my eyes had been repeatedly violated. I stumbled my way out of the tunnel and back to Rulitora.

"...Are you alright?" he asked me with a dubious expression, but that couldn't be avoided. After all, the clerics had emerged from the tunnel after me, beaming with smiles after a job well done. I endured another shaky carriage ride back to the temple, where I met back up with the girls in the VIP room.

"Wh-what are you doing...?"

“Nothing, I just need a little healing...”

I hugged Clena, then Roni, then Rium and Rakti together as soon as I saw their faces. They all looked a little startled, but still let me do as I pleased, probably noticing my temperament. Rium wrapped her arms around my waist, hugging me back.

“...Oh yeah, sister Fire’s ceremony is a little intense.”

Rakti was the only one who could understand the ordeal I went through. As I hugged her petite body, she reached a hand out to pat me on the head. Ahh, she was healing my soul. I patted her on the head in return.

“Alright then, now that you’ve been healed, let’s go update our status cards,” Clena said, clapping her hands. It was cute how her cheeks were puffing out a tiny bit.

She had arranged our donation to the temple while I was at my blessing ceremony. It was the norm to contribute a donation to the temple whenever they did something for you. This was the case for the two temples back in Ceresopolis as well. Since we were staying here and had them conduct the blessing ceremony, we’d donated gold coins when we first met with the temple elder. The reason we waited to update our status cards was because the update would reflect our conditions at the time. We wanted to rest up from our travels first, but we also considered that the blessing from the Goddess of Fire might affect things, so we waited until we could do an update all at once.

The donation Clena had prepared was meat. She had planned on buying fruit first, but after doing some research with the clerics, she learned that they’d be happier receiving meat as a gift. Indeed, I could imagine them more easily chowing down on whole roasted meat than daintily munching on fruit. I was afraid that some buff men would start dancing again to conduct the status card updates, but thankfully the procedure was the same as any other temple’s.

Rulitora’s level had gone up to 30. That was the limit for any normal person, but I doubted this was it for Rulitora. His stats had slightly improved across the board. For a warrior as well-rounded as him, maybe his stats simply didn’t change much.

Clena had risen to level 22, and Roni level 21. You were considered first-class

after passing level 20, so now I had not only Clena, but also Roni as first-class party members. Clena's MP and MEN had grown significantly after all the time she had spent controlling wind spirits while we traveled through the underground tunnel. Roni's TEC had also grown a fair amount. I wondered why, but TEC represented how dexterous you were with your hands. During our travels, she had endeavored to cook and do the laundry, butchered whatever monsters we defeated, and above all, learned how to use the washing machine flawlessly. It was no wonder why her TEC had grown so much.

"Your MP and MEN grew pretty fast, Clena."

"I know you don't mean it that way, but that sounds condescending coming from you."

"Come on..."

I knew she wasn't angry, but she looked a little exasperated. It wasn't hard to tell where she was coming from though, since my own MP and MEN stats were flying off the borders.

The lines on the radar chart showing my stats had just barely widened in angle. My other stats had increased as well, but it was honestly nothing impressive. Clena must have found it hard to be happy about my compliment after looking at my stats.

As for my level, it had risen to 24. It had been lower than Clena's at our last update, so I had passed her during our battle in Hadesopolis. Our levels increased by absorbing a portion of the blessings every living creature in this world possessed after defeating them. It was probably accurate to describe it in RPG terms as EXP. That made it easy to understand why Rulitora had only grown one level, too. He was already strong to start with.

But why had my EXP gain surpassed Clena's and Roni's so much? Sure, I had used far more magic than they had. However, that only affected stat growth, not necessarily level gain. I'd heard that being blessed by the Goddess of Light let you gain EXP faster, but the biggest difference must have come when I dealt the finishing blow on Goldfish.

"...You beat me."

Rium's level was surprisingly low. She was only level 15. She was noting how I had surpassed her level, but I didn't tell her that that had been the case since Ceresopolis.

Her MP and MEN were even higher than Clena's, and her TEC was fairly high as well, but her HP, STR, and VIT were all incredibly low. She had managed to travel on her own from Athena to Jupiter, then from Athena to the void, but apparently that had nothing to do with her level. She didn't actually seem that well versed in traveling, so she must have carefully avoided any possible dangers while traveling around on her flying disc. She had always been the type to ignore anything that didn't interest her, though that wasn't the case in regards to us.

Rakti was last, but since we had picked her up in the middle of our journey, she didn't own a status card yet and had to have a new one made for her. You could say she was similar to the farmer raver who'd fled his village to join the hero Ritsu Nakahana. The clerics didn't find anything strange with her presence in our group.

She ended up only being level 1. Her stats were no better than any ordinary human's. This went without saying, but those stats reflected the temporary body she had created after her seal was lifted, not her actual stats as the Goddess of Darkness. We couldn't have anyone finding out her true form, so this worked out just fine.

"We should buy a maid uniform for her," Clena said first thing after we finished having our cards updated and returned to our room. She went on to explain that it was relatively common for families to be attacked by monsters or thieves when traveling, and children would often barely escape and then be taken in by other travelers. It was common for temples to take those children in, too. That would explain why the clerics didn't seem suspicious of Rakti at all, even though she didn't have an ounce of fighting power in her.

"Maybe they're expecting us to give Rakti to the temple?"

"Huuuh?!" Rakti cried out from beside me after I asked my question to Clena.

Don't worry, we won't be leaving you at the temple. It made me happy to

hear that she wanted to stay with us so much, though.

“Well, there’s no way we could explain adding her to our party from just these stats.”

“Yeah, she’s just an ordinary girl... no, her stats are even lower than average,” Rulitora mumbled as he peered at the status card in Clena’s hand.

I didn’t know what was considered average, but it looked like Rakti’s temporary body was on the weaker end of the scale. Though it was temporary, this was still her one and only body in this world, and it seemed difficult for her to summon any more strength to it than she had right now.

“I-I can use magic! Dark magic! It’s really cool!”

“Don’t. You can’t let anybody else find out.”

Rakti tried to object, but Rium denied her right off the bat. Though it was normal for travelers to carry some secrets, I attracted attention as a Hero of the Goddess, so I needed to keep up appearances.

“So I was thinking—we could register her as a labor raver who handles odd jobs for us, which wouldn’t make it strange for her to be traveling with us.”

“The same as me then,” Roni said with her chest held high. She was Clena’s raver, after all.

“The same as Roni?! So I’ll be able to be of service?! Yes, please do that for me!” Rakti jumped up with her arms raised high. She had thought we were going to abandon her at the temple from our conversation, so she seemed especially desperate.

She herself was wishing for it, so it was probably the right decision to bring her along as a labor raver who took care of odd jobs.

“Can we really register a goddess as a raver, though?”

“They’ll make sure she doesn’t have a criminal record, and as long as she hasn’t done anything particularly heinous, her records won’t even make it to a neighboring country...”

“So they won’t be able to look her up too thoroughly. I guess that works...?”

“Yes, Rakti will probably be considered as someone without a citizenship.”

Apparently it was a common situation for demi-humans, and not unheard of if someone happened to be born far away from any nation. There wouldn’t be any problems registering Rakti.

“Touya, let’s go! Let’s go right now!” Rakti pulled my hand even though she probably had no idea where we should be going. Are you okay with that, Goddess of Darkness?

Clena laughed, telling Rakti to calm down. “You don’t know where the raver market is, right? Let’s go ask one of the clerics.”

“Oh, good idea!” Rakti replied energetically, her mood the opposite of how it was just a moment ago.

We asked the nearest cleric we spotted from our room, who quickly guided us to where the raver market was. The registration process went even more smoothly than expected. Since we weren’t buying from the market itself, all we had to do was pay a registration fee. And thus, Rakti officially became my labor raver.

“Would the Ficus store have clothing that could pass as a maid uniform?”

“Anything that needs to be worn on the road would have to be custom ordered.”

So the maids who stayed in the city to work were different. We’d planned to visit the great pervert’s store anyway, so we ordered Rakti some clothes along the way. We also bought some everyday clothes, then headed back to the temple.

Once we arrived back in our room, I summoned the door to the Unlimited Bath and made to open it, but then stopped in my tracks.

“What’s the matter, Sir Touya?”

“Did the door get bigger?”

“It’s both taller and wider, now that you mention it...”

It was obvious once I compared it to Rulitora’s size. In the past, he would have

had to crouch to get through the door. But now, even though he was fully clad in armor and standing up straight, he'd be able to pass through the door with room to spare.

"I'd expected the inside to change after getting the Goddess of Fire's blessing, but..."

"The changes are starting with the door itself," Clena said with an astonished expression while Rium nodded wordlessly beside her.

"Rulitora, if anyone comes by, I'll trust you to handle it."

"Understood."

There was no reason to hesitate. I left Rulitora to keep watch, then turned the doorknob and opened the door in one go. The door didn't feel any heavier than it did before.

"The door's tiny!" I exclaimed right after entering. I thought for a moment that the door inside had gotten smaller, but it was simply farther away than it used to be.

"Um, has this area gotten over twice as big as it used to be?" Roni asked as she peered inside.

The distance from the outer door to the inner building looked to be about three stutos now. The pile of weapons and armor that we had stuffed into the one stuto corridor before now had almost another stuto of space on either side.

"Clena, can you check the left side?"

"Got it." Clena and Roni walked to the left. I took Rium and Rakti along with me to the right.

"It's so wide..."

"The weapons have fallen over."

"We'll need to reorganize them later. There're a lot of swords without sheaths, too. Be careful to not trip over anything, Rakti."

"Why did you only address me?!"

"Look at Rium."

“Huh?”

Rakti looked toward Rium to see her hovering on her flying disc. There was no risk of her tripping over anything in her state.

“Uhhh...” Rakti looked like she wanted to say something, but just clung to my back instead.

Now I didn’t have to worry about getting her injured as long as I put away all the fallen weapons as we progressed.

“Here.”

“Oh, thanks.”

I turned around at the sound of Rium’s voice to see that she had managed to find my gauntlets. Now I could pick up blades without having to worry about cutting myself.

I picked up fallen swords and spears until we reached the far right side of the building. The corridor was still continuing three stutos wide. We kept walking until we reached the back of the building, which was also still three stutos wide. The building itself looked like it had gotten bigger. The pile of weapons we had put away had been cut off in the middle and continued to the left side.

“Um, I think beyond this would be...”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Rakti?”

“N-nothing... you’ll understand once you see it.” Rakti hid herself behind me, her cheeks blushing red. I had no choice but to proceed into the unknown.

“Huh, I see...” I understood what she had meant once we turned the corner.

The left side of the building was larger than the rest, measuring about six stutos wide. It was practically a garden now. There was an altar in a far corner, and on it rested a giant fire stone. Its shape was similar to the crimson pillars of crystal from the blessing ceremony, but it was several times larger in size. It might have been even taller than I was. I was tempted to call it a “fire pillar” instead of a “fire stone.”

“What in the world is that?”

“Ahh... I’m sorry. Sister Fire loves being extravagant...”

So this was being extravagant? Was this giant altar just because she wanted to be extravagant?

“Sir Touya!” I looked back to see Clena and Roni walking toward us.

I could also see the entire left side now. It was a corridor about six stutos wide... no, at this point I could call it a garden. The side closest to the door was concave, or rather, a part of the building was now sticking out. Looked like there was a new room.

There was nothing besides the altar here, and the gravel... no, the ground was wide open. The ground seemed like it was from Mt. Lemnos. Its texture looked similar to what I had seen during the blessing ceremony. Some of the weapons and armor had fallen over, so we lined them all back up along the building.

There was a door in the space we suspected to be a new room, but it was buried in equipment right now. We should probably check it out from inside the building for now.

Clena asked me as we looked around the garden, “So this is all from the Goddess of Fire’s blessing?”

“Most likely. The ground here is similar to the volcano’s.”

“I wonder if the part of the building sticking out is influencing it.”

“It’s close to that fire altar, so probably. That’s most likely a new room that the blessing created.”

“Sister Fire is the second oldest, right after sister Light.” Rakti said as she peeked out from behind me. Come on, stop hiding and talk to us face to face.

I turned around, picked her up, and set her down next to me. She was light as a feather.

Rakti looked surprised at first, but didn’t try to hide behind me and just clung to my arm instead. One step at a time.

“Anyway, do they have some sort of order? Like they have in the reliefs?”

“Sister Fire is the second oldest, so if we were to order ourselves, sister Fire

would be right after sister Light.”

“I see, so there is an order.” Clena and Roni looked at the new part of the building as they listened to Rakti.

“So is that why there’s a new room right next to the bathing room?”

“That’s probably it. We’re done inspecting the outside now, so let’s take a look inside.”

We all entered the building at Clena’s suggestion. The entrance and other areas hadn’t changed. The main difference was the new door on the far left wall. It matched where we had seen the building jut out from the outside.

“Is this the new room created from the Goddess of Fire’s blessing?”

“It won’t shoot fire at us as soon as we open the door, right?”

“S-sister Fire isn’t *that* extravagant... I think?” Rakti sounded nervous. Even she doubted what she was saying.

All five of us looked at each other. Nobody spoke a word.

“...Stand back just to be safe, everyone.”

In the end, I opened the door while the other four stayed back. Of course, I made sure I was in the right position to avoid getting hit by a sudden blast of fire.

“Ready, go!”

I opened the door all at once, but no fire came shooting out. I fearfully looked inside, but then my eyes opened wide. The girls started approaching and peering inside as well, but none of them could tell what this room was. I could imagine why.

“I-it’s finally here...” I muttered breathlessly, staring at the room before my eyes—the blessing from the Goddess of Fire had brought about a spacious, professional-looking kitchen.

The sink and counters were made from carved and polished stone, looking incredibly luxurious. The stove was similar to what we used in modern Japan, so I gave it a thorough inspection first. Kitchens could potentially be dangerous,

after all.

Roni and Rium didn't dare touch anything, but they stared at everything around them with keen eyes. Clena stayed a few steps back. Rakti was hiding behind Clena.

The sink had been carved from natural stone. I knew these details just like how I had known how to use my gift all of a sudden. The stone was granite, a type of stone that the volcano produced.



Not only was there a sink and a stove, but also a wide open counter. It was in the middle of the room so that everyone could gather around it and cook together.

The faucet was producing warm and cold water just fine. There was a control panel next to the sink. We'd been washing our kitchenware in the changing room sink before, but we could move them over here now.

The stove wasn't an induction cooker, but a gas stove thanks to the Goddess of Fire's influence. Though technically it was running off my MP, so it wasn't exactly a gas stove either.

"...What's 'godly' mean here?"

The knobs controlling the flame went from 'low' to 'medium' to 'high,' but then went to 'super' and 'godly.'" It was written in kanji. I tried turning it up to high for now, but I didn't dare to set it any higher. The girls' eyes were sparkling in surprise at how I summoned fire just by turning a knob, but my mind was in a totally different place. I told the girls what the words on the scale read and to never turn it past "high."

"If I turned it to 'godly' heat, would I summon the Goddess of Fire herself or something?"

"I-I don't think sister Fire would do that... probably?" Rakti didn't sound confident, but according to her, if fire was enough to summon the goddess, then she'd be sticking her head out of Mt. Lemnos right around now.

I looked inside the shelves and found kitchen knives, ladles, and a bunch of other cooking tools. Next to the kitchen knives was a butchering knife perfect for preparing anything we managed to hunt and kill. I opened a large drawer and found another set of cookware. Roni pointed at one, asking, "Sir Touya, what is this?"

"Hm? Oh, that's a whisk."

It was even electric. Well, technically it was powered by magic. I picked it up, turned it on, and the motor resounded as the whisk started spinning at a dizzying speed. Roni jumped away from it at the same time. She was more surprised by this than the stove since she at least knew what fire was, unlike

this completely foreign object.

There were other various tools I was familiar with from modern Japan. The pots and frying pans looked like they were nonstick, but I didn't notice anything else remarkable about them.

On the other hand, I couldn't find a single utensil. There were cabinets to fit them in, but all of them were empty. This wasn't a problem though, since we already had our own.

"And what are you doing, Rium?"

Rium had left my side and started doing little hops and spins around the room. To a crystal mage like her, this collection of modern Japanese cookware must have been like a treasure trove. She looked cute doing that, so I let her be for now. Rakti joined in the dancing along the way, which I found pretty amusing to watch. After a while, we started organizing our luggage again.

We had moved near the fire altar. This had become the most spacious area in the new and improved Unlimited Bath.

Rulitora and I handled the physical labor, while Clena and Rakti tried to do basic appraisal on our items. As the daughter of a noble family, Clena had been taught about antiques as part of her upbringing. Rakti didn't have as much of a discerning eye, but she could tell whether an item had been cast with magic and about how strong that spell was. We brought whatever needed touching up outside, where Roni and Rium handled both that and talking to whoever came by.

We lined up the weapons and armor into three categories—valuable antiques, magic items, and normal old items. Roni and Rium were helping clean up the old items that were dirty, but not particularly rusty. They looked much more appealing after giving them a thorough wipe.

In the meantime, two guests visited us.

The first was a cleric who came to deliver a magic textbook. Roni called for me to come out to the living room, where I met with the cleric and received the book.

The second guest, however, was more of a problem.

“Huh? Crissa’s here?”

Crissa, the daughter of Pardoe, the blacksmith we were having tune up our “Magic Eater” armor, had come to pay us a visit.

Had something happened with our order? We decided to all convene to hear her out. A cleric led Crissa to our VIP room. She was wearing a yellow dress over her pure white fur.

“I’m sorry for bothering you so soon after the order. There’s actually something I would like to discuss about it...” she said, then bowed her head. So they really did encounter a problem.

We asked her to sit on the sofa and explain what the issue was. Her small build allowed her to sit on a human sofa without her tail getting in the way, and she almost looked like a stuffed animal doing so. I wanted to just stare at her with a silly grin, but I suppressed the urge and let her talk.

“So what did you want to discuss?”

“The truth is... that armor is far too sturdy for us.”

We looked at each other while Crissa spoke with a solemn expression. Wasn’t it good for the armor to be sturdy? Rulitora spoke for me, voicing what I was thinking in a confused tone.

“...Isn’t that a good thing?”

“W-well... it’s a bit shameful to say, but the task is beyond the capabilities of my father and Mr. Shakova...”

“And they can’t tailor it, either?” Clena with a puzzled expression. Crissa hung her head and nodded in response. She was so small that it looked like we were reprimanding a child, making my chest hurt.

“...What’s the core issue?”

“The fire stones. They can’t get enough heat from the fire stones to be able to modify the armor. My father said that it was the first time he’d seen a metal like it.”

So the problem lay in the fuel source, the fire stones. In other words, it wouldn’t be resolved by bringing the armor to another alchemist. Not to

mention he had been introduced to us after we'd emphasized that we wouldn't mind a demi-human. A better alchemist here in Hephaestusopolis would be hard to find.

"Do you not have enough? Or do you need something other than just fire stones to make it work?"

"We'd need a larger fire stone, or perhaps..."

According to Crissa, the size of a fire stone depended on the strength of the fire spirits residing within. The larger the fire stone, the higher the heat it could bring out. However, to obtain a fire stone bigger than the largest they had now, they would need to mine deeper into the mountain. Fire spirits were more concentrated the closer they were to the center. However, they had no way of predicting what would happen to the still-inactive volcano if they did so. It was effectively an impossible task.

So they're lacking heat... I remembered something as I thought to myself. I told Crissa to wait a little as I gathered the others and discussed with them whether or not we could use my gift to help solve the problem. We decided it'd be fine, or rather, we had no other option. If we did have another option, it'd be to abandon the armor altogether, but that'd be a poor choice, considering what trials lay ahead for us. The only problem was whether or not they would keep our secret. I may have been overthinking it, but since my gift was more convenient than strong, I couldn't predict what troubles might come raining down if knowledge of it were to spread. There were plenty of demerits to having word get out that my gift was "weak," too.

"Uhh, Crissa. Would you mind sending a message to Pardoe?"

"N-not at all, what is it?" Crissa raised her head at my question.

"We might be able to help. But in exchange, you'll have to keep a secret of ours. Please tell him that."

"Help...? But how would you...?"

"I can't tell you the details, but just know that it has something to do with my power as a hero."

Crissa stiffened up and nodded in reply. Just in case you're thinking it, I wasn't

lying.

Jumping ahead a bit, Pardoe accepted our proposal. Maybe that was his pride as a craftsman who couldn't abandon his work talking.

We let the temple elder know that we'd be staying in Pardoe's workshop starting today. The elder was disappointed, but he somehow became emotional and understanding when I told him that I'd be helping the blacksmiths tune my armor since they needed the assistance of a hero. I wished he'd stop posing to express himself, though.

As for my lessons in fire-type clerical magic, I already knew the foundations, so I decided to study on my own for the time being. If needed, I'd go back to the temple for training. Training under this temple seemed like it would be especially stifling, so I wanted to do everything I could by myself first.

We saw two other ketolts besides Pardoe upon our return to the smithy. They were both tabbies, one brown and one orange, both with white fur around their mouths and paws. They were wearing work clothes like Pardoe was, but unlike his messy and sooty appearance, the two of them looked clean and professional. I couldn't tell how old cats were by their looks, but the orange tabby was a bit smaller than the brown tabby and the white cat. He was still larger than Crissa, though.

Crissa introduced the larger, brown tabby as Pardoe's friend, Shakova Remus, and the smaller, orange tabby as Shakova's son, Mark Remus. Shakova greeted us with a confident air, holding out his paw for a shake, but Mark only nodded his head in silence. Pardoe and Shakova had been best friends since they were young, which made Crissa and Mark childhood friends in turn.

Pardoe was the first to come speak to me. "I heard the story from Crissa. I'm nyot into spreading around people's secrets, but how do you plan to create a heat source stronger than the fire stone's?"

"It's easier for you to see it firsthand, but that in itself is a secret."

Pardoe looked at the other ketolts, who nodded at each other, then looked my way again. "Understood. We'll keep your secret."

"In that case..." I opened the door to my Unlimited Bath, which made Crissa

cower in surprise behind her father. The other three opened their eyes wide but remained composed—or so I thought, but all of their tails stood stiff and upright.

“Wh-what in the world...?” Pardoe stood in front of everybody. His appraiser mind got to work as he touched the door and observed the inside.

“Not yet, the best part is still inside.” I patted Pardoe on the shoulder and invited him inside. Clena and the others urged the rest of the ketolts inside as well, though they all looked nervous.

We took them to the fire altar we had discovered. The fire stone was shaped like a stone pillar, and stood a little above two stutos tall. If he wanted something bigger, this was the best we could offer. We couldn’t transport the stove that had the godly heat setting outside the room, so I decided to introduce them to this one instead. To be completely blunt, I thought the counters in the kitchen would be too tall for the ketolts.

“Ooh, look at all this...” Pardoe exclaimed, impressed as he saw the weapons and armor we had lined up in the garden area.

“There are a few more items here with spells cast on them. Inside the building, too. Well, I’ll ask you to take a look at them later.”

“Purrfect!” Pardoe replied, raising a paw to the sky. He was even more motivated now.

And then we finally walked past the heaps of equipment and arrived at the fire altar.

“M-my goodness...!”

“A fire stone of this size...?!”

The ketolts were almost breathless at the sight. They could appreciate how large the stone was even more than we could, since they used it as part of their trade.

Pardoe immediately began inspecting the altar. Shakova and Mark assisted him, both with serious looks on their faces. Crissa looked on at a distance along with the rest of us.

The fire stone pillar that stood atop the altar was about half a stuto in diameter. The pedestal itself was about one stuto tall. In front of it was a shallow box that reminded me of a donation box.

“Meow, I see...”

Pardoe stood up slowly and went into his workshop, then came back carrying a burlap sack with black stones inside. The black stones looked like charcoal at a glance, but they were actually fire stones that had lost their spiritual power. They were used as mediums to transfer the heat from the fire stones to the metal as thoroughly as possible.

Pardoe spread the contents of the bag out inside the box. A metal item was supposed to be buried among the stones, so they had been smashed to about the size of pebbles and filled the inside of the box. It reminded me of how sweet potatoes were roasted, but I kept that to myself.

“There’s a connection between the fire stone and the box. So if we do this...” Pardoe pointed at the fire stone pillar, chanted something, and then the pillar started glowing.

Rium, who was standing next to me, explained that it was a basic spell using craftsman magic. It allowed the caster to control how much spiritual energy they drew from the fire stone, and was a basic yet vital spell.

At the same time, I felt as if my energy was being sucked out of me. I see, so the source of that stone pillar’s power wasn’t the fire spirits, but my own MP. It was putting a bigger toll on me compared to the other facilities we used inside the Unlimited Bath. Nothing I couldn’t handle, though. My MP had grown more than enough to handle this.

Just as Pardoe said, the fire stone and the box were connected, and the black stones inside the box started glowing red as they gave off heat. Pardoe gave a firm nod at the amount of heat being produced, though the power source was my MP and not the fire stone. Maybe his craftsman magic let him know how much heat was being produced, too.

“...Alright! This will do!”

“Mark, start the preparations! Bring all of our tools in here!”

“Y-yes, Father!”

The blacksmiths busily began their work.

“Rulitora, help them carry their things inside.”

“Understood.”

They quickly set up their tools with Rulitora’s help. I could still feel my MP being sucked away in the meantime, but the sensation was similar to when I used cleric magic. It felt like the times I used spirit summoning spells, but it didn’t feel quite like light or earth magic. Was this what drawing power from the fire spirits felt like? So even though it was my MP, the fire stone pillar was still using the power of fire spirits somehow. In that case, this would be good practice for learning fire-type cleric magic. I could practice spells from my new textbook as long as I made sure to not use too much MP. We could also leave the weapons and armor we didn’t know what to do with to the blacksmiths. I looked over at Clena and the rest.

“We’ll be making this smithy our base for now.”

“I suppose we could call it that, since it seems like you won’t be moving for a while.”

I couldn’t help that. I should just make use of the time to practice my cleric magic.

“Well, I’ll keep you company. I wanted to read the books we picked up from Hadesopolis, too.”

Oh yeah, we still had those. What had happened 500 years ago? What had been erased from history? The key to unlocking the mysteries might lie in those books.

Even if we can’t go outside, the next few days should be anything but boring, I thought as I stared at the lively garden.

I saw another dream that night. Just like before, I couldn’t tell if I was standing or lying down. I might have been floating in the sky or buried underground. However, I didn’t feel the pain or suffocation I had felt last time.

Rakti was clinging to my back. Standing in front of me was a woman wearing a pure white dress, her blonde hair tied in a high ponytail. Was Rakti trying to hide from her?

This time, I knew who she was. The Goddess of Light. I had noticed she was tall before, but she may have been even taller than me. She looked angry, but she wasn't reprimanding Rakti like she had been doing last time. Perhaps because I was in between them now.

The other woman with wavy green hair must have been the Goddess of Earth. She was standing next to the Goddess of Light, trying to calm her down. She was pretty big, too. Not just her height, which seemed even taller than the Goddess of Light, but a certain part of her body covered almost all of her face from my point of view. I might have started praying to her on instinct if I could move. I couldn't see her face now, but I imagined it had a very gentle expression. She had such a serene air about her.

I only started noticing now, but she was wearing a pretty racy dress. The skirt was composed of two sashes about a third of a stuto wide each, decorated with a tribal-looking pattern. The front of her dress was rather revealing, and the slits ran far up her legs. I could spot hints of her tanned skin peeking out from underneath.

I had so much to thank her for. I had been saved by earth spirit summoning multiple times since receiving the blessing in Ceresopolis. As I thought that, the Goddess of Earth came up to me with a cheery smile and patted my head. She was bending down toward me, and her giant breasts swaying close to my face made me blush.

The Goddess of Light suddenly became angry again. Rakti cowered behind my back even more. She must have been frightened and trying to hide behind me. It didn't help a bit though, and the Goddess of Light continued scowling in my direction. It looked like she was angry at me, not Rakti. Maybe she was telling me to use more light magic and appreciate her more. She was rather modest compared to the Goddess of Earth—closer to Rakti than anyone else, but she probably wasn't upset about that.

Her face grew red as I thought that and she got even more angry, but I didn't

think it was related. Hopefully.

There was one more girl in my dream this time. She was hugging my shoulders next to me, laughing at the Goddess of Light and Earth in a lively fashion.

Yes, she was the Goddess of Fire. Her hair reached slightly past her shoulders and looked a little scruffy, as if she had combed through it with just her fingers. She was wearing a tropical-looking dress, similar to a bikini and a pareo. She was showing the most skin out of all of the goddesses here. On that note, she was bigger than the Goddess of Light and smaller than the Goddess of Earth.

She was petting Rakti's head, hugging the both of us, and basically doing whatever she wanted to. I couldn't tell what she was saying, but she had a hearty smile on her face. She hugged me while sticking her tongue out at the Goddess of Light.

I remembered my Unlimited Bath and started to understand what the Goddess of Fire might have been thinking during the upgrade. She was protecting me the same way the Goddess of Earth was. She wanted to guard me against the clash between the light and darkness blessings. Maybe she was able to protect me more than the Goddess of Earth could, since I had received the blessing at her head temple. That would explain why she was so close now.

She was also the reason why we could start tailoring my magic eater armor. I had just received her blessing, but it was helping me a lot already.



I couldn’t voice my thoughts, but I tried to look at her in a way that expressed my gratitude. Maybe I got through to her, because her eyes starting sparkling and she gave me a bear hug with a giant smile on her face. She pushed me into her supple breasts, and while I couldn’t feel anything at the moment, I could imagine their softness and a smile formed on my face. The Goddess of Light looked even more fearsome after seeing us like that, but it was probably unrelated... or at least I wanted to think it was.

Should I tell Haruno about this feast of goddesses the next time I send her a message? I thought as my mind faded from consciousness.

Spring Bath – Harunon's Crime Report

Athenapolis—the nation of the wise. The nation was currently struck by a presence that had gained notoriety all the way from the intellectuals of the *ecclesia* to the ravers in the streets. That was the Hero of the Temple of the Goddess of Light, or Hero of the Goddess for short—Haruno Shinonome.

She was still periodically going out with the Goddess of Light pilgrims to subjugate monsters, showing everyone that "hero" wasn't just a word tacked onto her name. On top of that, she was so beautiful that it was rumored she might have been an incarnation of the Goddess herself. She was both gorgeous and lived up to her name, so it was no wonder that she had become the talk of the town.

"Sigh..." The famed Haruno was currently standing by a window in a mansion located in the outskirts of Athenapolis, wrought with ennui. She was happy to hear about her reputation in the city, but that alone wasn't enough to keep her spirits up all the time. She was a bit embarrassed about being treated like a goddess, but that wasn't it either.

It all started with the recent message Touya had sent her. Touya, her loved one, had defeated a demon general. That was a huge achievement for a hero. Sera and the three pilgrim knights—Lumis, Rin, and Sandra—were all as happy to hear the news as if the accomplishment was their own, to say nothing of Haruno. However, the other news that came with it had delivered a huge shock to the girls. Information on Hadesopolis, the fact that there was a sixth goddess called the Goddess of Darkness, the truth behind the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord, the fact that the first sacred king had sealed the Goddess of Darkness on accident, which created the void... All of this information had been covered up. It was all too much for followers of the Goddess of Light.

The demon lord was a human who had also been summoned from Haruno's world, and his name was Oda Nobunaga. The Goddess of Darkness was the

goddess of all demi-humans, and demons were only a subcategory of demi-humans. After the Goddess of Darkness was sealed, the sacred family and the temple of light took over the nations of demi-humans.

All that information was so far from what they thought they knew about the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord. Every last bit of information blew away what common sense they had. You could even say that these followers of the Goddess of Light were having an identity crisis.

It had been so much of a shock that Sera and the others no longer had a trace of the vigor they normally had. Rin, who was usually full of energy, was now moping. For Haruno, who wasn't a follower, seeing her friends like that gave her just as much of a shock.

They ended up following Sera's suggestion to only report that Touya had defeated a demon general and hide the findings on Hadesopolis for the time being. They felt wrong about keeping it a secret, but every one of the pilgrims agreed that giving the temple all that information might put Touya at risk. After all, he was the one who revealed the secrets that the sacred family and the temple of light had covered up, and was also taking the Goddess of Darkness along with him. Fortunately, news had recently spread that a hero of the sacred family, Natsu Kannami, had defeated a demon general. It wouldn't seem odd for them to report the news without all the extra information.

"It just isn't working..."

"What's the matter?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

They were currently riding horseback on the road home from battling monsters in the neighboring village. Haruno let her thoughts slip, but quickly diverted the topic after a party member noticed.

Haruno had many worries, but her activities as a hero of the goddess wasn't one of them. She had already reached level 19. She was only one level away from become a first-class party member at level 20. Haruno wondered if she was gaining levels too quickly, but that was just the effect of the blessing from the Goddess of Light.

She had also discovered that her gift, the Unlimited Reflection, proved extremely strong in battle. The power blocked any and all magic from affecting her unless she consciously willed it. The fire that monsters breathed was included in that, and it didn't affect Haruno one bit. On the other hand, she'd have to concentrate to have healing spells work on her, but she'd also be shielded from any surprise attacks without even thinking about it.

She was also worried, as a girl of her age would be, about how physical stats such as STR and VIT were the only ones increasing on her status card. Her sword had been feeling lighter in her hands lately, but she concluded that it was just her imagination after pinching her arm to check.

In any case, Haruno had gotten used to fighting monsters after all the time she'd spent subjugating them. When they had first started traveling, Haruno had been so afraid of taking lives that she cried to Sera a few times, but she had gotten past that now. She wanted to return the favor to Sera by saying something to her now, but she couldn't think of anything worthwhile. In the end, she had murmured that things weren't working, vexed that she could do nothing but listen.

After they finished cleaning up and returned to the mansion, Sera welcomed them back wearing a robe. It wasn't a cleric robe, but a loose and thin one that looked like pajamas. She almost looked like a sheltered princess wearing it.

"Lady Haruno, a message has arrived from Sir Touya."

"Really?!"

Haruno hurriedly stepped down from her horse and rushed over to Sera after hearing the news. She realized what she was doing a moment later and turned around, but it went without saying that the pilgrims were all giggling at her. Haruno tried to cover her blushing face.

The pilgrims went their separate ways after that, and Haruno, Sera, and Lumis were left to go to Sera's room. Sera's room was stylish and had a bed, table, and dresser. The holy tool used to transmit messages was sitting on the table.

Haruno was the only one who could read the message, so she did so by herself first. Even though they were just regularly scheduled letters, she was a little embarrassed since it was mainly Touya reporting his life to her.

This message explained that they had reached Hephaestusopolis, where Touya had received a goddess' blessing. He wrote that they'd be staying in the city for a while to repair their damaged armor after their battle against the demon general, get new armor, practice magic, and study documents they had collected. Though the thing that caught Haruno's eye the most was the cat-shaped ketolts.

"There seems to be no problem... Oh, that may be a problem depending on the person."

"What is?"

"The fact that he is collecting blessings from other goddesses. Is that alright?"

"The arch-cleric in the first sacred king's party had been blessed by five goddesses, but that was not a common case..."

Sera averted her eyes and hesitated from completing her answer to Haruno's question. The pilgrims eyed each other, looking a little dubious.

"Um... what do you mean by depending on the person?"

"I think he's doing amazing, he reminds me of San Pilaca."

"Though those were arguments on both sides of San Pilaca's case at the time, too..."

Rin, Lumis, and Sandra spoke in turn. All three of them didn't mind, but apparently some people might. Touya had already been blessed by the Goddess of Earth, but no one had paid that any mind before. That was because the ceremony hadn't been conducted at the head temple.

"According to how he described the new Unlimited Bath in his message, he hasn't lost the Goddess of Light's blessing..." Sera said, but it still seemed like she was being evasive.

"So some people might assume he threw away his blessing from the Goddess of Light if they didn't know that," Haruno added, and Sera nodded awkwardly in response.

"Actually, I did some research while all of you were out."

"On what?"

“On the human conquest of the demi-human nations over the past 500 years.”

“...Did it really happen?”

Sera lowered her head sorrowfully at Haruno’s question. Everyone could guess what that expression meant. The takeover really did happen—which provided evidence that the story about the Goddess of Darkness was true, as well.

“Which nation could it possibly have been...?”

“That was actually... this nation, Athenapolis.”

“...Huh?”

“Yes, Athenapolis used to be a nation of demi-humans.”

Everyone looked bewildered at the statement. The current Athenapolis was governed by the senate, but according to Sera’s research, it was a nation of demi-humans until about 300 years ago. Demons were a subcategory of demi-humans, but people back then might have thought of demi-humans as a subcategory of demons.

“I’ll ask just in case, but what kind of demi-humans lived there?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t find out that much...”

Sera’s answer was completely expected, in a way. The fact that demi-human nations had been taken over was concealed information, so it was no surprise that information on its past residents was nowhere to be found.

“Looks like I’ll have to do some research on this myself,” Haruno said, which made Sandra look up.

“Sera, have you already informed the temple leader about this?”

“...No, I have not.”

Sandra was the diligent type, so her mood was best cleared up by taking some sort of action. She deliberately joined the conversation. Rin and Lumis leaned forward, all ears.

“Would it be bad if we told them?” Lumis inquired.

“We don’t know what sort of situation Lady Haruno would be put in if we did, not to mention we might cause trouble for Sir Touya as well.”

“Oh, so that’s why we shouldn’t yet.” Rin came to an understanding after hearing Sera’s reply.

“Yes. So I thought it would be best to hear what Lady Haruno wanted to do herself first, as well as discuss the matter with Sir Touya,” Sera continued, and Haruno nodded in agreement. She was curious about where the demi-humans who had once lived in Athenapolis had gone, and they wouldn’t be able to do anything until they found that out. Even if they were to tell the pilgrims about it, that would have to be after finding out such information.

And thus Haruno’s party decided to start by investigating the demi-humans who had once lived in Athenapolis. Of course, she couldn’t forget to send Touya a reply. She had a mountain of things she wanted to tell him.

A message from Touya came the next day. He could send replies more often now that he was staying in a city. Haruno had mentioned her group’s plans in her message, to which Touya offered a few suggestions.

He had asked the Goddess of Darkness about it, and she said the demi-humans who lived in Athenapolis at the time had wings. The nation once housed the head temple of the Goddess of Wind.

“Oh yeah, Athenapolis does have a wind temple somewhere.”

“Yes, though it’s a small one. We might gain something by investigating their library.”

That day, Haruno, Sera, Lumis, Rin, and Sandra paid a visit to the temple of the Goddess of Wind, but their investigation ended in failure. Athenapolis’ temple for the Goddess of Wind was honestly tiny, so its library was tiny in turn. The Goddess of Wind sect was currently a very minor one with hardly any followers. The quality and amount of documents were easy to guess.

“Maybe...” However, Haruno had come to a conclusion after the failed research attempt... This temple was a “fake” one.

Haruno thought as such: The winged demi-humans who once lived here were

followers of the Goddess of Wind. After they were driven away from Athenapolis and the temple of light gained authority, the Goddess of Wind grew outdated as a religion, resulting in what they saw of the temple today.

The others no objections to her theory. Though that brought them no closer to the original goal, finding where the winged demi-humans had gone.

“So the light temple really...” Sera murmured on their way back from the investigation, her eyes downcast. She wasn’t looking blue, but downright pale. The shock must have been too big for her, as a cleric who served under the Goddess of Light.

“Sera...”

“I’m sorry, Lady Haruno. We were the ones who summoned you all, and yet...” Sera put her hand over her mouth as tears streamed down her face, unable to continue the rest of her words.

Haruno could guess what she wanted to say next, though. Originally, the sacred family and the temple of the Goddess of Light had summoned the heroes to prevent the demon lord from reviving, or perhaps to battle the revived demon lord. She hadn’t agreed to it, but she knew that the world was in danger. But then Touya uncovered some hidden truths, and now the situation had completely changed.

The demon lord and demon race weren’t just monsters that they needed to fight instead having a proper conversation with. They were just demi-humans like Rulitora.

They didn’t know what in particular was different about the species. However, now that Haruno knew what was going on, she realized that the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord was just a power struggle. Hadesopolis, the kingdom of demons, attacked Jupiter, and Jupiter fought back. The Goddess of Darkness got sealed on accident along the way, and Hadesopolis and the area surrounding it fell to ruin.

Jupiter hid the cause behind everything and took over one of the nations of demi-humans, Athena. The wind temple still existed but was small. This was either because the temple still had few followers, or because it was just a front

to keep up an image.

“Sigh...” Haruno paused her train of thought at that point and sighed. Lumis started getting flustered after noticing her.

“L-Lady Haruno, what’s wrong?!”

“No, it’s just... I’m kind of disgusted with myself for thinking that far...” Haruno was concerned with whether or not Touya would dislike her for thinking the way she just did.

“U-um, Lady Haruno?”

“Y-yes, what is it?” Haruno was wallowing in anxiety, but quickly brought her head back up. Sera leaned her face close to Haruno’s, looking at her with a serious expression.

“Please believe just this one thing. The Goddess of Light rules over justice and morality. She would never teach us to attack demi-humans!”

“Uh, um...” Haruno didn’t know how to respond for a moment, but she soon understood what Sera was trying to say. Driving the winged demi-humans out of Athenapolis and taking over the country would never be among the teachings of the Goddess of Light.

“...Will you believe me?”

“Of course I will, Sera.” Haruno clasped Sera’s trembling hands inside her own.

“Lady Haruno...” And then large teardrops started streaming down Sera’s cheeks. She was wailing.

Haruno looked around in a fluster, only to see that Lumis and the rest had started crying, too.

“Wait, please don’t cry, Sera! You too, Lumis!”

“But... I thought you’d hate me... after everything we learned...”

“I thought we wouldn’t be able to travel with you anymore...!”

“I was thinking about switching over to the Goddess of Darkness.”

“Hey, Rin!”

“No no no, I meant that given the choice between the light temple and Lady Haruno, I’d choose Lady Haruno. What about you, Sandra?”

“W-well, I’d...” Sandra was at a loss for words.

Haruno could think of nothing to say, either. She had thought this incident was nothing to worry over, but she hadn’t imagined that the other girls had given it that much thought. She was especially surprised at Rin, who never seemed like a devout follower, suddenly exclaiming that she’d abandon the Goddess of Light for her. This must have been a gap between Haruno, who was born in modern Japan, and the other girls, who were born in this world. The difference in how severely they thought of the situation was apparent.

“Of course I’ll keep traveling with you all! I can tell from a glance that none of you are the type of people that would discriminate against demi-humans!” Haruno raised her voice and countered everything the others had suggested. Those were her true thoughts. It was easy to tell how they would treat demi-humans just by looking at them. She did have some issues with being summoned to this world, but the responsibility was on the sacred family and the light temple, not at all on any of the girls individually.

In any case, Athenapolis had been taken over long ago. Even if they were still planning something in the shadows to this day, hardly anyone was aware of it.

Sera and Sandra looked like they had no reservations against demi-humans. Rin was the type who might think some of them looked scary, but wouldn’t form any opinions just on the basis of them being demi-human. Lumis looked like she wanted to make friends with them. Those were the impressions Haruno had gathered.

However, they had all been deeply anxious ever since being informed on the matter. Sera had especially been hurting inside. Haruno wrapped her arms around Sera’s shoulders and hugged her tight, placating her. She looked like a young child crying into Haruno’s chest, not at all like an older woman.

Haruno reported to Touya about their recent attempt at investigating the wind temple, and the next morning, he sent a reply back. Besides some more personal content, he suggested that they get information from demi-humans

currently in the city.

To find out about demi-humans, you had to ask them. His suggestion was entirely correct, but unfortunately, Athena had no demi-human communities like Hephaestus did.

There were few demi-humans in this country, since the influence of the Goddess of Light was so strong. You would spot a demi-human raver once in a while at most. The best place to search would be the raver market.

"...Let's go there and see. They would be much more knowledgeable about demi-humans than we are."

There was little chance they'd come across a winged demi-human there, but there would be plenty of others. They also had a higher chance of knowing about other demi-humans than normal humans did.

And so Haruno's party went to Athenapolis' raver market to investigate, entirely unaware that this would be the start of an event that shook Athena to the core.

The group of five girls crossed the city gates of Athenapolis. Before them lay a sprawling, western-style cityscape similar to the scenery of Jupiteropolis. Now that Haruno knew that the city had been taken over by humans, she wondered if the only reason the landscape looked similar was because the people of Jupiteropolis had taken it over.

Athenapolis was once inhabited by winged demi-humans. How had the city looked back then? Haruno had no way of finding that out.

Residents of the city amicably greeted the group of girls as they walked by. Just another side effect of fighting off monsters as a "hero of the goddess."

They asked an elderly woman the way to the raver market, and she gave them directions with no questions asked. Haruno had been worried that people might give her looks of disapproval if they thought she was going to buy a raver, but reality let her down in a sense. She once again realized that employing ravers was a privilege for the middle class and up. The party waved goodbye to the elderly woman, then headed to the raver market.

Haruno thought to herself as she looked at the people in the streets. Almost everyone in this city was a follower of the Goddess of Light. Perhaps the temple of light had taken over this nation, but that happened hundreds of years ago. It had nothing to do with the people living here now. Haruno had plenty of thoughts on the situation, but she didn't want to look at the residents from a biased point of view. She was becoming self-conscious of the smiles she returned to the townspeople, wondering if she looked too awkward. Her feet began taking brisk and nervous steps toward the raver market.

No good, I've got to think of something more positive. And so she tried to think of Touya, but couldn't for long since a silly grin broke out on her face.

Next, she tried thinking of Sera and the others. They seemed a little more cheerful this morning. They had been in shock since learning about what the temple of light had done, but they appeared to have broken out of their gloominess since.

The Goddess of Light ruled over justice and morality, and would never seek to attack demi-humans. It was one thing to question past acts committed by the temple, but another to keep believing in the Goddess of Light. Maybe the girls had realized that in the meantime. Haruno thought that was a fine way to look at it. She would never have been able to meet Sera and the pilgrims in the first place had it not been for the Goddess of Light's blessing. She never thought to doubt the Goddess of Light herself. In that case, it made more sense in Haruno's mind for the battle to be called a "battle between nations" rather than a "battle between the hero and demon lord."

"I guess things don't change no matter where you go," she muttered to herself with a self-deprecating smile.

They finally arrived at the raver market, which was located in a fancy, concert hall-like building, quite different from the dome-shaped building in Jupiteropolis. They went inside to find a large stage. The auctions were most likely held there.

As soon as Haruno proclaimed herself as a hero of the goddess, the elderly gentleman who managed the market personally showed the party around. That was just how much her reputation had grown.

The gentleman was tall, slender, and wore expensive-looking clothing. Haruno handled the talking, since the other girls weren't accustomed to being in a place like this. The smile on the manager's face looked fake as they conversed, but Haruno didn't let it get to her and returned his smile.

They were first led to a door past the stage in the entrance hall. There were large rooms to the right and left.

"Ahem, the right side houses the battle ravers, while the left side houses the labor ravers."

"We've only heard about the raver market in Jupiteropolis, but is this one any different?"

"No, not particularly so. Hmm, if there was one thing—the demand for battle ravers may be higher here, since many people want bodyguards."

"What kind of people want bodyguards?"

"Mainly members of the senate. This raver market itself is managed by the senate, after all."

"I see..."

The senate was the equivalent of the royal family in Jupiter. They were governing this country without a king. Since there was no king with absolute authority here, the party members might have needed stronger self-defense. If any of them were competing for influence amongst one another, then the need grew all the more.

"Do you have any demi-human ravers?"

"Demi-human?"

The moment Haruno asked the question she had been meaning to ask, the smile disappeared from the manager's face. If you looked closely, his eyes were twitching. It seemed like he had a few things to say about demi-humans.

"I apologize, but the demi-human ravers are..."

"Will you let us meet them?"

"...I cannot allow a regular customer to meet with them, even if you are a

hero.” His attitude did a sudden one-eighty. The type of ravers he might not have wanted the party to meet would be criminal ravers. Common citizens normally did not have the qualifications to hire them.

However, not all demi-human ravers were criminals. Rulitora had remained unsold since he was a demi-human, but were they *that* disliked? The other girls bunched up behind Haruno, looking like they had something to say.

“...Well, we have no choice. Is there an auction right now?”

“Auctions are usually held in the evening. We will be conducting one this evening, as well.”

“I don’t think we can wait until then...”

“That’s too bad, I conduct those auctions myself!” The manager looked obviously relieved as soon as Haruno changed the topic, his smile returning to his face. He kept rambling on as if he wanted to forget the previous topic or pretend it was never brought up in the first place.

He’d let the cat out of the bag. This manager most likely viewed demi-human ravers and criminal ravers as one and the same. The fact that he wouldn’t let ordinary customers meet demi-humans was proof of that.

Perhaps there was a larger ratio of criminal ravers in Athena, but Haruno knew not to lump all demi-humans in the same category. Especially after having met Rulitora, who had chosen to sell himself to save his homeland. Of course, she wasn’t planning on fighting another person on their principles. But she wouldn’t simply go along with them, either. Rulitora was Touya’s precious party member and Haruno’s precious friend.

“I understand. We’ll get the rest of our information from the reception desk, then.”

“Oh, let me guide you...”

“Oh no, you don’t have to go through the trouble. It’s right there.” Haruno declined the invitation with a grin, then speed-walked to the reception desk in front of the battle raver room. The manager stood agape, unable to do anything but see them off. He reached his arm out as if he wanted to say something.

If Touya was here, he would have expressed his thoughts loud and clear, for better or worse, Haruno thought.

When they entered the reception area for battle ravers, they were greeted with a long counter. Several workers sat at tables behind it, fighting off stacks of paperwork. Haruno was reminded of the time she went to a police station along with her older sister, who'd almost been victim to a molester. Her sister had gone a little too far in personally taking care of that molester.

Memories aside, a lady behind the counter noticed Haruno's group and called out to them with a smile. "Welcome. What kind of raver are you looking for today?"

"A demi-human raver," Haruno replied with a smile, but then the receptionist froze up. The workers inside also started stealing glances at Haruno's party and whispering among themselves. Apparently the manager wasn't the only one who treated demi-human ravers like criminals. That, or they were simply following the manager's policies.

"U-um, Lady Haruno..." Sera timidly tugged at Haruno's sleeve.

"It's alright," Haruno returned a smile.

"I'm afraid regular customers are not allowed to meet demi-human ravers..."

"My... I mean, another hero I am acquainted with employed a sand lizardman battle raver in Jupiter. He did not have a criminal background, of course." She had wanted to use another word, but had to settle with "acquainted" since the alternative wouldn't have been appropriate there. She apologized to Touya with all her heart.

"Um, well..."

"It's only the criminal ravers that regular customers can't employ, right? I'm just asking to see the normal demi-human ravers."

"...Understood."

She had wanted to confirm something with her request. She wanted to know if demi-humans were treated as criminals across the whole market, or if it was only the manager deeming it so. Not to mention how much of his bias against

demi-humans had influenced other people. Judging by the conversation just now, it looked like it was only the manager. The market staff tried to follow his policies, but they weren't terribly strict or stubborn about it.

"It will take some time, however..."

"Oh, are they not available right now? Since they're battle ravers, after all."

"Huh? Oh, yes, that's right!"

Haruno raised an eyebrow at the receptionist's reaction. She was flustered and had used Haruno's words as a cover-up.

"...Don't tell me you're treating innocent demi-humans the same way you do criminals?"

"O-of course not, we would never!"

"I see. In that case, we'll visit again tomorrow."

Sandra leaned forward as if she was about to say something, but Haruno held her back. She was suspicious too, of course. But they were still unprepared, so she decided to hold off for now.

The receptionist saw Haruno's party off, looking relieved. That was a naive reaction, though. Haruno's party quickly made their way back to Nartha's mansion. They planned to take a group of pilgrims and return to the market within the day instead of waiting until tomorrow. Their strategy was a little brute, but the staff might try to hide evidence if they had more time, so they decided to use the authority of the pilgrims of the Goddess of Light.

"U-um, Lady Haruno. Will this be alright?"

"Don't worry. We have reason to believe they're doing something unethical in the raver market." Haruno gave a firm reply to the doubt in the pilgrims' eyes.

They arrived at the raver market again after sundown. Many carriages were parked outside for the auction, which had seemingly started already, and they heard voices and saw light spilling from the windows.

Any destruction of evidence would take place after the market closed. If the auction was still going on, then they should still have time.

After hearing about the auction that night, Haruno purposely said that they'd come back tomorrow, making the staff believe that any evidence-concealing could be done overnight.

"Okay, let's start investigating." The manager would be notified of their presence, so it was now a battle against time.

The pilgrims used their authority to ask a guide where the criminal ravers were kept, and he answered honestly. They were shut inside a building in the back. Haruno's party quickly made their way there. The pilgrims were still hesitating, but Sandra and Lumis were the first to make their way inside, and the others soon followed.

Once they entered, they were met with five people who looked like staff members. They must have been startled and confused by the sudden intrusion. All of them stood still, looking agape. Haruno asked where the battle ravers were, and the man closest to them pointed a trembling hand at a staircase farther inside. So they were kept underground.

"There are jail cells underground, right? Where are the keys? Also, please give us the documents on the ravers being kept here."

"Th-that..." The man stammered, averting his eyes. Haruno concluded something from that.

"Rin."

"Got it. I'll need a few extra hands for this~"

Rin had been biding her time from the sidelines, but as soon as Haruno said her name, she called for a few other pilgrims and started the investigation. She wasn't very self-motivated, but could use her head when the need arose. She would get the job done fast.

They found the documents, which Haruno and Sera checked. There was one file for each raver, making for a total of five. A surprisingly low number. They were probably in high demand since people could push all the rigorous, tiring work on them. The five here had just been captured recently.

"...Siiigh," Haruno breathed a deep sigh after she confirmed something.

What kind of information was vital in a criminal raver's records? Several fit the bill, but the most important by far was their crime. If you had to choose between a robber and a murderer, for example, the former would pose much less of a risk.

The documents indeed mentioned each raver's crime. However, every single one had "bandit" written on them.

"All five of these criminal ravers have 'bandit' recorded for their crime—does that mean they were all captured as part of one gang?"

"Huh? No idea. The garrison brought them here, so I don't know the details..."

"How long ago was that?"

"Uhhh, I believe four... no, five days ago!" The man wore a confused expression, responding with his head tilted.

The pilgrims looked at each other and whispered among themselves. The workers became uneasy again, glancing at one another in response.

"We've found evidence... Sera, please explain."

"Y-yes... We are currently cooperating with the garrison to subjugate the monsters around Athenapolis. Thus, we have access to information on any incidents like that... but we have never seen reports on demi-human bandits appearing near the city. Of course, we have not heard of any being captured either."

Crimes and incidents were under the pilgrims' jurisdiction as well, so they immediately knew that something was wrong. Most of the travelers in this world armed themselves. There were barely any demi-humans in this city, so if someone saw a demi-human, they would automatically assume they were a traveler.

"So they were carrying weapons and got charged with banditry just because of that?"

"That would work as an excuse for the false accusation..."

Lumis and Sandra conversed. That was most likely the trick used to label the innocent demi-humans as criminal ravers.

“Rin, how many people do you need to gather the documents and get the innocent ravers to safety?”

“Ten... no, just five if we can tie these guys up.”

“Oh, let me stay behind. I’m used to talking to demi-humans.”

“Then five of you stay here, including Rin and Lumis. Everyone else, come with me!” Haruno exclaimed, then turned around and ran out not a moment later. Sera and Sandra followed behind in a fluster, bringing the rest of the pilgrims along with them.

Haruno laid out the situation in her mind as she ran. They probably had enough evidence to release the five innocent ravers already. But that didn’t mean they could save all the demi-humans who had been falsely convicted up until now, nor the ones who might be wrongly labeled as criminal ravers in the future.

She had delved into this demi-human raver situation as Haruno the Hero. They had already lit the fuse. They would have to find the perpetrator that same night.

Haruno ran past the raver market and stopped before the door to the manager’s room. He was the prime suspect, considering his contempt for demi-humans.

“M-Miss Hero!”

She was about to break in the door after finding that it was locked, but the manager showed up right then. He had likely rushed over as soon as he could step away from the auction. He was gasping for air.

Haruno smiled at his demeanor. *Looks like we were right in time,* she thought.

“Good timing. We found that innocents had been falsely convicted as criminal ravers and came to speak to you about that.”

“I-is that so! I would expect no less, Miss Hero! I’m impressed!” The manager sang his praises, but he sounded deliberate and disconcerted.

“Let us talk inside for now.”

“N-no need, we can do that right here!”

“That won’t do. This isn’t something we can talk about in the open.”

“...I understand.” Having grasped the situation, the manager unlocked his door. But Haruno suspected that he hadn’t given in quite yet. There was probably some more evidence hidden in his room. The manager had rushed here to conceal or dispose of it. He should have gone to the scene of the disturbance, the building out back, as soon as he’d been informed. But he came here instead, which meant some vital evidence must have been left in this room. And the fact that he stopped resisting and unlocked his door likely meant that he was hoping they wouldn’t be able to find that evidence.

Sera, Sandra, and several other pilgrims entered the manager’s room. It was extravagantly furnished. There was a bookshelf and a large painting along the farthest wall, and dark-colored desk in front of it. A table stood in the center of the room, with two long sofas on either side. The sofas seemed to be made of an expensive leather. There was a chalk-colored pedestal on the right wall, with flowers in a vase set on top of it. Three small paintings were lined up along the left wall.

“What a nice room.”

“Thank you.”

Haruno examined each of the three paintings on the left wall, then stood before the large painting on the farthest wall.

“Do you enjoy art?”

“Y-yes...” The manager replied as he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his sweat, fidgeting all the while. He didn’t want to be asked anything right now.

Then Haruno moved over to one item, turned around, and spoke to him nonchalantly, “It’s hidden here, isn’t it?”

“What?! How did you know?!” The manager put his hands over his mouth, realizing what he just blurted out, but it was too late. Haruno was standing before one of the paintings on the left wall, the one deepest into the room. She had guessed that this was where he was hiding something.

“Will you give me the key without trying to resist?”

“.....” The manager bit his lip in frustration, but didn’t move or say a word.

Haruno responded by placing her hand on the hilt of her sword, which prompted the manager to fumble a key out of his pocket and then drop it on the ground. Sandra picked the key up from off the ground, keeping an eye on the manager. She inspected the frame Haruno had picked out and realized that it was formed like a cover with a keyhole underneath. She unlocked the frame and it opened up like a door. There was a safe hidden inside the wall. The frame had acted as a hidden door that concealed the safe.

“What’s all this...?”

Inside was a bundle of documents along with several letters. They couldn’t tell what was inside without reading them all, but it was mostly likely concealed evidence and information regarding the manager’s self-protection.

Sandra opened her eyes wide at the discovery, and Sera tried to stay calm as she asked Haruno, “U-um, Lady Haruno?”

“What is it?”

“How did you know that the evidence was hidden here?”

“Good question... this is the only painting that looked cheap,” Haruno pointed at the still-life painting inside the frame-door, “You’d need to touch and move this every time you opened the safe, so it’d be easy to ruin the painting. I don’t think he wanted to place an expensive piece here.”

The manager dropped to the ground like a marionette whose string had snapped. Haruno had hit the bull’s-eye.

“...Honestly, it’s the same no matter where I go.” She stared at the manager, now tied up, and softly sighed. *You even used the same hiding spot,* she thought, and her father’s face that she wanted to forget came to mind. She had been able to risk the guess thanks to her ability to analyze works of art.

Haruno, Sera, and Sandra watched as the manager was dragged away, then sat themselves down on the sofa and started looking over the documents. They noticed that the letters had mostly been sent by the same person. They didn’t recognize the name, but the letters spelled out plans to protect the manager’s well-being and schemes against anyone who tried to pry into their illegal

activities. The sender was likely someone with a lot of political power—a member of the senate, for example.

This was most definitely proof of illegal activity, as well as a form of blackmail on the senator. As long as he had these letters, the manager would have been protected even if he got arrested. In fact, he might have been keeping the letters for exactly that purpose.

“.....” As they studied the rest of the letters, Sera started focusing immensely on a particular one, and her hands began shaking.

“Sera, did you find something?”

“R-read this...” Haruno scanned the letter she was handed, then let out a deep sigh. This letter was proof that the pastor in this city was involved in illegal dealings as well. Not just any cleric, but the pastor. One of the leaders of the temple.

The criminal ravers had a clerical spell called Oath Seal placed on them so that they wouldn’t disobey their owners. It was one thing for the spell to be cast on the innocent ravers who had been wrongly labeled as criminals, but the pastor who cast the spells not only knew the truth, but had also accepted bribes. A comrade of the temple of light had committed fraud. Of course Sera was angry.

“...Sandra, contact the temple. Have them seize this pastor and bring someone here to release the five victims from the Oath Seal.”

“U-understood.” Her voice was calm, but it had a tint of anger in it. This case wasn’t something she could just overlook like Athena’s takeover hundreds of years ago. Haruno was also silently seething in anger.

“Also, as a Hero of the Goddess, I demand the release of all victims of this case up until now.”

“Up until now...?”

“Everyone who has been falsely convicted as a criminal raver. Find every last one of them, release them of the Oath Seal, and free them. We can’t just leave them be, you realize?”

“...Yes, of course.”

“Bring them over here. There might have been more than one pastor involved.”

“Understood! I’ll take care of it!” Detecting Haruno’s anger and realizing that this was something that had to be done, Sandra stood up, took the matter into her own hands, and headed to the temple with several pilgrims in tow.

Haruno gave orders to Sera next.

“Sera, get in contact with the rest of the pilgrims. Make sure to secure the area where the ravers are staying, the documents, and the safe. Even if the capitol guards come, don’t hand anything over.”

The capitol guards were soldiers who maintained public order, investigated crimes, and arrested criminals. They were essentially the same as the police of modern Japan.

“Not even the capitol guards?”

“A member of the senate is involved in this. If you can confirm that none of the capitol guards are under their support, then I don’t mind. But the members of the senate are their superiors, aren’t they?”

“Yes, the capitol guards are under the command of the senate...” Sera looked troubled. She was bewildered that even the guards might be involved in this.

She was a little off, though. Haruno decided to give her a brief explanation.

“I don’t believe there are that many people under the senate member’s direct support. But once they find out that there’s been trouble at the raver marketplace, all of them will come rushing over here. We have to be on guard so that they don’t try to destroy any evidence.”

“I-I see...”

Not all of the capitol guards were involved, but the few who were would come running over. Sera understood the explanation.

Now that Sandra’s group had left, they placed two pilgrims outside the manager’s room to keep guard, and the rest in front of the building entrances until the capitol guards arrived.

Haruno and Sera continued looking over the documents inside the manager’s

room. They would give the information they gathered and all the evidence of illegal activity to the pilgrims, the senate, and the temple of light all at once. After that, they would leave rescuing all of the victims to the senate and the temple. The pilgrims had to be careful to not tread too deeply into a country's problems. They were right on the borderline right now.

Athenapolis had been taken over several hundred years ago. It was no longer a relevant story. *In that case,* Haruno wondered, *how will the current citizens of Athena react? How will they treat the demi-humans who had fallen victim?*

The capitol guards arrived less than an hour later. They were angry that the pilgrims had secured all the entrances to the building. However, the tables turned less than another hour later when a pilgrim seized one of the guards and found a fire-lighting device in his pocket. After that, the guards followed all of the pilgrims' orders with embarrassed expressions on their faces.

Later, Sandra returned to the marketplace after successfully tracking down the guilty pastor. The temple told her they would look into the incident themselves, but she asked them to send a cleric who could release the Oath Seal just as Haruno instructed.

However, that cleric did not arrive until the next morning. One unmotivated-looking cleric arrived in front of them, dragging his feet.

"Please leave," Haruno told him with a smile as soon as he arrived.

"Huh?" The cleric looked bewildered.

"I said, please leave."

"Wha... that's no attitude to throw at a follower of the Goddess of Light! I'm not ignoring what you just said, even if you're a hero!"

"I called for a follower of the Goddess of Light to rescue victims from harm's way! And what are you doing, showing up now?! If you don't care, then please leave! I'll be raising an objection with the temple about this!!" Haruno raised her voice back at the cleric. He realized he was in an inferior position, hung his head dejectedly, and hurried away.

The pilgrims who had been watching from behind started seeing Haruno in a slightly frightened light. Haruno felt the fear from behind her and sighed softly.

Her party had invaded the raver market and captured the manager before the end of the day last night. Since the pastor had been involved in the crime, Haruno had given the temple an opportunity to redeem themselves by requesting that they send out a cleric. But this was the result. They had given such low priority to helping victims of injustice, which went completely against the teachings of the Goddess of Light. She at least wanted them to come running over like the capitol guards had.

The cleric was so late that Sera had actually managed to undo the Oath Seal herself long ago. They had no need for a cleric anymore. The spell was undone in the middle of the night, so they let the victims sleep after that.

In addition, the capitol guards were now completely under the control of the pilgrims. They had no means to oppose, now that everyone knew about the lackey's attempt to destroy evidence. They had taken the opportunity to redeem themselves by capturing another staff member who had likely been involved in the crime as well.

Soon after Haruno drove the cleric away, word came in that the demi-humans had woken up. Haruno, Sera, Lumis, and Rin decided to meet them together in the manager's room, which had the nicest sofa. They wanted the ever-reliable Sandra to be there as well, but she was busy giving orders outside.

Sera had released the victims from the Oath Seal by herself, so Haruno had yet to actually meet the demi-humans. She hadn't asked what kind they were either, so she was looking forward to meeting them now.

"Oh, Lady Haruno. We need to prepare a seat for the one with a tail."

"Hmm, I believe there were some in the reception room. Let's bring one over."

They brought over a backless chair according to Lumis' suggestion. She really was the type to look out for others, demi-human or not.

They also prepared tea and tea cakes, then a pilgrim guided four of the demi-humans to the manager's room.

"Oh? What about the fifth one?"

"The last one is still sleeping... Also, these four had been traveling together

and said they wouldn't talk unless all of them were together."

So the demi-humans didn't trust them yet. It was understandable, considering how they had been captured before. However, there were four of Haruno's group inside the room and another three right outside. Even if the demi-humans were planning something, there was no need to be too wary of them.

"I understand. Please come inside," Haruno said with a smile and invited the four of them inside the room.

The first one to come in was a large man about two stutos tall and plenty wide as well. The door was too small for him to pass through normally, so he had to duck to get inside.

"So you're the Hero of the Goddess, huh... I'm this party's leader, Dylan," said the man with the face of a bear. He essentially looked like a bear wearing human clothing. He had a shirt and pants on, but they looked too tight on him. Maybe they had taken away his old clothes and forced him to wear those. He tried to give Haruno a sharp and intimidating stare, but she brushed it off without flinching.

According to him, he was a callisto, a type of bear demi-human. An average adult male of his species was about the same size as him.

The lycaon in Touya's party looked human besides her ears and tail, but ketolts had the face and body of a cat. Callistos were closer to ketolts, in that sense.

"My name is Haruno. Please have a seat."

"...Well, I'm grateful you saved me." Dylan gave a short nod and sat himself on the sofa. He looked fierce, but not like he was angry at all. That being said, he wasn't creating a friendly atmosphere either.

"Oh, let me take this backless chair." The next man to come in moved quickly and helped himself to the seat next to Dylan. He was wagging his long, thin tail back and forth.

This man had the face of a lizard. He was a lizardman like Rulitora and was wearing nothing but a waist apron. His body was covered in small green scales, and he was very slender compared to Rulitora. He looked shorter than Haruno,

partially because he kept his body bent forward. Rulitora had an astonishingly muscular physique, so it felt fitting to say that this man was more “lizard-like.”

“What, something on my face? Oh, the name’s Spar.” Spar cocked his head as Haruno’s party kept staring at him.

“Oh no, I was just thinking that I have a friend who is also a lizardman. But you look quite, um, different from him.”

“That’s normal enough... Oh, is your friend from the desert? I’m from the marsh.”

“Yes, he’s a sand lizardman with yellow scales.”

“No wonder. Those guys are huge!” Spar said, then opened his mouth wide and laughed. He seemed like a cheery guy.

On that note, his species was commonly referred to as marsh lizardmen.

And then the next guest... couldn’t enter the room. The third in line was actually a giant coming from a race called “cyclops.” She was taller than Dylan was and couldn’t get through the door with her huge body even when crawling on all fours.

“Can’t get iiiin!” she lamented, still on her hands and knees, with an unexpectedly cute voice.

Haruno exited the room to take a look and found a large crouching body colored blue. The staff had probably not been able to find any suitable clothes for her and instead made her a makeshift outfit using fur pelts. She may have been large, but didn’t seem to have a particularly muscular build. She looked about three stutos tall. According to the guide, she couldn’t stand up straight inside the building and had crawled all the way here.

The giant slowly raised her head until Haruno was met with the face of a young girl. Size aside, she didn’t look much different from a normal human. She carried out each and every action slowly, and Haruno felt an almost leisurely aura about her. She had ruffled hair a shade of blue darker than her skin down to her shoulders, and a single short horn growing from her forehead.

“Hmmm?” The giant’s large red eye peered at Haruno. The eye was round

and cute, almost like a cat's. Only her left eye was visible at the moment, as her possibly injured right eye was covered by an eyepatch.

"How did she get inside the jailhouse, anyway?"

"Well, there's a cage for big monsters behind the building for criminal ravers..."

So she wasn't able to enter the jailhouse, but could they not have found another way to keep her? Haruno knitted her eyebrows at the sloppy way the market staff had treated her.

"Um, so what's your name?" Haruno asked gently, tilting her head and forming a smile as best she could. She had unintentionally started treating the giant like a young child. Something about the giant girl's cozy aura was tempting her to act that way.

"Ummm... my name's Prae."

"Prae, is it? My name is Haruno. It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Harunooo~"

She couldn't tell how old the giant was, but she guessed she was around the same age as Sera. There was a large gap between her appearance and tone of voice, not to mention the aura that made others want to take care of her. Such was this girl called Prae.

"You're not scared of Prae?" Haruno turned around at the voice behind her to find the fourth guest, a woman.

"I don't think she's scary or anything."

"You're a strange one, for a hero," the woman laughed. She had long silver hair and white skin, and though she wasn't as tall as Prae, she was still impressively tall relative to human women. She was quite the beauty, with ashen eyes that felt like they'd suck you in if you stared long enough. Haruno couldn't tell how old she was, but she looked like the personification of the word "bewitching." She was wearing a cloak, but it looked like all she had on underneath was underwear. She had probably also gotten her clothes taken away like the others. No reports had come in of the pilgrims finding any

clothing, so they must have already been sold or thrown away.

“My comrade is also a Hero of the Goddess and has a sand lizardman and a lycaon in his party.” She wasn’t going to mention the Goddess of Darkness, Rakti, of course.

“What about you?”

“It doesn’t bother me at all. As long as we can speak the same language.”

“I see... Okay, let’s chat then. Prae, make sure to listen from outside the room.”

“Okaaay~” After she gave the order to Prae, she reached a hand out to Haruno.

“I’m Maha Melis. Just call me Melis.”

“My name is Haruno.” Haruno grasped her hand and shook it. It was awfully cold. “Um, then getting right to it, do you mind if I ask you a question?”

“Oh my, for me? Don’t tell me it’s my bra size... Oh, yours look a little bigger. But if you want my age, little miss, I’m afraid you won’t be getting that information right now~”

Melis’ expression had gone dark for a moment after looking at Haruno’s chest, but she was nothing to be scoffed at herself. In contrast to Melis’ joking attitude, Haruno asked her question with a serious tone of voice.

“Please tell me how old Prae is. We started talking to her as if she was a child, but I’m not aware of how giants age.”

“...She’s probably older than you are. Even if we converted that into human years,” Melis answered dejectedly, still holding on to Haruno’s hand.

Sera and the others were shocked at the answer. Prae had been replying to them almost like an infant, but her body was that of an adult woman’s. It was understandable that she was older than Haruno, in one sense.

“But as you can see, this is what she’s like on the inside. We’d be happy if you kept treating her the same way you just did.”

“Oh, yes, of course we can.” Prae didn’t seem like a bad girl, and Haruno was

more than willing to accept that request. Melis smiled amicably in response, and Prae started grinning as well.

“Alright, let’s continue this inside the room. You didn’t call us all over just to ask how old Prae is, I assume?”

“Of course. Please come inside then.”

Haruno escorted Melis inside the manager’s room. There was something she absolutely had to ask them—whether or not they knew anything about the winged demi-humans.

“Oh...” Haruno realized something as soon as Melis stepped inside the room in front of her. Melis had told her her name, but nothing about what race she was.

“What’s wrong?”

“...N-no, it’s nothing.”

The woman in front of her had no features that would identify her as demi-human at all. Maybe she had a demi-human party, but was human herself. Or even if she was a demi-human, maybe there were personal reasons why she couldn’t reveal that information. Haruno ran through her thoughts and decided to hold off on asking for now.

On one side of the room was Dylan the callisto, Spar the marsh lizardman, and the silver-haired woman of unknown race, Melis. On the other side was Haruno, Sera, Lumis, and Rin. Prae the cyclops was peering into the room from the hallway.

The seven of them sat around the table and talked, but unfortunately it was not a topic they could chitchat lightheartedly about over tea. Haruno could tell that even the cheerful Spar was keeping a close eye on them.

They had been falsely convicted and denounced as criminal ravers, so it’d be difficult for them to trust Haruno’s party all of a sudden. Though they were answering all of Haruno’s questions such as detailing how they’d gotten caught, so that was a positive sign.

On that note, Dylan, Spar, and Melis had been captured after they had gotten

drunk and passed out. Prae didn't resist at the time since the other three had already been seized. The Oath Seal had already been cast on them before they regained consciousness, so they couldn't escape. They had let their guard down.

The Oath Seal was a spell that could only be used once you cleared several requirements, but the fact that the caster had been cleared implied just how far up the chain of command this case had gone.

"Do you know anything about winged demi-humans?" Haruno wanted to become friends with the group first, but this wasn't a situation where they could take time getting to know each other before asking questions, so she cut right to the chase.

"Winged? I can name a few off the top of my head." Dylan crossed his furry arms and answered with his eyes shut.

"I heard that they lived here long ago."

"In Athena? I've never heard about that..." Spar had a confused expression on his face as he looked between Haruno and Dylan.

Not many people would know of anything that occurred 300 years ago. The temples and old families with record books were the only groups keeping track of historical events, but Athena's past had been covered up by both the temple of light and the sacred family.

"...When did they last live here?" Melis inquired. She stared at Haruno with her ashen eyes, as if she was testing her.

From the outside she looks elegant and friendly, but she must be the toughest to handle, Haruno thought. Though she was only wearing underwear under that cloak and Haruno had a clear view from how she was sitting.

"I heard it was about 300 years ago."

"...I see." Haruno answered with an unflinching expression, but Melis' smile now seemed like it had a hint of another emotion mixed in. Only for a moment though, and she went back to looking serious after that.

Dylan read the change in atmosphere, opened one eye, and asked Melis,

“Melis, do you know something?”

“...I’d heard that those demi-humans had lived here a long time ago, but I hadn’t heard where they might be living now.”

“I see...” Dylan was satisfied with that answer, but Haruno couldn’t let this lead go. She couldn’t just stop now.

“Um, do you know the name of that race?”

“...What do you plan on doing once you find out?”

“I would like to go and meet them.”

“And why do you want to meet them? Would you mind telling me the reason?”

“I could, but you might regret hearing it afterwards.”

“I won’t answer your question if you won’t answer mine.”

“.....”

“.....”

The two of them stared at each other silently. Spar started looking a little scared, while Rin pursed her lips.

Melis’ response was weighing on Haruno’s mind. She was deliberating how much she should tell Melis about what they knew.

“Looks like there’s no other choice... please lend me your ear.” Haruno said with a small sigh. Melis propped her right hand on the table, leaned forward, and brushed her hair aside with her left hand to reveal her ear. Haruno whispered to her the details of how Athenapolis’ temple of wind might be a fake one, and the real one might be among the winged demi-humans. She didn’t mention anything about Hadesopolis for the time being.

The effect was immediate. Melis opened her eyes wide, sat herself back down on the sofa, and looked dumbfounded.

It was the expected reaction. Even if the Goddess of Wind was a minor sect, Haruno had claimed that the head temple in Athenapolis might have been a fake one all this time. Thoughts must have been spiraling in her head right then.

Haruno didn't apologize, though. She couldn't relate to some of the more emotional aspects, but this paled in comparison to how Sera and the others had reacted when they first found out.

"...Where did you find this information?" "It's researchable up to a point. After that, just reasoning." Following the trail of information would eventually lead you to the Goddess of Darkness, but she couldn't say that right now.

Melis wore an expression of shock and some other emotion as she stared silently at Haruno, while the others all looked on nervously at the two of them. The other emotion was most likely fear. When Haruno realized that, she sighed, thinking, *Am I really that scary?* She wasn't like this because she wanted to be. It was the result of her grandfather's and father's training.

Prae was the only one who couldn't tell what was going on and looked at Haruno with her head titled. Haruno's heart was warmed a little by that and she returned Prae a smile.

"...Glaupis." After another bout of silence, Melis finally wrung that word out of her mouth.

"Glaupis, you said?"

"Yes, they were the winged demi-humans who lived in Athena about 300 years ago. I said this before, but I don't know what became of them after they fled from this land."

Haruno felt like Melis was still hiding something with her reply. Glaupis didn't seem like a fake name, though.

"I'll give you one more piece of information about the glaupis."

"What's that?"

"The fifth one who's still sleeping has wings, but she is not a glaupis."

"...I'll keep that in mind." Haruno had been thinking of a way to get Melis to reveal more information, but Melis gave her a piece of mostly useless information herself as a defensive measure. Haruno's group might have tried to investigate the last demi-human too much just for having wings. She might have been protecting the demi-human from that as well by giving them a warning.

Melis finished talking and gave a calm smile, returning to her casual attitude from before. Haruno honestly preferred that to being glared at and feared.

It didn't seem like they could get any more information about the winged demi-humans now, so they started talking about the four's plans from here on instead. The three of them originally had their own goals and started traveling. At first, it was just Dylan and Spar. Along the way they invited Melis, since larger groups were safer when traveling through human cities, and the three of them traveled together from that point on.

"What about Prae?"

"She just popped up one day."

"Eheheh~" Prae gave a silly laugh from the opposite side of the door.

The three of them had been camping in the forest one night when Prae sluggishly appeared before them. They thought she was an enemy at first, but soon realized she wouldn't harm a fly. It didn't seem like she had any comrades around at the time, so they decided to take her along with them.

After listening to the story, Sera asked Melis, "Um, so when you said the four of you had to be together, did that mean...?"

"...You understand now?"

Sera, Lumis, and Rin all nodded. Haruno figured it out as well. The three of them were all worried about Prae and didn't want to leave her alone.

"Yes, I get it now. Next, please tell us what was stolen from you. We most likely won't be able to get them back, but we'll have the senate and the temple of light return the value of everything to you twofold."

"...Should we really be accepting that much?" Dylan asked, keeping only one eye open still. His tone of voice was dubious. He was probably wondering if they would really compensate demi-humans that generously.

"Honestly, I think it barely makes up for what you've been through. For the people who had already been made to work as criminal ravers, we're also planning to remunerate them for all their work done as innocent ravers."

"Wow, pretty extreme!"

“What part of that is extreme? If we don’t do at least this much, then I don’t think those people have a right to call themselves followers of the Goddess of Light or talk about righteousness.”

Spar shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, and then Haruno objected to his frivolous attitude.

“The same goes for the senate, too. Since the raver market is under the jurisdiction of the senate, we’ll have them all take responsibility and compensate everyone. Even if it was just one person who carried out the crime, I bet many of them took bribes to overlook what was happening.”

Haruno thought that even *that* wasn’t enough to make up for this incident. This was probably a difference in philosophy between them and Haruno, who had grown up in different worlds.

“...Yeah, this girl is pretty extreme.” Spar said in exasperation, but for Haruno that was a very unwanted judgment on her character.

After that, they looked into the prices for all the items stolen from them and returned double the amount in coin. One silver lining they discovered after all this was how all of the goods they carried happened to be common market items.

They had a destination to reach, so they wanted to be released quickly. Haruno’s party also wanted the record of negotiating successfully with them, so their wishes were right in line. The senate and temple of light would have a harder time now if they ever wanted to complain.

Word came in that the fifth victim had woken up, which marked the end of the conversation with the group of four. They let pilgrims handle the rest and went to see the fifth victim.

When Dylan’s group left the room, Haruno heard a voice asking, “Hey hey, what were you guys talking about?” It sounded like Prae hadn’t understood their conversation with Haruno.

When they left the room, they were greeted by a waving Prae, who was listening to an explanation, still on all fours. Haruno felt warmer looking at her

and returned the wave. She felt better now thanks to Prae.

The group of five walked over to the room the last demi-human had been resting in, but they couldn't find any sign of her.

"Huh? She responded when we knocked just now, right?"

"She did... I wonder where she went?"

They had knocked and heard a faint, though audible reply, and entered the room after that. Rin cocked her head, since she had definitely heard the reply as well.

The room was plainly furnished, with two sets of bunk beds. There was a table with something covered in cloth on it and four chairs. Four drawers lined the inner wall.

They had heard the demi-human's voice just now, so she should have been in the room, but they saw no one. All of the beds were made, so she wouldn't have been hiding under the sheets. Haruno looked around the room, thinking that she would check under the beds and inside the drawers first.

"Um, Lady Haruno..."

"Did you find her, Lumis?"

"Not exactly. Or rather, I put her there in the first place. Look, she's right here."

"Huh?"

Lumis was pointing at the object covered in cloth on the table. Haruno put her ear close to it and could hear a faint voice. She nervously lifted the cloth up to reveal a birdcage underneath, then met eyes with the person inside.

"Huuh?!" She jumped back in surprise and took the rest of the cloth with her to reveal the entirety of the birdcage. It was large and made of brass.

"So you're the fifth...?"

A young girl not even half a stuto tall was sitting inside. She had ruffled black hair, sharp-looking eyes, and two opal horns growing from her forehead. Looking closely, you could also see that the ears peeking out from behind her

hair were slightly tapered. The black tail growing from her behind was hairless and a little wider at the tip. She had a pair of wings on her back, but they weren't the wings of a bird—rather, the black wings of a bat. Like Melis and Prae, she was only wearing a piece of cloth draped over her body.

So being a winged demi-human doesn't necessarily mean you're a bird demi-human, Haruno realized. And of course, if Melis was to be trusted, she wasn't of the glaupis race either.

The birdcage had been covered because the curtains in this room were thin and kept the room bright even when they were closed, so Lumis had used the cloth to let her rest well.

"Ummm... what's your name? And your race too, if you don't mind."

"...Daisy, I'm an imp," she replied, but looked sullen and kept her head turned away from them. She was physically small, but seemed more mature than Prae.

Though they might not have looked too threatening, imps were a fully-fledged race of demons. They could use magic to some extent, but nothing especially powerful. They were barely seen in human territory, and the seldom times they did show up, they'd be up to no good. The worst they could do was play some childish prank though, so people never went after them. Since Haruno had learned that demons were just demi-humans, she wanted to get to know this girl without any prejudice.

"Are you feeling alright? You should already have been released from the Oath Seal," Sera brought her face closer and asked. Daisy started moving her limbs and checking her body here and there.

"It's true!" Realizing that her body was free, Daisy started hopping up and down inside the birdcage in joy. She had been falsely convicted too, so of course she was happy.

"That fuckin' geezer! I hadn't even done anything yet, all I did was sneak in and he locked me in here for no reason! Idiot! Jackass!!"

...Presumed falsely convicted, at least.

When they asked Daisy for more details, they learned a few strange things. She had snuck inside a mansion in Athenapolis out of curiosity, but she'd found

a group of men talking in private inside. The only reason she'd snuck inside was because she wanted to make some mischief.

"So this would be a case of... trespassing?"

"Tres...? No, I was thinking she'd be charged with burglary."

Though she was innocent because she hadn't done anything yet, Sera noted.

"Hmm? This is weird." Rin cocked her head as she looked over Daisy's documents.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, just that it says she was charged with banditry here. Wouldn't saying she was a burglar have worked here?"

"...Maybe they didn't want people to know?"

"Know what?"

"That she had been captured within the city."

"...Oh, I get it."

They didn't want to make public the fact she snuck into this mansion. Almost all criminal ravers were forced to do incredibly taxing manual labor. The girl wouldn't have been too useful in that regard, since she just barely reached half a stuto tall with her tail included. The main goal here had been to keep her mouth shut. They learned where the mansion was from Daisy, and Haruno gathered the information to report to the capitol guards.

"Daisy, did they take anything from you when you were caught?"

"Hm? Not really. Just my clothes."

"Did you have anywhere you needed to go, then? Were you traveling with a destination in mind?"

"Not reallyyy." Daisy sat cross-legged inside the birdcage and answered Sera's questions. She had apparently never had a destination and would travel wherever her whims took her.

Haruno's party was a little troubled by this. It'd be easy enough to release her here, but Athenapolis would be especially on guard for a while until this fiasco

was taken care of. If she were to go somewhere and cause trouble again, she might get arrested and legitimately become a criminal raver this time. The best decision would be to keep her under Haruno's care for the time being. Until they left the city, at the very least.

"Daisy, we'd like to speak with you a bit more. Would you mind coming to the house we're staying at?"

"...Is there tasty food involved?"

"We can buy something on our way back. Would you like some fruit?"

"Okay! I'm all up for that!" Daisy readily agreed to tag along. They opened the door to the birdcage, and then she floated out and perched herself on Haruno's shoulder. After being with a giant almost twice as tall as her just earlier, she was almost overwhelmed by the sight of a little, doll-like girl sitting on her shoulder.

"...Oh," Haruno remembered something while she marveled at Daisy, "...um, Sera? I want to check just in case, but would it be bad for a Hero of the Goddess to be seen with an imp...?"

"Well, when it comes to outward appearances..." Sera started getting evasive with her answer. There was nothing they could do in this situation, since she was a demon.

"Daisy, would you mind staying in the birdcage until we leave Athenapolis?"

"I'm fine with it as long as you carry me, but don't sway me around, 'kay?"

"I'll be careful." Haruno picked the birdcage up with both hands, being careful to keep it from swaying. She would let Daisy pick out what she wanted to eat when they bought fruit on the way home.

A team of inspectors arrived soon after that, and the pilgrims handed the investigation over to them and pulled themselves out. The inspectors were a group that monitored senators and capitol guards to make sure they were doing their job correctly, then conducted investigations whenever something went wrong.

Haruno's group pulled themselves out of the investigation like they were

supposed to, but not before making copies of all of the documents to bring home. They made sure the copies contained no errors, with Sera the light cleric and an inspector serving as witnesses. Now they were assured that the inspectors wouldn't try to cover anything up, either.

Next, they calculated the losses for Daisy and paid her back double. Haruno used her title as a Hero of the Goddess to request proper remuneration for all the people already working on the case. The inspector she spoke to pursed his lips, but he didn't want the investigation to stay in Haruno's hands, either.

"What's that birdcage for?"

"This is the imp who was falsely convicted of banditry. We're making sure she doesn't cause any more trouble, so we're keeping her for now until we leave the city."

"Uh-huh..." The inspector seemed like he wanted to say something more, but kept his mouth shut.

They didn't want to be subject to more questions, so Haruno's party quickly departed from the raver market.

"Oh, Harunooo~"

"Prae?!"

For some reason, Prae greeted them as soon as they stepped outside. She slowly waved at them as she sat, hugging her knees, surrounded by the pilgrims who had left just earlier.

"Did something happen, Prae?" Haruno ran over to her and asked in as gentle of a voice as she could muster. She couldn't help but talk in that tone of voice around her.

The three others in her party were nowhere to be seen. Where had they gone off to?

"Ummm, y'know, I'm gonna be going with you, Haruno~"

"...What?" Haruno was taken aback. Prae noticed Daisy in the birdcage in the meantime, then drew her face close.

"What's thiiis? So cuuute~♪"

“Whoa, you’re huge! Hold on, don’t come any closer!”

Daisy was startled by the giant face. The size difference between them couldn’t just be described as adult versus child.

Haruno, still stunned, looked over at Sera, who had been waiting with Prae outside. She reluctantly handed a letter to Haruno. It was from Melis. She dubiously opened the letter. The letter said, “Prae said she’s going to stay with you, so we’ll be leaving her here. Please get along,” in neat handwriting.

“...What?” The letter didn’t help Haruno understand the situation one bit. They’d said she popped up out of nowhere one day and they took her along because she had no companions, but that didn’t mean they would also leave her at the drop of a hat. Especially since they all seemed to adore her. But in reality, all three of them were already gone.

“So um, why did you want to stay with me?”

“Because I want tooo~”

“Uh, I see...”

She was happy that Prae had gotten so attached to her, but that response didn’t make for a good reason. But since the rest of her party had left, and they couldn’t just leave her be, they had no choice but to take her in just as they had with Daisy.

“U-ummm, let’s be friends.”

“Friieennds... Sera, was it?”

“Yes, that’s me. It’s nice to see you again, Prae.” Sera greeted her with a smile. She had been caught off guard, but didn’t seem to object to letting Prae stay. She also couldn’t abandon someone who acted like such a young child.

In Haruno’s case, she didn’t mind demi-humans and had no objections to bringing such a nice girl into her party. In fact, she was overjoyed about it. She still didn’t know why Prae wanted to come along with them, but they’d all be heading back to Nartha’s residence for now.

“Hey hey, Harunooo~”

“What is it, Prae?”

“Um, ummm, I wanna go somewhere with you~”

“With me? Where would you like to go?”

Somewhere Prae wanted to go, huh? The first possibility Haruno thought of was the fruit shop they were taking Daisy to. Next was a pretty place like a flower garden. However, her answer came completely out of left field.

“She’s calling for you, Haruno.”

“Calling for me...? Who is?”

“The Goddess of Wind~”

“.....What?” Haruno said softly, blinking her eyes several times.

Haruno’s party bought their fruit and returned to Nartha’s mansion soon after that. Daisy was let out of the birdcage as soon as they stepped outside Athenapolis, but either because she was scared of Prae or because she was wary of any followers of the Goddess of Light, she stayed perched on Haruno’s shoulder the entire way. Since they had captured her to keep her mouth shut, there was a chance people were still targeting her. Haruno felt that they’d be safest by keeping Daisy under their care for now.

Prae couldn’t enter the house, so they went to the garden to hear her out. Sera went inside the house by herself to fill Nartha in on everything, as well as get in touch with Touya.

Almost everyone kept their distance from Prae, who was larger than the ordinary monsters in the area. None of them knew how to interact with her. Lumis was the only one who would act naturally around her. Apparently her hometown was one where humans and demi-humans lived in harmony, and many of her friends were demi-humans. She had volunteered to look after the captured demi-humans back in the raver market because she personally couldn’t leave the victims be.

Lumis gallantly proclaimed that she would go hunt for Prae’s dinner and took Sandra and Rin along. Haruno was the only one left now. She first decided to ask what Prae had meant by the Goddess of Wind calling for her.

“Ummm... I dunnooo~”

Her goal was to bring Haruno to the Goddess of Wind. Prae had been instructed to follow along with a party of three camping in the forest, but knew nothing about why the Goddess would be calling for her. It all sounded rather frivolous, but she had actually managed to meet Haruno that way.

“S-so where should I go to meet the Goddess of Wind?”

“Ummm, Thebai!”

“Thebai?”

“Isn’t that the name of a forest? I don’t remember where it is, though.”

Haruno had never heard the name before, but Daisy supplied her with the information while perched over Haruno’s shoulder.

“So the Goddess of Wind is in this forest called Thebai?”

“That’s right~”

“Which means... the glaupis are there, too?”

“They are~”

So it seemed like the winged demi-humans, glaupis, fled to the forest called Thebai after they left Athenapolis, and were now living with the cyclops. They asked Nartha for the exact location of the forest later.

The current map of the continent was laid out as such:

In the middle of the continent was Jupiteropolis, where Haruno was first summoned. A straight road leading west took you to Athenapolis. South of Jupiteropolis was the void region, which Hadesopolis lay in the center of. Going west from Hadesopolis would take you to the country of agriculture, Ceresopolis. The four city-states formed a slightly jagged quadrilateral between them. Hephaestusopolis, where Touya was currently located, was on the eastern side of the void.

Thebai forest was located right in between Athena and Ceres. The forest sprawled westward off the road connecting the two cities.

“Are you going?” Daisy peered at Haruno from her shoulder and asked. Haruno responded with a warm smile and a nod. That was the original plan, after all. Now that she knew where the glaupis were, she had to go.

“Will you come with me, Daisy?”

“I wonder...” She sat cross-legged hovering in the air, but didn’t seem too keen on the idea.

“We’re going to gather everyone together and talk about it tonight, so you can think about it after that. We’ll need time to prepare, too.”

“Prepare?”

“You can’t go traveling in that outfit, right?”

“Ah...”

Daisy was still wearing her single piece of cloth, looking as if she had just stepped out of the bath.

“Please use my handkerchiefs for the time being. The cloth you’re wearing is dirty now.”

“Thanks, I’ll take you up on that.” Daisy picked out a big handkerchief to wrap around her body, then hopped around in joy. She had folded the handkerchief in half so that one edge lined up right over the other to create two rows of lace. Imps typically paid no mind to fashion, so this was the first time she had worn something so stylish. As Haruno watched Daisy dance around in the air, her wings flapping, Sera returned, having finished her duties. They decided to talk about what to do from here on.

“I exchanged messages with Sir Touya, and he said he didn’t mind if we revealed everything besides the fact that *she’s* staying with them right now.”

“...Wouldn’t that cause a lot of trouble for Touya?”

“He said that it’d be worse to keep everyone we’re staying with in the dark...”

In other words, it was safest to reveal all the information now, rather than wait until a troublesome situation popped up or having the information be leaked before having a chance to talk about it. It might worsen the relationship between the pilgrims and her, but nothing terrible would happen as a result of

that. Haruno thought about it and decided that Touya was making the right suggestion. Her face grew red after thinking about how Touya kept looking out for her all this time, which Daisy keenly noticed and started poking her cheek about.

“Haruno, you’re red~ Hey, Sera. Who’s this Touya guy?”

“He’s another Hero of the Goddess, and also Haruno’s lover!”

“Uh-huuuh... and here I thought you were just boring and stiff. Not bad...”

“Don’t say that with that grin on your face, Sera! Didn’t you end up promising him to bathe together, too?!”

“Th-that’s...!”

“Oh, now Sera’s red too.”

Daisy flew from Haruno’s shoulder to Sera’s head, lightly tapping her atop her soft hair. The two of them were just teasing fodder for Daisy right now.

“L-let’s stop talking about that. We need to discuss what to do tonight!”

“You’re right...”

“Pft, you guys are no fun.”

“This is important!” Haruno said, then took Daisy from Sera’s head and squeezed her tightly into her chest. Daisy looked a little uncomfortable, but her wings were trapped right now and she couldn’t escape.

“Loosen up a little. Can’t breathe.”

“Oh, sorry...” Haruno loosened her grip and Daisy dug her face out of her chest, gasping for air. She had been more than a little uncomfortable.

That aside, if Haruno wanted to start traveling to the temple of the Goddess of Wind, they had to figure out what to do with the group of pilgrims. Just as Touya said, she would have to explain what they knew to everyone. The truth behind the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord.

“In my case... I believe going along with you, Lady Haruno, falls in line with the wishes of the Goddess of Light. But I also think it might go against the will of the temple.” Sera spoke in a serious tone, but her expression started to look a little

solemn.

“To be honest, I think the chances of the pilgrims coming along with us is low...”

“I thought those girls all chose to follow the Goddess of Light rather than living a secure life in the temple, am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right. But that’s where the problem lies.”

“What do you mean?”

Haruno and Daisy both cocked their heads, and Sera started speaking meekly. “It’d been a slight issue for Sir Touya to start collecting blessings from other goddesses, but in this case, you’re trying to meet directly with the Goddess of Wind...”

“...I understand now.”

They were acting under the official title of Heroes of the Temple of the Goddess of Light, and it might cause a problem if they were to proactively act for the sake of other goddesses.

“So in that case, wouldn’t it be a problem to have Sera come along?” Daisy asked with furrowed brows.

“I’m not a pilgrim, so I can act on my own accord. There’s nothing wrong with me cooperating with someone who’s not a follower of the Goddess of Light.”

“Mhmm...” Daisy leaned back on Haruno’s chest after hearing the answer, looking disinterested. Imps were a race of demons, so they probably weren’t very interested in the no-nonsense clerics of light.

In any case, traveling wouldn’t be an issue for Sera. Haruno believed in her. The problem lay with the group of pilgrims. If traveling to meet the Goddess of Wind would be a problem, then how would the girls react? Haruno and Sera discussed all the possible reactions they could think of and how they would deal with them. Daisy took a jab at them once in a while, too.

They lit a bonfire that night and gathered all the pilgrims into the garden. There, Haruno explained everything Touya had discovered in Hadesopolis and

everything she had discovered in Athenapolis.

The existence of the city of Hadesopolis in the void, as well as the sixth goddess, the Goddess of Darkness.

How the first sacred king sealed the Goddess of Darkness on accident, which created the void, and then how all of those events had been concealed.

How the demon lord was actually summoned from their world at the time.

How the Goddess of Darkness ruled over demi-humans, and that demons were just a type of demi-human.

How during the 500 years the Goddess of Darkness had been sealed, all the demi-human nations had been taken over.

How Athenapolis was one of them, and how the temple of light had a hand in it.

How the temple of wind in Athenapolis was a dummy.

How much of this information had been divulged by the Goddess of Darkness after her seal had been lifted.

How they had retrieved a grave marker, the ace up the first sacred king's sleeve to defeat the demon lord—and how they had gotten a ketolt craftsman to confirm it was the real deal.

She explained everything besides the fact that the Goddess of Darkness was with Touya right now, and the demon lord's true identity. She made the explanation more convincing by revealing that Touya had heard the voices of the goddesses, and that the Goddess of Darkness was being kept safe at the moment.

It was a difficult story to believe right off the bat, but the grave marker served as proof. It was the final weapon used in the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord, left embedded in the ground. It wouldn't be hard to believe that once you factored a hero summoned by the Goddess of Light into that equation, some crazy miracle might have occurred. There were some tough points to get through, but she emphasized that it was the temple of the past who had made those mistakes, and she wasn't accusing anyone of the current

temple. She hoped that that would help open some of their minds.

Everyone was dumbfounded and speechless. Even Daisy's eyes were wide open. The only one smiling was Prae, but that was likely just because the speech had been too difficult for her to understand.

Sera was next to speak. She said that shunning demi-humans was not part of the Goddess of Light's teachings and that the temple's past actions went against the Goddess' ideas of justice and morality. Hearing a cleric condemning the temple was the final straw that got everyone in an uproar, and the commotion reached its peak.

It was now Haruno's turn.

"I intend to take up the Goddess of Wind's invitation and set out to travel soon. I won't ask any of you to come along with me. Please, every one of you should think about where to go from here."

She couldn't order them under the authority of a hero. Nor could she plead them. Considering her status as a hero, it wouldn't have been treated as an ordinary "please."

Thus, Haruno simply asked everyone to think about it. All that was left to do was wait and see. She let everyone return to their rooms for the night.

Haruno remained in the garden to talk with Prae a little longer. She looked somewhat dejected from behind.

She could tell that she'd have to say goodbye to the pilgrims she made friends with. She was trying to play tough, but probably had a lot on her mind as well.

The first who decided she would come along was Daisy. Imps typically didn't believe in the existence of any gods, so she had gotten curious about the Goddess of Darkness. They planned to hold off on telling people about Rakti until after everyone decided whether they would come along or not, then secretly tell those who would come along.

After a while, Lumis, Sandra, and Rin showed up with their luggage in tow, saying they would come.

"I want to become better friends with Prae and Daisy."

“I’m worried about leaving Sera alone to protect Lady Haruno.”

“If we’re not together, then I won’t be able to swing that sacred sword around anymore!” Rin yelled the last line with a clenched fist.

The reason they were later than Daisy was because they wanted to speak with the pilgrim leader first. They had gone in fully prepared to give up their ranks as temple knights, but the leader told them with a wry smile to go ahead and act as independent temple knights, not as part of the pilgrims. The leader was similar to Sera in the sense that she believed more in the Goddess than in the temple itself. If she hadn’t been the leader, she probably would have agreed to join Haruno. She may have been jealous of those three for being able to be so reckless as to say they’d give up their ranks. Haruno detected a hint of those feelings in her wry smile.

That leader visited Haruno first thing the next morning.

“I’m sorry, but...”

“I see... that’s unfortunate.”

The leader indeed couldn’t come along. She didn’t think Haruno was wrong, but she had to stay behind to fulfill her responsibilities as the leader. Haruno had expected as much, so she was able to hear her out calmly.

Next came the practical matters. They agreed to split the funds between them and the pilgrims fifty-fifty. They would also take along enough horses to travel with. The pilgrims would continue to act as Haruno’s guards until she set off.

“We’re just as angry about this situation are you are,” the pilgrim leader laughed.

Not everyone thought the same, however. That same day, a group of over ten pilgrims said they would be leaving the mansion.

“We were fooled by you.”

“We were fooled by the sacred family and the temple of light.” Haruno gave a firm reply to the snide remark and stares. She had spoken about Hadesopolis

knowing that some people might react like that. She wasn't going to falter, though. If the pilgrims thought she wasn't emotionally prepared, then they underestimated her.

The pilgrim couldn't find anything to say in return, gathered her luggage with a vexed expression, and hurried out the door like she was running away. She must have realized, too. The fault was in the sacred family's and temple's hands no matter how you spun it.

Those girls wouldn't stop being pilgrims, however. They were simply moving to another lodging in the city.

Haruno had plenty of things on her mind but chose not to voice them, focusing on packing her things instead.

First was preparing for Prae and Daisy. They would have to get new clothes.

Haruno was worried at first since they were both far from human size, but the craftsmen in Ficus Brand assured them they could get the job done within a week.

"Will it be alright? I know we're asking a lot from you..."

"Don't worry! If the Goddess of Light preaches about justice and morality, then we will preach that underwear is justice! We will most certainly prepare underwear that will satisfy our customers' needs."

"I-I see... I'll leave it to you, then."

"I can't tell if these guys are amazing or amazingly stupid..." Daisy said exasperatedly as the lady shop attendant measured her three sizes, looking overly zealous for some reason.

They ordered a rucksack for Prae as well. She would need a place to store her belongings as a new party member.

They didn't have many choices as far as armor went. Daisy's clothes just needed to be as sturdy as possible. Prae would receive a breastplate made from lesser boar fur as well as a pair of gauntlets. She didn't want any boots and chose to wear sandals instead. Apparently she didn't like anything that made her feel constricted. Her clothes were overall fairly revealing, with her stomach

showing at the moment.

They also purchased a giant tower shield, the biggest in the shop. It was surprisingly inexpensive. These items usually increased in price relative to the size, but once they got so big that no one could use them anymore, their price points would plummet.

As for weapons, Daisy had no choice but to use a needle in place of a sword. They retrieved a sturdy sewing needle used to make stuffed animals and shaped it like an estoc sword. Daisy wobbled a bit with the sword on her back, but she seemed pleased with it.

As for Prae, she had only a few weapon choices, just like with her armor. The most she could do was swing a weapon around mindlessly, so they recommended she use a blunt weapon called a mace.

They also requested that a thick tree branch be shaped to have an easy to hold handle, then wrapped thin iron plates around the tip to create a bludgeon. It was a mostly smooth, simple design. Haruno and the others could barely pick it up, but Prae grabbed it and started swinging it around like a feather. The weight of it alone was enough to carry some heavy destructive power. The party got a glimpse at how frightening a cyclops could actually be.

They had run into plenty of problems until now, but the biggest was getting a blanket. Bedding was one of the most important items for travelers. However, a normal blanket would be far too small for Prae. She said she didn't need one and had been sleeping without one up until now, but that was no reason to call it quits.

Ficus Brand was able to take care of this issue as well. Blankets were always a burden for travelers since they were so bulky. Haruno couldn't exactly relate since she had traveled with the pilgrims and several cargo wagons, but it was an unavoidable issue for those who traveled on foot.

The Ficus Brand's solution to that was a multi-purpose cloak that could also be used as a blanket. Also designed to be cold resistant, it was one of their most popular products. Haruno's party bought five of those multi-purpose cloaks for themselves since they were ready-made. Prae's would need to be specially

made, but the shopkeepers were more than happy to help. It would be an easy order for them. On the other hand, Daisy's order would be more expensive since it required detailed craftsmanship. They decided to buy a blanket made using a hand towel instead. It was a cute size and also had an embroidered pattern on it, so she seemed to like it.

They went on to order their food, and their preparations took almost a week in total. In the meantime, the senators, temple of light, and inspectors were all keeping busy trying to resolve the demi-human scandal. The city was filled with rumors related to that incident, the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord, Hadesopolis, and the Goddess of Darkness. The pilgrims who had left the mansion had most likely spread them around.

Also, the temple of light visited Haruno to offer an apology. They had considered the relationship between Haruno and Touya and decided it wouldn't be a good idea to leave Haruno angry. She took the opportunity to request that they make rescuing past victims the highest priority. The temple had no means to reject, seeing as how they'd had no hand in resolving the incident. But to maintain their authority, they used all of their influence to start seeking out those past victims and freeing them.

Haruno had actually predicted this course of events. She had requested that the inspectors and temple free the past victims as a way to redeem their reputation. This way, the inspectors could show that they didn't condone unethical activities within the senate, and the temple could announce that the actions conducted by the temple in the past did not represent them now.

She didn't take any particular action toward the senate. They wouldn't be able to conceal evidence or cover up their actions anymore, and Haruno felt that that was enough for now. Since they had been exposed, their only option was to give appropriate punishment to whoever had been involved in the incident.

"The inspectors do honest work."

"The temple of light won't forgive any injustice. We are different from the temple that once took over other nations."

“The majority of the members of the senate had nothing to do with the illegal activities.”

Each party advocated for themselves. It was all for the purpose of self-protection, and Haruno had predicted exactly that. They had their own well-being in mind. If that was the case, then Haruno made them rescue the past victims as a way to push each group toward their goal. That was Haruno’s way of thinking.

The senator that the inspectors arrested on the fifth day was indeed the owner of the mansion that Daisy had interrupted a discussion in. This was an entirely expected outcome as well. Without that connection, Daisy wouldn’t have been falsely charged and become a criminal raver.

The other participants of that secret discussion were the pastor and another high-ranking senator who had accepted bribes to accommodate their plans. They were both arrested as well, of course.

Ironically enough, they had the Oath Seal placed on them and were forced to confess each and every last one of their deeds. A clearer picture of the case was painted thanks to that, and they were able to make further progress on rescuing victims as well. It would take much more time to resolve everything, but Haruno believed they would finish the job they started.

She figured she should disassociate herself from the incident before departing on her journey, so she handed all her copies of the documents to the senate. Perhaps as a result of that, the day before Haruno’s departure, she was awarded with a medal and monetary compensation. She had achieved high merits from this case.

She split the reward money fifty-fifty with the pilgrims just like they had with their funds for the journey. The medal was called the Olive Moon Medal. It depicted three olive branches underneath a small crescent moon. It was a particularly honorable medal awarded to someone who helped protect the peace in Athena.

Her party members were also allowed to participate in the ceremony, so Sera, Lumis, Sandra, Rin, Daisy, and Prae were all invited to join. It also served as a

way to represent her acceptance of demi-humans.

The ceremony would be held in a large hall with an equally large set of doors. Prae would be able to enter the building just by ducking down a little. Prae's ceremonial dress was a simple mantle with an elegant embroidered pattern on it. An elf had once worn a mantle in the audience of the sacred family, and it had been recognized as formal ceremony attire since. Yes, just like the time the legendary pervert Ficus appeared in front of the king wearing nothing but a leaf over his nethers.

On that note, Daisy was wearing a dress from an antique doll. The ceremony progressed without issue. When Haruno came forward, a senator started reading aloud a letter of commendation. After that, a court lady who had been waiting behind the senator stepped forward reverently and attached the medal to Haruno's chest. At nearly the same time, loud cheers and thunderous clapping resounded from the crowd. The leader of the pilgrims was among the audience, clapping as loudly as she could with a beaming smile on her face. When Haruno escaped from the main hall, she gave a little wave toward the leader. The leader noticed that, took a few glances around her, then shyly waved back.

A few days later, Haruno's party armed themselves and set out on their journey on horseback. Right as they crossed the gate to Athenapolis, Haruno turned back to Sera and the rest.

"Alright then, let's be off."

Everyone gave her a firm nod in response. They were now a party of seven, including Haruno. Their numbers had dwindled quite a bit since she left Jupiteropolis with over 30 pilgrims in tow.



But the Haruno back then had been saved by Touya acting as her decoy and was under the constant protection of the pilgrims. She had essentially taken her guardians along with her on her journey. When they had been fighting off monsters outside the city, the pilgrims had taken the lead, and Haruno had constantly been safeguarded as she tried to contribute to the battles.

Perhaps this incident that shook Athena was the first battle that Haruno had managed to lead on her own. In that case, she felt even more proud to have been awarded the Olive Moon Medal.

This is the start of my *journey*, she thought as she gripped the reins and set off.

Words of the Great Ficus

All beings are equal

Whether human or demi-human, Rich or poor,

Large or small,

Whether wings grow from thy back or a tail sprouts from thy rear, Whether thou follow one goddess or another or none at all, There is no such trite nor sad reason For one to not find underwear most befitting thyself.

Ficus

Second Bath – The Bottomless Black Steel Bath

Well damn, I was a little impressed.

I stood speechless in front of a framed poem written by Ficus himself, hung inside the Ficus Brand store in Hephaestusopolis. If I were asked “which historical figure do you admire most?” right now, I might have blurted out “the great pervert Ficus” as my answer.

After I’d heard from Haruno that Ficus Brand had made underwear for a giant and a little fairy, I became a little curious and started researching in-depth about the great pervert Ficus. Apparently he had lived a long life, up to almost 100 years. He died over 200 years ago, which meant he was born 300 years ago—around the same time Athena was being taken over.

The sacred family and temple of the Goddess of Light were doing work in the shadows back then, and the inclination against demi-humans was probably still strong during the period he grew up in. Despite the time period, this pervert still boldly proclaimed that he didn’t care if someone was a human or demi-human—he just wanted to make them wear bras and panties. It may have sounded pretty idiotic, but it took some guts to do what he did.

Take the low-rise panties on display in the shopfront, for example. From a modern Japanese person’s perspective, they looked like they were designed purely for style, but they actually served a purpose as well. The design was born to solve the very practical issue of not having panties get in the way of a demi-human’s tail. This was one of his legacies, thinking about it. Roni wore those kinds of panties every day, which is exactly what the great pervert would have wanted. Though I was no more convinced to imitate his single-leaf style of formal wear.

It had been about half a month since our party started crashing in the workshop-slash-residence of the ketolt blacksmith Pardoe Paul. Word arrived

from Haruno yesterday that she'd set off from Athenapolis.

Our magic armor, the Magic Eater, needed some time to let the magic power stabilize before being tuned further, so we used the time off to go shopping today. Our main objective was to pick up the maid outfit we had ordered to make Rakti look like a labor raver. We had placed the order half a month ago, but since we wanted a custom one that could be worn during travel and requested several of them at once, it had taken a while to complete.

And right now, I had just finished explaining what a "futon" was to the craftsmen for an order. The explanation had taken a while, since the concept of a futon didn't exist in this world, but I thought the craftsmen got the basic idea. Rium was the only one among the girls who stayed around to listen to my futon explanation, but she had grown tired and was now taking a nap propped up beside Rulitora.

It looked like Clena and the others weren't done shopping yet, so I decided to look around the store for the time being.

"This place looks like it's half-meant for children."

"You mean the clothes are all small? Maybe it's because there are a lot of ketolts here."

Thinking back to the Ficus Brand in Jupiteropolis, the walkways in the store were large enough to fit Rulitora since the city had all sorts of ravers, many of which lived there as middle-class citizens after completing their terms of employment. Ceresopolis, on the other hand, was a farming nation that demi-human ravers avoided, so the walkways were made without large demi-humans in mind. And here in Hephaestusopolis, the walkways were wide enough for Rulitora, but the shop's displays were all very short, possibly to accommodate the small ketolts in the area.

"Does that mean that half the customers here are ketolts?"

"Probably, yeah."

A race of demi-humans called glaupis had once been driven out of Athenapolis, but apparently nothing of the sort happened in this city. According to what Pardoe told me later, the temple of light had indeed tried to banish the

ketolts from this nation once. That was a story from 200 years ago. However, Hephaestusopolis and Athenapolis had one key difference. This nation had mines and blacksmiths, and talented blacksmiths were among the most respected here. The temple of light invaded the nation and tried to drive out the ketolts, but the ketolts responded by proclaiming, “Then find blacksmiths who can do a better job than us!” Apparently the temple of light couldn’t live up to that demand.

Judging by how the fire clerics went out of their way to check if we were okay with demi-humans when we asked them for a good blacksmith recommendation, the human blacksmiths in this city couldn’t hold a candle to the ketolts. According to Shakova, it was a difference in the way they handled the fire stones. That difference led to the relative standings between the two temples now. I recalled how one cleric from the temple of the light had come to greet me on my way here, and how three clerics from the temple of fire pushed him over. I figured it would be best for the light temple to just withdraw completely at that point, but they must have had their reasons.

“Sorry for the wait.” And while those thoughts ran through my head, Mark arrived carrying his bags.

Mark Remus, an orange tabby cat. He was the son of Shakova Remus. He and Pardoe’s daughter, the pure-white ketolt named Crissa Paul, had come with us to shop today.

He had purchased leather gloves for work. They were particularly resistant to fire, made from the skin of monsters called red lizards who lived around Mt. Lemnos. However, even those gloves didn’t stand a chance against the fire energy produced by divine intervention. Gloves were on the shopping list today because all of their current ones had burned up.

“Where’s Crissa and the rest?”

“Still shopping. Nothing we can do in these situations other than be quiet and wait.”

Crissa was accompanying Clena and the other girls shopping.

“It’s not something we can help them pick out, unless they want us to.”

“Yeah...”

Mark knitted his eyebrows the moment I mentioned Crissa’s name. He was 15 years of age and apparently harbored a little crush on Crissa. Crissa was 18 years old, one year older than me. Pardoe’s and Shakova’s families had been close for a long time now, so she was a childhood friend and like an older sister to him. Not only that, but Crissa was a popular and attractive girl in her neighborhood. We were on good terms, so it was no surprise that he’d become vigilant of me.

But don’t worry, Mark. I did think Crissa was cute, but she was a ketolt in the shape of a cat. I doubted I’d ever start developing feelings for her.

It was cute seeing another cat like him all wary of me, unaware of my thoughts on the matter. After all, his biggest issue right now would be the fact that Crissa didn’t think of him as anything more than a childhood friend who was like a little brother to her. Well, it was fun watching them from the sidelines.

“Thanks for waiting!”

The girls walked up to us, having finally finished their shopping. Rakti led the group, prancing over to us in her maid uniform.

“...Isn’t that a little short?”

She had purchased her maid uniform, but the skirt seemed a bit on the short side. I wasn’t well-versed on the maid uniforms here, but I recalled the ones in Jupiter’s castle being longer than that. More than a maid uniform, the outfit looked like a waitress outfit you’d see at a cute café. Clena arrived a moment later to answer my question.

“This is standard for maids working outside, you know?”

“Really?”

“It’d be hard to run away if something happened and she was wearing a long skirt.”

These short maid outfits were originally used for maids working outside

castles and mansions. Being inside the city didn't guarantee safety, so the skirts needed to be short enough to allow them to run if anything ever came up.

"So why couldn't we just get her ordinary traveler's clothes?"

"It's important for maids to be recognizable at a glance. Meaning, it's important to be able to tell they're a raver of someone noteworthy."

"I see..."

So if anyone tried to lay a hand on the maid, they'd know they'd be picking a fight with the employer. Sometimes that might be inviting trouble, but I bet it helped steer away trouble most of the time.

Employers were traveling far distances more often these days, so maid outfits had gotten sturdier in turn. Rakti's outfit was one of those sturdy types.

"What do you think? Does it look cute?" Rakti did a spin, which made her skirt flutter. I could see her slender and supple legs covered in pure white tights from under the skirt.

Tights were apparently a trademark of maids traveling long distances. Grass and other various hazards might hurt their legs, so this protection was a matter of course.

"You look cute, Rakti!"

"Yaaay!"

In any case, Rakti looked cute in her maid uniform. She jumped up and hugged me in response to my praise. Maybe I had gotten stronger, but I was able to catch and support her petite body pretty easily. Then, since she was happy to be on the same eye level as me for once, she showed me a beaming smile and rubbed our cheeks together.

The maid uniform was a deep indigo-blue with a frilly white apron. I wondered if this was an okay design for travel wear, but I recalled that Clena's surcoat was a dress as well.

According to Roni, the materials for the apron were different from usual. It prioritized sturdiness rather than lightness. It didn't look too different from the outside, but I noticed that the sheen was a little off.

Clena and Roni also retrieved the clothes they had ordered. We put all of our purchases in one bag for Roni to carry.



“Are you done on your end?”

“Yes, we tried on our tailored clothes and they all look good.”

“Now then, let’s head back.”

I see, so they were slow because they had tried their clothing on. That was a vital step for getting custom-made clothing.

“Oh, Roni. I can carry that for you.”

“Eh? I couldn’t make you carry our things, Sir Touya...”

“Let me at least do that much, as a man.”

“Then let me take it.”

I tried to take the bag off Roni’s hands, but Rulitora’s hand came swooping from above and picked the bag up as he was still carrying Rium on his back.

“Don’t try to steal your attendants’ jobs.” Clena knocked me on the back of my head while I was still caught off guard by the surprise interruption.

And then I finally realized. I had wanted to pick up our belongings as a man, but right now I was supposed to be “Roni’s owner.” I’d tried to keep it in mind before, but had totally forgotten just now.

“S-sorry, Roni.”

“No, thank you for worrying about me.” I apologized, but Roni forgave me with a slightly embarrassed look. Rulitora’s surprise interruption must have been a way to follow up on my blunder as well.

“Rulitora, carry our things.”

“Understood.”

This was how I was supposed to act as their owner. I gave Rulitora an order and he replied with a dignified nod.

“Um... was I acting badly too?” Rakti asked Clena while she still clung on to me.

“...It’s fine as long as Touya is happy with it, but try to behave yourself in public.”

“Understood, teacher!” Rakti vigorously raised a hand up in response to Clena. Let me remind you that this was the Goddess of Darkness we were dealing with.

“Shall I carry that for you, Marky?”

“...Nyo need.”

Crissa smiled and tried to get Mark’s attention, but he swung his head away from her in embarrassment. She didn’t seem at all shocked by his attitude and instead gave a little giggle. This might have been an everyday occurrence for them. I mean, she was even calling him “Marky.” It felt like she was a level above him most of the time, but I wanted to think that was just our imagination.

After that, we went to see how Haruno’s incident had influenced the raver market over here. But as soon as we arrived, I saw a wooden plank hung right over the entrance with “Annihilate Injustice!!” written in letters from this world on it, and I couldn’t help but laugh a little.

I decided to gather some information from a passerby, and apparently word had already gotten to the temple in Jupiter about the pastor of the temple of light in Athenapolis being involved in this incident. The temple then ordered investigations into each temple of light in every city-state. No perpetrators were found in this nation, since the demand for criminal ravers was low and no profit would be made from falsifying anything. I asked why criminal ravers weren’t more in demand here since they seemed like a perfect fit to work in the mines, and Mark answered my question.

Mining for fire stones was the first job assigned to blacksmith apprentices. It was the first step to being able to discern the quality of fire stones. If you wanted to make something good, you had to start by gathering fire stones that were both big and high-quality. According to Mark, the human blacksmiths had a hard time realizing that.

So being a miner was recognized as an honest job in this nation, and there was no need to gather criminal ravers since there were plenty of people lining

up for the work already. Above all, Mt. Lemnos was a sacred place for the followers of the Goddess of Fire. More than a few people thought they'd rather work in the mines themselves than send criminals over there.

And maybe it was just me, but I thought "no profit would be made" sounded like a more convincing argument than simply "I would never commit fraud!"

On that note, the number-one thing this country needed was guards on Mt. Lemnos to protect the mines from monsters—battle ravers. Number two was labor ravers who attended to household needs. There were plenty of demi-human ravers who came here to seek employment as guards.

Now that we had finished everything on our to-do list, we headed back to Pardoe's house. While it looked like any other workshop on the outside, the other side of the building was a rather luxurious mansion. It was a good indicator of how skilled blacksmiths ranked socially in this nation. We wouldn't be using the altar with the fire stone pillar today, so it was time for magic lessons and practice.

"...I'll help." Rium, who had been sleeping on Rulitora this whole time, woke up and offered her assistance.

I had learned over 10 new spells over the course of this half month. Considering how it had taken me three days to learn Summon Earth Spirit, I was now progressing at over twice the pace as back then.

"Summon spirit!" I said, and a ball of fire formed at the top of my fingertip. I just summoned a spirit of fire. The heat was prickling my fingertip, so I quickly let the ball of fire go. The spirit then started changing its form to my will.

According to the fire clerics, the flame could be fired off as a ball, an arrow, or a spear. Each of them were called "fireball," "fire arrow," and "flame spear," and were treated like different spells, but they were all derived from fire spirit summoning.

If I pumped too much MP into the spell, the firepower would get out of hand, so I needed to be careful. I mean, if it weren't for the red lizard skin gloves Pardoe had given me when I told him I'd be practicing fire cleric spells, my hands would be burned black by now. The first time I tried the spell, the gloves

went up in flames. Since then, I'd been careful about how much MP I used, and my second pair of gloves were still intact.

Besides that, I'd learned a few more light and earth spells as well. Darkness spells were still not going well for me. According to Rakti, the spells were meant for demons only, and even if I were to become able to use them, it would take quite a bit of time.

No matter how stacked my MP and MEN were, I wouldn't have gotten this far if textbooks were my only resource. There was one particular reason why I'd been progressing so fast. That night, I saw the goddesses in my dreams again.

Yes, I'd been seeing these goddesses in my dreams every single night. I asked Rakti what was going on when I woke up, but she said even the other goddesses didn't know.

The arch-cleric that had been part of the first sacred king's party, San Pilaca. Even he had been blessed by the five goddesses at the time, but never had anything like this happened to him.

Apparently the goddesses could perceive each other's thoughts, and Rakti told me the reason the Goddess of Light had been angry with me before was because I had been summoning nothing but earth spirits when I should have been practicing light magic more.

As for what those goddesses were doing with me every night, they were teaching me magic. The Goddess of Light was especially enthusiastic about it.

I couldn't move myself in my dreams. I couldn't hear what they were saying, either. So how was I learning magic from them, you ask? Right now, the Goddess of Light had numerous flipbooks in front of me like we were in a quiz show. Each book had pictures in it that explained in detail how to use each spell. Yes, the goddesses were using my only sense, sight, to teach me magic. Those flipbooks were many times easier to understand than the textbooks the temples had given me. That was the sole reason why I had been learning spells so fast.

There was the arch-cleric who had been blessed by five goddesses long ago, then I, who had four blessings now, though one from a non-head temple. I was the first person since San Pilaca to achieve anything close, and the goddesses

wanted to help me grow and learn more spells.

Lately the fire stone pillar had been consuming much more of my MP than usual, and a certain someone wasn't taking that very well. The Goddess of Light, unsurprisingly. As a result, most of the spells I had learned were light cleric spells.

Why was she wearing glasses and a skirt suit, though? She had been wearing a dress that went down to her ankles until now, so her bare legs extending beyond her skirt were far too radiant for my eyes. Her silky blonde hair that she had originally worn as a ponytail was now tied up in a neat bun. Knowing my thoughts would be conveyed, I wondered if her hair would get damaged by tying it up like that, and the next night she wore her hair in a simply ponytail tied at neck level.

The Goddess of Fire was wearing a tracksuit. She had a tank top on underneath her jacket. A bamboo sword would be very fitting for the rest of her appearance.

She was, how should I say, the type to get friendly easily. The day I learned how to summon fire spirits, she happily ruffled my hair.

The Goddess of Earth was wearing a white blouse and a pencil skirt, as well as stockings. She wore a white lab coat on top of that. The three of them looked like schoolteachers all lined up together.

Her incredibly well-endowed assets were practically spilling out of her blouse, and even now it felt like a button might fly off at any moment. In fact, I could see her cleavage and bra from the gaps between the buttons. She was indeed the goddess of bountiful harvests. On top of that, she didn't seem to mind it at all, and I was always greeted by a splendid view whenever she came to teach me. It'd be a huge problem to have such a healthy teacher like her in school.

After I woke up and asked Rakti about it all, she said that we each had influence on each other's images inside the dream. I see, so when I was being taught spells in my dream, I started imagining a school setting as well. I could understand why the goddesses started dressing like teachers, then. But in that case... why was Rakti wearing a red elementary school backpack in my dream? Was that her image of herself or mine? I was unable to confirm that with her

even after we woke up.

After about half a month of being taught magic in an environment that would make all the men of the world jealous, my Magic Eater armor was finally done being tuned. It had gone down about a size, and I would describe the look as a “sleek black demon.” According to Pardoe, it hadn’t actually gone down in size, but had just been pseudo-shrunk to fit my size.

I’m about to get into an utterly practical and realistic topic, but magic items were extremely expensive. Especially a full set of metallic armor—it’d get harder to sell the moment its size changed. As a result, a spell had been placed on it that let the armor pseudo-shrink to its wearer’s size.

That spell was right at the top among the arsenal of craftsman spells. Its name was “Alteration,” and it was an indispensable skill that used rare magical items. It couldn’t turn a smaller object into a larger one, nor could it modify an object’s weight, so it had its limits when it came to changing an item’s size. The Magic Eater, which was created over 500 years ago, did not yet have that spell placed on it.

To get an idea of just how great of a spell Alteration was, only a few among even the top-class blacksmiths in Hephaestusopolis could use it. The reason Pardoe had called for Shakova to assist with tuning the Magic Eater was none other than the fact that he knew how to use Alteration.

He pounded the magic into each and every part of the armor using the blessing of the Goddess of Fire, the divine heat from my MP, and a hammer. The tailoring had taken a month because of how difficult to understand the process was.

“Aren’t the horns and the claws a little big?”

“That’s where the conductors are located, so we can’t change those.”

Originally, magic was all conducted through a person’s body. Imagine a person facing an enemy with their palm facing out, about to blast a spell—that was essentially it. If you felt so inclined, you could also blast the spell from your forehead or anywhere on your body.

On the contrary, a conductor was an item that you could hold in your hand or wear on your body, then channel the spell through there. It was like a magician casting a spell with their wand, and the spell shooting off from the jewel at the top of the wand. With how the magic in this world worked, the jewel at the tip of the wand acted as the conductor, and as long as the wand itself could channel magic, magic could be fired from the jewel at the tip just by gripping the wand part of it.

The hammer Pardoe used was a conductor, too. The process was essentially the same as Rium's crystal magic.

In the Magic Eater's case, conductors were located in the gauntlets' palms, the short but sharp claws growing from the back of the gauntlets, and the helmet—or more specifically, the two horns growing from the helmet's forehead. I additionally ordered another set of conductors be placed at the bottom of the greaves' shoes.

Since the pseudo-shrinking didn't work on conductors, those parts were all a size larger than the rest, but they were never too big in the first place so I accepted it as part of the design.

The armor was originally designed to look terrifying, but the size alteration kept the Magic Eater from looking too eerie and gave it a slightly cleaner look. Pardoe said that the design had changed a bit since pounding the magic in with the hammer. Shakova had tried to make the armor look more fantastical again, but Pardoe stopped him from getting carried away. Pardoe apologized for the change in the armor's looks, but I hadn't wanted it to look terrifying or flashy, so I should have thanked him instead.

Shakova, who was looking a little worn out next to Pardoe, seemed a little dissatisfied with how the design aspect had turned out, but his eyes were still sparkling. Mark looked triumphant himself, though all he did was help out here and there. Lastly, Crissa had been moved to tears, currently wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Nyow then, try it on!"

"Let me help you."

“I’ll help too!”

I let Rulitora and Roni help me into the Mana Eater. It was much heavier than the brigandine I’d been wearing until now, but no so much that I’d have trouble moving. My field of vision decreased when I put on the helmet, but I suppose that couldn’t be helped.

“Touyaaa! You look so cool!” Rakti immediately squealed at me as soon as I put on all the parts. This was armor we’d originally obtained in Hadesopolis, so the design must have been right up her ally.

Beside her, Rium gave me a thumbs up with her eyes sparkling. The armor looked pretty intimidating. I wondered if I looked like a veteran warrior with this on.

“How is it? Anywhere that feels tight to mewve in?”

“Let me try... Roni, Rulitora, step back for now.”

After the two got a safe distance away, I started moving around to test the armor all over my body. The metal made clanging sounds with every move, but nothing felt like it was obstructing my movements. It looked like I shouldn’t have any problems in a real battle, either.

“...And what sort of dance is that?”

“Radio calisthenics.” A certain track was playing in my head at the moment. An intimidating set of armor doing radio calisthenics must have looked pretty surreal to everyone looking on around me.

Next, I checked all of the conductors. I pressed my hands against the ground in the yard, summoned earth spirits through my palms, and made two pillars pop up from the ground a distance away from where the others were standing. I stood back up, pointed a fist at each of the pillars, then summoned fire spirits through the claws on the back of my hands and fired them at the pillars, toppling them over. So far so good.

The damage to myself was minimal if I formed the fire spirits through my claws. The claws actually stayed the perfect size for my usage.

Next, I tried to summon light spirits from the horns on the helmet. Two balls

of light formed at the top of each horn. Nothing wrong on this end, either.

As an aside, I was a beat slower than usual when summoning spirits to something other than my hands since I had to concentrate more. I'd need to keep practicing to make that go more smoothly.

Last were the conductors at the soles of my feet. Those were the ones I'd asked to be placed anew. There was one reason I asked them to go out of their way to do that for me. A full set of metal armor was heavy. I knew as much, and felt as much now that I had it all on. Of course I planned to get stronger in this armor in the future, but I'd always get tired from having to run around in this suit no matter what. So I thought of a possible solution.

First, I lowered my hips a little, then positioned my legs about shoulder width apart to keep my balance. Then I summoned earth spirits from below my feet and controlled them.

"Alright, success!" The next moment, I was darting around while still wearing the Magic Eater. This was a big success for checking the functionality of the conductor.

The others must have been seeing me as a full set of armor in a defensive pose gliding across the ground without moving my feet. Right, I was using the earth spirits to move the ground underneath my feet. That made the ground itself slide and allowed me to move large distances in one go. Since I was controlling the ground using my own MP, moving around felt even easier than skating or skiing. And since I wasn't moving up and down, it was more quiet than walking as well.

However, I would lose balance during sharp turns and sudden stops. The power started at my feet, but I needed to control it with my whole body. I'd need to practice and train this skill as well.

I needed a cloak and preferably shoulder guards if I wanted to wear this in battle, but apparently it was hard to find metal made from the same materials as my armor. I'd ask Pardoe and the others about that later. The shoulder guards served as decoration as well, so maybe I should talk to Shakova about it, too. There was one last thing I had asked the blacksmiths to prepare for us.

"I've got it right here for you, meow~"

This was something they had been working on during our off time like how we had gone shopping, and it looked like it finished just in time.

It was a single sword. The blade was one stuto tall and fairly wide—a longsword. I doubted I'd be able to use it with one hand. The blade was sharp and wavy, like a flamberge sword. Flamberge swords normally sacrificed strength due to their wavy pattern. However, this sword was about as bulky as a wooden plank, had a wide blade, and was overall massive enough to be called a greatsword.

The blade was colored black. Cursive kanji was etched into it, saying "Demon King of the Sixth Heaven."

Rakti seemed scared and hid behind Rium, which didn't placate her one bit. She was trembling while holding on to Rium's shoulders.

Yes, this was the grave marker that the first sacred king had prepared to seal the demon lord, but ended up sealing the Goddess of Darkness, Rakti, instead. I had asked to make it into a sword. I had been wondering what to do with it since we retrieved it from the demon lord's castle, but since we confirmed that it held absolute power against demons, I asked Pardoe to make it into a greatsword for us.

I felt a dense weight as I gripped it using both my hands. Everyone was watching on silently as I swung the sword like a kendo sword. It made a sharp sound as it cut the wind. I had never learned fencing or kendo, so I couldn't be called good with a sword no matter how you looked at it. I'd need some training on this as well if I wanted to use this in a real battle.

I decided to name it "Gravesword." "Grave Marker Sword" sounded a little off. Though "Grave Marker Sword" would sound funny to anyone from modern Japan, I bet the people of this world wouldn't have minded. I hoped Haruno would understand my thought process for the uncreative name and not laugh at me. I hoped.

But just in case, I decided to contact her to ask her opinion on my name "suggestion."

If there was one problem, it would be that even though this was an ultimate anti-demon weapon that could even seal the Goddess of Darkness, it was

nothing more than a sturdy magical greatsword to everyone else. Well, that already made it an impressive weapon, but only one among the many we had found in Hadesopolis. We had the blacksmiths appraise and single out any weapons that seemed easy to use, then keep them as our trump cards for the future.

"The armor job is done nyow!"

"Time to dig into that pile of treasure like we agreed!"

"...You don't even need to take a break?"

Pardoe and Shakova distinctly remembered our agreement to save the other weapons for after the armor was done being tailored. They should have been tired, but their breathing was running wild right now.

Of course, I remembered our agreement as well. I was curious about the mountain of weapons we had piled up in a corner of the garden, too.

I looked over at Crissa to find her wiping her tears again, for a different reason this time. She had long given up on trying to stop them. I could tell that she knew from experience how tough it was to get them out of this state once they were in it. However, there were some things they needed to do before diving into that mountain.

"Don't forget to eat. And you're dirty, so go take a bath—"

"I refuse!"

"...I figured."

One thing I had learned from staying with them over the past month was that ketolts, as their outward appearance implied, tended to hate baths. Or rather, they had their own methods of keeping clean that were comparable but different to humans.

Yes, that was the grooming process. Grooming someone else implied romantic intimacy, and in general it was a very important part of their culture. Of course, they didn't lick themselves after a day of blacksmith work or else they'd be eating up soot. So a bath was the solution here, but anyone who

refused to take a bath in this state must have hated them to the core.

Pardoe was infamous for his hatred of water among his group of friends. He often boasted about his soot-covered fur like it was a symbol of his pride. Apparently self-grooming brushes were made for these kinds of ketolts.

The filthy Pardoe and the pure white Crissa. Their huge difference in cleanliness likely came from Crissa learning by example of what *not* to do from her father.

Shakova, on the other hand, was a neat freak. You might not have been able to tell from his work clothes, but according to Mark, he enjoyed dressing fashionably. He would take a bath after a hard day's work and groom himself after that. But even he wouldn't get near baths with hot water, so it was easy to tell how much ketolts in general hated bathing.

"At least take a bath. Or else I'll only let Shakova do the appraisals."

"Hisss!!"

We couldn't just leave the almost-black Pardoe be, so I tried to negotiate with him a little. Some of the items in the pile were made of cloth, so we couldn't have him getting stains everywhere. Pardoe might have been shrieking in terror, but Crissa seems happier, so I called it a success.

On that note, apparently Mark was the opposite of his father in that he hated baths, but ever since learning that Crissa preferred cleanliness, he took a bath every day. Ah, to be young.

We transported the weapons to be appraised outside for the blacksmiths to look at, then decided to go to the temple of fire and thank the clerics. After all, the main reason we had been able to get the armor tailored was because they had introduced us to Pardoe. We bought some meat as a donation.

I had kept the Magic Eater on to show them how it looked, but let's not mention the bit of commotion I caused because they thought I was an invading monster. When the temple elder heard about the disturbance at the front gate, he started rolling on the floor in laughter.

Well, the Magic Eater was indeed pretty scary on the outside. In fact, it clearly

made me look like the bad guy when I wore it. There wasn't much I could do about that though, since we had taken it from the demon lord's armory.

Anyway, when the elder heard that the tailoring was finished, he introduced us to the training ground that the clerics and followers used day to day. The training ground was surrounded by audience seating, so it would've been more accurate to call it a stadium.

The elder must have known that I needed some time to "break in" my new suit of armor. I had thought he was just a broadminded, muscular man who did nothing but laugh, but he actually paid attention to our needs. I took up the opportunity and visited the training ground every day for the next week. I was breaking in the armor just fine, but my surroundings had changed in the past few days.

"Ohh, is that...?"

"The armor from the demon lord's castle..."

"I heard even the Pauls' smithy couldn't handle it..."

Three cats and a human were sitting in the audience seats. All of them had connections to smithing and wanted to have a glance at the Magic Eater after hearing about it. Apparently word had spread that even Pardoe, a top blacksmith of Hephaestusopolis, couldn't put a dent in the armor, but still made an attempt using the blessing of the Goddess of Fire.

And then reports regarding Hadesopolis, located in the middle of the void, started spreading. Haruno had started giving out the information back in Athenapolis. The information source was only supposed to be the temple of the Goddess of Light, but somehow word started spreading from another goddess' temple. In the end, people were wondering where exactly the information had come from, and my name started drawing attention for being the Hero of the Goddess who had defeated a demon general.

At this point, it wasn't hard to guess that my Magic Eater had come from Hadesopolis. And then naturally, everyone realized that I had gone to Hadesopolis. I had predicted this much, in fact. Since I figured this would happen, I made Clena and the others stay behind as I trained with Rulitora.

That was also the reason why I let the audience continue to watch me. If that weren't the case, then I'd have left the training ground already long ago. Not only had I accepted that things would turn out this way, I had given the okay for Haruno to spread the word.

The first and most important reason was that Haruno and Sera would be most at risk if the information stayed hidden, since they were surrounded by the pilgrims who were followers of the Goddess of Light. Just because they were followers of the Goddess of Light didn't mean they were to be blindly trusted, so I needed a way to separate Haruno's party from the rest of them. It would have been dangerous to cut the relationship between them when she was still new and inexperienced, but their monster subjugations worked perfectly to make Haruno stronger. That was why I thought it'd be okay to spread the information. Or rather, I had given Haruno the green light to share what we knew with the public. As a result, all but three pilgrims had left Haruno's side, but I bet those three would be able to protect Haruno just fine.

Of course, I didn't assume that I was safe on my end, either. Back when my Magic Eater was still being tuned, Mark had asked me something.

"Why do you keep the Unlimited Bath a secret?" he asked.

In fact, I wasn't exactly trying to hide my Unlimited Bath. I wasn't hiding the Bath itself, but rather, the fact that I had no gift other than the Bath. I didn't have a battle-oriented gift such as the Unlimited Bullet that the hero Cosmos had, and I didn't want anyone to know that. I wanted them to keep thinking I had some sort of unknown power.

At the time, I didn't know how to use any weapons and only knew the most basic of basic cleric spells. If my gift was revealed back then, it would have also been revealed that I had no fighting power, and I would essentially have been left stripped bare. Thinking about it that way, it was obvious why I needed to hide the existence of my Unlimited Bath. Though it was also true that back then, I was too embarrassed to announce "mixed bathing is my gift!"

I explained everything I could to Mark, but wasn't sure how much of it he understood. He probably just thought I should be more proud of my gift since it was so convenient.

So I had kept my Unlimited Bath a secret for those cowardly reasons back then, but now my MP and MEN stats were shooting off my status card and I had my cleric spells. I also had my Magic Eater and several more weapons and items that we had retrieved from the demon lord's castle. And above all, I had the achievement of slaying a demon general in Hadesopolis. So the information leak might have exposed me to the threat of danger, but I had the proper resources to defend against it now. Haruno was important to me, but so were Clena and the other girls. I couldn't make light of one or the other. I only recommended this information leak after making sure that both of our parties would be safe.

I also had two goals of my own.

One was my reputation as a hero. Maybe that sounded a little snobby, but this would plant my reputation in solid ground and allow me to see Haruno again one day. To get back on the original topic, that was the reason I kept using the training ground even while knowing there were people watching. You could say I was putting on a show.

The rumors that I had brought along a terrifying-looking set of armor from the demon lord's castle, and the rumor that I had defeated a demon general somewhere, transformed into a rumor that I had killed a demon general at the demon lord's castle. And then, since they could see me wearing the Magic Eater in person, that rumor started to gain credibility. Maybe I was getting a little too full of myself for thinking this way, but seeing a giant sand lizardman fight against the figure of a black demon would convince the vast majority of people that the story was true. I hadn't actually obtained the Magic Eater before I defeated Goldfish, but that didn't matter.

The ketolt group who had come to watch me kept looking on at our mock battle while whispering among themselves.



Shakova was among them—or rather, it looked like he had been dragged in to explain things.

Apparently questions on how my Spirit Dash, which was built off of Summon Earth Spirit, worked were among the most frequently asked. Well, they were seeing my massive set of armor gliding effortlessly at speeds far beyond that of normal running. Of course people would be curious.

I had spent this week getting used to “steering” the suit of armor, and was now gliding along at massive speeds that must have looked very unsteady from an outsider’s perspective. It was surprisingly easy to guide myself along as long as I kept moving. I needed to plan when to stop, though.

Rulitora was also getting plenty of attention from our mock battles. People were amazed at how this battle raver had managed to block all of my quick speed shots.

I knew how they felt. During this whole week of mock battles, I had yet to land a single hit on him.

I bet the match would be more even if I let myself use magic. I was keeping myself from casting any spells for the sake of training—that was my excuse, at least.

My second goal was laying down the groundwork, so to speak. We were having Pardoe and the others appraise the weapons we had brought from Hadesopolis now. Shakova said he’d help with the appraisals whenever he had time, but right now he was busying himself with answering questions from anyone in the audience. He was a bit of a show-off.

The items that had been appraised were sorted into three categories: Magical items, non-magical items that still held value as antiques, and normal old items.

We didn’t hesitate on what to do about that last category. Since most of them couldn’t even be used anymore, they couldn’t be sold either. About 70% of the weapons we had obtained from Hadesopolis fell into this category. We tried to reforge any of the weapons that looked like they only needed a little repairing, and if that didn’t work, we would just recycle the metal into pots, pans, and utensils.

Among the normal old items, about 20% of them could be reforged. But if you looked at it another way, 80% of them could be reused as scrap metal. Shakova said that if we also gathered any metal ornaments, we could have quite the pile.

This kind of work was left for apprentices, in this case Mark. Since it was apprentice work, it didn't cost that much for us, and the price was easily set as the value of the scrap iron offset by the service fee. Everything was transported over to Shakova's workshop, and since it was a large order, he had other apprentices in the neighborhood come in to help and made it a big party. Apparently opportunities like this didn't come up very often, and they couldn't skip on the chance to have other apprentices learn and participate in this "festival." It went without saying, but the always-showy Shakova was the one behind this ruckus. This was part of laying the groundwork for me, so I didn't bother to hold him back.

The weapons we had brought with us were exceptional in both amount and quality. They were untouched antiques, since we had practically brought the demon lord's storehouse itself with us. If it weren't for my Unlimited Bath, we wouldn't have been able to carry so much with us. Which brought us to the next issue—how we'd explain having so much to sell. How did we obtain so much in the first place?

One solution would be to sell the items a few at a time, but since we'd keep stocking up quality weapons, people would wonder how we had gotten our hands on them. There was the even possibility that people would accuse us of selling counterfeits. But if we added my name into this, as the hero who returned alive after defeating a demon general in the demon lord's castle, the scenario would change a bit. The goods for sale would now hold some persuasive power. We'd just say that the weapons were the ones that the Hero of the Goddess brought in.

This was the groundwork for how we would sell the antique and magical items. Let me explain the remaining two categories of weapons, then.

First was the antiques—we had the options of selling them off or keeping them with us. They served no practical use and could only be displayed as collector's items. They held historical value, so just owning one would raise the

value of a collection. We wouldn't have any problems storing them within the Unlimited Bath, either.

As they were goods from a ruined kingdom, they would definitely fetch a high price. The main problem would be that we'd need to find someone who collected these kinds of assets.

Last were the weapons with spells cast on them—we were still undecided on what to do with them. They would fetch an enormous sum on the market, that much was certain. However, magic weapons were considered very hard to find. They were a scarcity. It wasn't like there were *none* on the market, but items that lined the storefronts were usually stuff cast with the most rudimentary craftsman spell.

"What's the spell, by the way?"

"Rustproofing, meow."

That was an excerpt from my conversation with Pardoe the other day. Rustproofing was an elementary craftsman spell that simply made it harder for metallic items to rust. Apparently it was a highly valued spell in the south, where it was close to the ocean.

Monsters that only took damage against magic weapons apparently existed, but even a spell like that would make the weapon effective against them. It was just that a weaker spell meant weaker attack power.

What I wanted to say after all that was—if we could keep the magic weapons to ourselves, then there was essentially no point in selling them. Also, weapons weren't the only thing we had brought back from Hadesopolis.

First, there was the magic bookshelf that kept all the books inside from deteriorating. In addition, we had expensive-looking furniture, jewels and other ornaments, and a few chests' worth of gold coins. The gold coins were from 500 years ago, bit since it was a common currency under the Olympus Alliance, they were still usable today. We had enough gold coins to get us through our travels for the next little while, so we could just get the appraisals done now and sell our items in another country. In fact, Pardoe and Shakova themselves said that the items would fetch higher prices in another country. The ornaments especially would sell better in a country that "used" things, rather than

Hephaestus, which “made” things. It sounded obvious now that I thought about it.

According to Clena, there was a southern country along the coast called Neptunepolis, the “country of merchants,” and it may be worth visiting. But before that, I wanted to get some real world experience fighting in my armor.

After I finished my training, I went back to Pardoe’s mansion, where Clena and the others came to greet me. Of course, I had my armor off already. Hephaestus was still a hot country. Walking around in a pure black full suit of armor was a little... no, very taxing.

As soon as I stepped in the yard, Rakti jumped toward me in her maid outfit and gave me a big embrace. Then Rium trotted over to me and I pet her head. Next, Roni tried approaching me diagonally from behind wearing the same maid uniform Rakti had on, but Clena held her back and gave me a warm smile. Looking at her in the sleeveless dress that even an amateur could tell was well-made, I was reminded that she was an aristocrat. Though she had a sword hanging from her waist. The light, see-through cape she was wearing invoked a cool sensation in contrast to this hot country right next to a volcano.

Roni said the Clena of the past never wore anything sleeveless regardless of the temperature because she was concerned about her body image. She had been traumatized by always being treated as the fat one when she was young. But every night, I told her through my words, behavior, and actions that it was nothing to worry about and that I thought it was rather attractive. The results of that materialized as her now wearing a sleeveless dress like this.

I mean, maybe she was a little fleshy, but she wasn’t fat at all. This wasn’t a matter of my personal preferences, but that she was honestly as slender as any ordinary girl in town. I’d argue that the young ladies around Clena back then were simply too thin.

Thinking back on it, the princess of the royal family that the hero Cosmos had managed to invite into his party was also quite thin. Maybe that was just the vibe the nobles in this world wanted to go for.

“Wh-what are you doing...?” Clena asked, her cheeks turning red. I had

accidentally started staring at her.

“No, I was just wondering... if you were pinching your belly fat every night.”

“Wanna go for training round 2?”

I mumbled my answer, which made Clena bring her face close and place a hand on the hilt of the sword hanging from her waist.

I’m only saying this just in case, but everything I did from washing the girls’ hair to scrubbing their backs to touching their bellies to touching anywhere else was always done under their explicit permission. Clena had Roni as her attendant who took care of her daily needs, but Rium and Rakti had no such personal attendant besides me, and Roni enjoyed having me wash her in the bath, too. Clena didn’t want to be the only one left out, so she let me wash her hair on a daily basis.

The skill I had become most proficient in since being summoned to this world might actually have been treating other girls’ hair. Seriously. Though half of that was due to the shampoo my MP created.

“By the way, who are they?” I brought my face closer to Clena’s until we were leaning into each other just enough for no one else to hear. I was looking at six armed men who had gathered themselves at the entrance of Pardoe’s mansion. Two of them were standing stoically upright on the left and right sides of the door. The remaining four didn’t command as much presence, but definitely didn’t look like they were slacking, either.

All of them were wearing mostly light armor. They looked like battle ravers at a glance from the way their burly arms were exposed from their shoulders down, but looking closer, I noticed that their armor was heavily decorated with exquisite ornaments. Their light armor was most likely due to Hephaestus’ temperatures, and their positions required them to keep their outward appearances in shape.

Roni then approached me, tip-toeing a little to whisper into my ear, “Sir Touya, you have a guest. Look over there.”

“A carriage? It looks high-class.”

Roni pointed toward Pardoe’s yard, where I saw an elaborate-looking carriage

parked next to ours. Our carriage was a four-wheeled covered wagon you'd typically see in western films used for traveling long distances. The other was a prim and proper-looking red carriage.

"So those six are the guards of whoever owns the carriage... are there more inside?"

"There's four more inside."

"They all seemed pretty strong."

"...Not surprising."

It was obvious enough from the six at the entrance. I'd gotten better at recognizing these sorts of situations lately.

"They must be a customer since they're inside the shop, but... who in the world is it?"

"Well... you're gonna be surprised."

"What?" I approached the front door while we conversed, but then the door suddenly slammed open and a large red-headed man sprang out.

"Ohh, you must be the Hero of the Goddess, Touya!"

His skin was tanned from the sun. His short and frizzy red hair extended to form sideburns and a mustache down his face, making him look like a lion. The way he heartily laughed while showing off his white teeth reminded me of the clerics at the fire temple. His height rivaled Rulitora's, and he was clad in what looked like an Indian kurta. It was pure white and seemed like it was about to rip apart from his copious amount of muscle. I could guess from the extravagant embroidery on his shawl that he must have been someone fairly important.

He spotted me and started making large strides in my direction, so I hastily whispered to Clena, "...Who is he?"

"...Can't you tell by looking?" Clena answered without meeting my gaze. She was right—I could guess, but I wished I was wrong.

"Hahahah! I've heard word of your accomplishments! Hmm, your body is well toned." The man stopped before me and gripped my shoulders, then my arms, and finally vigorously rustled my hair while laughing like I was a little kid.

Rium and Rakti hid behind my back, and Roni behind Clena's. Rulitora was staring agape at something on the man's head. He must have had a clear view of it from his height, but I had to look up to see a trace of it.

"...Are you His Majesty, the King?"

"Indeed, you are correct! I am Hephaestus XIV!"

There was a glistening golden crown on the head of the man guffawing before us, though tiny compared to his large frame. That could mean only one thing—he was the king of Hephaestusopolis, one of the four kingdoms within the Olympus Alliance.

"Um, your crown looks like it has cat ears."

"Indeed! They are meant to imitate the ears of the ketolts!"

The main issue with his appearance were the cat ears on his crown, which made him look like a muscular, bearded man wearing, well, cat ears. I found out later that the crown was designed like that out of respect for the ketolt blacksmiths that supported this kingdom.

Now then, what to do in this situation? I thought as I stared at Hephaestus XIV's back as we walked inside Pardoe's mansion.

The Hephaestus royal family had 300 years of history. They had come into power right around the time Athenapolis was being taken over. The family most likely had some connections to the sacred family and the temple of the Goddess of Light. However, the royal family's crown had ketolt ears, Hephaestus XIV himself was a follower of the Goddess of Fire, and he seemed to be on fairly good terms with the ketolts.

"I've heard all about you from my younger brother."

"Younger brother?" The King turned around to speak to me, but I only cocked my head since it didn't ring a bell.

"The temple elder. That's my younger brother, there in the Goddess of Fire's temple!"

My eyes opened wide in response. Clena and the others couldn't hide their surprise, either. They looked similar now that I thought about it. If you stripped

away the beard from the king in front of us, he'd look nearly identical to the temple elder. So that guy was the king's younger brother, huh?

"Where is that black armor, by the way? I came here to see that."

"I put it away. I couldn't keep it on in this heat."

"Ahh... well, that is understandable. It was rather stuffy inside my carriage, too. I suppose it would be a little cooler here if we had some wind clerics around."

So wind cleric magic was the replacement for electric fans here? Though the heat in Hephaestusopolis really did call for some air conditioners.

The king had wanted to see my Magic Eater armor, but he had just missed us at the training ground in the temple, so he came here and had been observing Pardoe appraise our antique equipment. When he heard that I had returned, he couldn't sit still and rushed to greet me at the front door. He was pretty light on his feet for someone of his size. He didn't see anything we were having appraised other than the antiques, nor did he seem suspicious about the quantity of items, so we had no reason to worry for now.

We would normally have gathered at the reception room, but instead we went straight into Pardoe's smithing room. One of the two guards standing at the door came along inside with the king. The smithing room was decently large, but right now the antiques were lined up not only on the desk and shelves, but also on clothes spread out along the ground as well. There was only one path to walk from the door to the desk.

From my party, only Clena and I entered the room. Maybe it would have been better for me to enter by myself, but Clena was my last resort for making judgments during our conversations.

When the four of us entered the room, Pardoe took one glance at us, then silently returned his attention to his appraisal work. This cat—er, person—was rather undaunted in the presence of the king. Though maybe they had just finished their introductions before I got here.

"By the way, is it true that everything Mr. Paul is appraising was retrieved from the demon lord's castle in Hadesopolis?"

So Hephaestus XIV called Pardoe “Mr. Paul,” huh. There really was significance to him having a family name.

“Yes, that’s true. Hadesopolis was in the middle of the void, underground.”

“Hmm...” Hephaestus XIV fell into deep thought at my reply, then picked up a shield and sheathed sword from the ground. The shield was a knight’s shield with a scale pattern, while the sword was a thin rapier. Neither of them looked too gaudy, but they were decorated with elegant ornaments.

“Oh...” Clena let out a small gasp when she looked at them.

“Have you noticed, young lady?”

“Y-yes.”

I glanced over at her, not knowing what was going on, and she returned my gaze. She was trying to see if I reacted. She then looked back at Hephaestus XIV and continued talking. She was covering for me, who still hadn’t figured it out.

“The symbols on the shield and the rapier’s hilt...” She hesitated on finishing her sentence. Was it something bad?

“They’re the crest of the Hephaestus royal family.”

“What?!” The king finished Clena’s sentence. I yelled in surprise and then turned around to face him. “Huh? Hadesopolis was destroyed 500 years ago, so... huh?”

The Hephaestus royal family was formed 300 years ago, which was after the destruction of Hadesopolis. It wouldn’t have made sense for the Hephaestus royal family’s crest to appear on anything from there. Had we found out something we shouldn’t have? We could write it off as a fake, but if it were real, then this would be proof that there was some relation between the demon lord and the Hephaestus royal family. Though I didn’t know where the 200 year gap came from.

I felt the blood drain from my face.

“Oh no, don’t worry. I’m not going to seal your mouth shut just because I have a sword in my hands. If I wanted to do that, I’d just do it with my bare hands, you know?”

Hephaestus XIV noticed I had grown pale and offered me words of encouragement. The contents were a little disturbing, but it was true that the thin rapier looked like it would snap as soon as he tried swinging it with his brawny arms.

“You might be wondering why the Hephaestus family crest existed 500 years ago... but our royal family actually goes back further than even the sacred family.”

“...Really?”

“The Hephaestus royal family that formed 300 years ago, was the ‘human royal family,’ but another family existed even before that. The ‘ketolt royal family.’”

“...The ketolts?” I looked over at Pardoe, who returned a nod.

“Back then, we had the old royal family, and the current one is considered the new royal family,” Pardoe explained without looking worked up at all. Apparently this wasn’t any sort of secret information.

“I never knew...” Clena had her eyes wide, looking shocked. So she had never heard of this before, either.

“Well, it’s not something that comes up in conversation often. Many of the citizens here have no idea, either!” Hephaestus XIV said, then gave a hearty laugh.

This information was on the level of a scandal, but the party concerned looked entirely unaffected, and Pardoe joined in on the laughing as well. What was going on here? I couldn’t wrap my head around the situation and wracked my brain until the king spoke out to me.

“I heard about what happened in Athena. However, there was one big difference between our kingdom and Athena’s.”

“Difference?”

“The attempt to take over Hephaestus failed.”

“...Is that something you should say as the king?”

“It’s nothing more than a silly tale at this point.”

He explained that the new royal family had successfully usurped the throne back then, but due to the differences in technological power, they weren't able to drive away the ketolts.

"So why is the new royal family still in power? If that were true, then the takeover should have counted as a failure."

"That is what my ancestors thought as well, but..."

"The old royal family let them keep it, meow."

"...Why?" Clena exclaimed in surprise at Pardoe's words before I could.

I looked at the guard with my mouth still agape, and he also nodded with a grim look on his face. It seemed like this was a fairly well-known story.

"The old royal family was comprised of twelve families who were all related to each other. They were all blacksmith families, and the most skilled one represented the country as king." Apparently the Paul family and the Remus family had both been part of it.

"So the old royal family was all related?"

"All of the blacksmith families with last names still are."

Since the blacksmiths worked closely together since long ago, all of the families naturally started intermingling. It was such a simple fact that no one even thought to bring it up here.

I wasn't being judgmental, but I had always thought that the Paul family's mansion was a little too big for just a blacksmith's. I had wondered if being a good blacksmith could earn him that much money, but it made sense now that I knew he was a descendant of the old royal family and was essentially treated like an aristocrat here.

"But why, though? From what I understand, the ketolt blacksmiths were the ones holding the kingdom together, and they could have taken the throne back anytime."

"Well... being the king was a pain, I guess?"

"......Huh?"

“It was long ago so I don’t know the details either, but even if we had chased out the new royal family at the time, the sacred family might have kept targeting us.”

“Yes, that was the case. I heard the story of what happened in Athena from Haruno.”

“So in the end, we decided to just push the work of the king onto them.”

“Oh...” I understood what they were talking about now. The king and twelve families at the time had probably realized, too. Even if the new royal family ruled over Hephaestus, they had no way to drive out the ketolt blacksmiths. The ketolts would have been happier shoving the responsibility of being king onto someone else and focusing on their blacksmith work. I had heard that a skilled worker was harder to replace than a company CEO, and this must have been exactly the case. I see, so the option to leave the new royal family in place would certainly have been tempting.

“The one condition the old royal family set was that the new royal family had to become followers of the Goddess of Fire. We’ve been followers ever since, and hey, we have no complaints about it.” Hephaestus XIV said, then garishly flexed his biceps. His chest muscles were twitching a bit as well.

He was completely indoctrinated, that much was obvious. Well, as long as he was happy.

In any case, that was the reason why the old royal family had the same crest. The cat-eared crown was something the new royal family had made to acknowledge the ketolts, but the ketolts at the time were apparently just bewildered, wondering why they had gone so far. The new royal family back then was a bunch of nobles sent out by the sacred family at the time, and the temple of light had also sent out their own group of pastors. However, once the new royal family converted to the Goddess of Fire, the pastors were driven away and sent scurrying back to Jupiter. Even then, a smidgen of faith in the Goddess of Light remained, and that brought us to the temple of light in this kingdom now.

Come to think of it, Rakti had said that the demon lord had been summoned as a result of Goldfish acting rashly as a cleric. The sacred family’s and temple of

light's actions after the demon lord's defeat went purely against the teachings of the Goddess of Light, according to Sera. From that perspective, the Goddess of Light herself could be considered a victim of all this as well. I felt like I could see her in a new light during my dream tonight.

The new royal family most likely had no choice but to follow the twelve families' orders. Blacksmithing was their main industry—it essentially ran their economy. If the royal family so much as angered the twelve families, they could have been driven out in the blink of an eye. All they had to do was stop their smithing and the kingdom would collapse. No joke, that was how much power they had.

Looking at it another way, as long as the new royal family was faithful to the Goddess of Fire, provided cover against the sacred family and temple of light, and didn't intrude on the ketolts' work, they could rest easy. They had given up and joined the other side in a way, but then governed and protected this kingdom for the past 300 years.

The culmination of all those years of history was now flexing his muscles and posing flamboyantly before me. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Though when I looked at the flexing king and the exasperated Pardoe, I realized that this was a perfectly fine way for humans and demi-humans to co-exist.

"Ahh, and about this shield and sword. Would you give these to me?"

"You want them back in the Hephaestus royal family?"

"Of course, I will give you proper compensation... No, how about you bequeath them to me, and I present you with an award?"

"Like in an official manner?"

"Indeed."

The shield and sword hadn't been formally given to me by the royal family, and they must have been worried that the crest might be used to dishonor their name. I glanced over at Clena, who gave me a small nod. Looked like there were no problems.

"Are there any procedures we need to go through?"

“Oh, no need, no need. Though we will have to conduct a ceremony to present you with the reward.”

“I figured we wouldn’t be able to skip that. I can take you up on that, then.”

One of the guards behind the king was pressing down on his stomach, but I decided to not touch on what he was trying to do. In any case, the shield and sword with the royal family’s crest might have been worth an unimaginable amount, but I had no practical use for them. So the best move here would be to hand them over to the royal family, then exchange it for something we would have a little more use for.

“Is there anything you would like?”

“I don’t have anything specific I can think of... but I’d appreciate something that I could only get here.”

“That’s quite a demanding request, in a sense.”

“I guess it is.”

“Well, there we have it. I shall think of something befitting to award you with.”

“Thank you for the offer. Please go ahead and take the shield and sword.”

“I shall!”

I wondered if it was okay to let him take them without asking for an exact compensation value, but this was the king we were talking to. It’d be best to let him do his thing without kicking up a fuss. The worst case scenario would be getting a medal or a letter of recognition in return, but even then, we would have gained a connection to the royal family in exchange for something we picked up for nearly free. It was still a net positive. Most of all, I didn’t expect this giant king in front of me to do something so dull. He seemed more the type to try to surprise you with something out of left field. I was pretty sure of that. So I decided to just wait and see what he would come up with, for better or worse.

“Oh, should we show you the magic armor as well?”

“Hmm, not in here, no. Too cramped. Let us go out to the reception area!”

“I’ll have Rulitora bring it over, then.”

Hephaestus XIV had only wanted the sword and shield from the smithing room and didn’t show interest in any of the other antiques. He led us back out to the reception area. Rulitora was a step ahead of us and had already brought the Magic Eater into the reception area, propping it down like an armored doll. Hephaestus XIV ordered one of his guards to bring the sword and shield over to the carriage outside.

The table and chairs in the reception area were a size fitting for humans to sit down and around on. They must have had plenty of non-ketolt customers as well. We sat facing the king, who had two guards behind him. Clena, Rium, and I sat on the sofa, while Rulitora, Roni, and Rakti stood behind us. The three of them were considered ravers, so this was how we had to arrange ourselves. With the way Rakti was, she was making me feel less afraid and more guilty for making the Goddess of Darkness stand.

Crissa left the room to make us drinks, and not a moment later, Hephaestus XIV stood up to admire the Magic Eater armor. His eyes were sparkling in excitement. He must have also been curious because full-body armor was a rare sight in this hot kingdom.

After a while of him inspecting the armor from all sorts of angles, Crissa returned with a silver tray of drinks in hand. She had brought us a type of drink called “lassi.” It was simply described as a whisked, drinkable yogurt. It could be sweetened, salted, or blended with fruit or spices according to preference, and could be made as a thick yogurt or thin and light. Crissa had made lassi with crushed fruit blended in, exactly how I would have wanted it. There was a slice of fruit perched on the rim of each glass. It was nice and chilled, especially soothing since I had just come back from training.

Once all the drinks had been set, Hephaestus XIV returned to his seat, took a gulp of the lassi, and suddenly started talking to me. “By the way, I have one question for you.”

“What is it?”

“You said you had defeated a demon general... what sort of demon was he?”

“You mean what he looked like...?”

“Yes.”

I didn’t know what he was getting at, but I had nothing to hide, so I replied honestly.

“He was a goldfish... oh wait, they don’t exist in this world. He was a demon that looked like a small fish. He was a cleric of darkness, and the one who summoned the demon lord himself. He could use magic to control all the metal weapons and armor around him.” I described him as accurately as I could, but in a way that didn’t make him sound too easy to defeat without exaggerating too much.

However, Hephaestus XIV’s face turned glum after that.

“Hmm... that’s not right.”

“Not right? What do you mean?”

“It is said that the demon generals have actually been living in a place close to Mt. Lemnos.”

“...The survivors of the demon generals?”

“You believed you had defeated a demon general, but there is no way a fish could have lived in that environment.”

Goldfish had been killed by boiling. He wouldn’t have survived high temperatures.

“What kind of place is it?”

“First of all, it’s hot. Though that much is obvious since it’s so close to a volcano. It is surrounded by steep cliffs on three sides and is right beyond an area that spouts poisonous volcanic gas.”

“That sounds crazy...” Apparently even monsters who lived on the volcano didn’t approach that area.

“On top of that, the gas burns incredibly viciously, so the area is constantly shielded by pillars of fire.”

“So it’s essentially telling you to stay away.” It scored full marks in terms of

isolation, but zero in terms of habitability.

“We can see them, but can’t approach them. Whether they’re really the demon generals or not, whoever is living there must have terrible personalities.”

“I can agree with that.”

Hephaestus XIV was clenching his fist as he explained the situation in an unsavory tone. He must have gotten incredibly frustrated at knowing where the possible demon general hideout was, yet remaining unable to do anything about it.

“Well, make sure you keep away from it as well.”

Hephaestus XIV asked about Hadesopolis after that. When I explained that the former kingdom was essentially in ruins with sand raining down from its skies, he looked solemn, as if he had pictured the ruined nation in his mind. We talked for a while longer, then the king took his guards and left. As we watched the carriage leave, Clena suddenly muttered from beside me, “Hey, Touya.”

“Hm? What’s up?”

“About that demon general hideout...”

“Oh yeah. The poison gas is a real bother... Do you think we could blow the gas away if I had the blessing of the Goddess of Wind?” No matter how flammable the poison gas was, pillars of fire wouldn’t be a problem if only we could remove the gas itself. That was the only method I could think of.

However, Clena had come up with something even more clever than that. “We could cross over that gas barrier if it were me and you.”

“...How so?”

“There’s a spell called Water Veil among my spirit magic. It’s a spell that creates a water shield around people. It’s supposed to be used as a bubble of air so that you can breathe inside water, but it can shield against fire and gas, too.”

I see, so this spell created a wall of water around someone. It should be able to shield against fire if it can do the same for water, and gases probably couldn’t

permeate through as well. However, Clena's spirit magic operated in a way that she had to have a source of fire to draw from if she wanted to use fire spirit magic. The water veil would need a large amount of water to work, and there was no way water would be present around a volcano. However, I could provide a solution to that.

"You can draw water from your Unlimited Bath, and I'll conjure up the water veil. We could cross the gas barriers like that, right?"

I'd have to draw water from the Bath over and over again, but the plan seemed doable.

"Do you want to try? It'll be hot in there."

"Oh, didn't you know? It's actually quite nice and refreshing inside the water veil." Clena said, then showed me a mischievous smile.

And so our next target was the demon general hideout, surrounded by fiery, poisonous gas and deadly cliffs.

Third Bath – Beyond the Laconium

“Hyaaah!” I yelled out, then sliced a red lizard’s body in two.

The monster looked like an oversized red iguana with the way its large spikes ran down its body. It was over one stuto in length, giving it a pretty frightening appearance.

I had a new weapon in my hands. It was one of the magic weapons we had recovered from the demon lord’s castle, a one-handed, double-edged battle axe with a unique shape. It sported a beautiful golden color on the outside, but was in fact made of a sturdy metal. The right and left sides of the blade weren’t perfectly symmetric, and the blade itself drew an upward-facing arch. It looked like a hollowed out semicircle. The edges of the blade were decorated not with accessories, but with craftsman spell inscriptions carved using crystal magic. Rium told me that many spells had been cast on the blade, Rustproofing being one of them. Spells were cast by inscribing the name of the spell onto the blade. The larger the blade, the more spells you could place. There was a magic conductor in the middle of the blade, which was the deciding factor in me choosing this crescent moon-shaped axe. I didn’t know if the axe already had a name, so I decided to call it Crescent Moon. Yes, I know I wasn’t very creative.

When I told everyone the name I had chosen, Rakti cheered in joy. Apparently the Goddess of Darkness had often been called the Goddess of Night, so she was glad I had picked a name related to the night. That was probably one of the reasons this axe was in Hadesopolis in the first place, too. And to no one’s surprise, the Goddess of Light showed up incredibly annoyed in my dream that night.

I mustered up all my strength and swung my Crescent Moon downward to decapitate another red lizard. I didn’t forget to offer my prayers after killing it. We’d be able to absorb some of our opponent’s power like this and slowly raise our levels. The rest of the party lined up to offer their prayers as well. Thinking about it, this must have looked like the scene at the end of a battle in an RPG

where everyone struck a victory pose.

I looked beside me to see Rakti trying her hardest to offer a prayer. She had been prayed to a countless number of times until now, but had never done the praying herself. She didn't have her own way of praying from Hadesopolis and was trying to imitate me instead. Well, the intent was the most important part of it. How exactly you prayed didn't matter.

We were now traveling on Mt. Lemnos. Our goal was the demon generals' hideout, of course. Stifling air surrounded us on this pure red mountain. Needless to say, it was hot. And though it was, we hadn't reached the area with poison gas yet, so we hadn't brought out the water veil.

Rakti's temporary body was hardly any different from a human's, so she was being overwhelmed by the heat. My Magic Eater should have been treating the heat as damage to deflect in exchange for my MP, but even then it was hot. The air I could see beyond my helmet's narrow vision was blurry, but that wasn't the only problem.

Mt. Lemnos never had any large-scale eruptions, but smaller eruptions happened frequently in exchange. Getting close to the volcano meant being exposed to the ash falling from above. Rulitora was the only one who could travel through all this without batting an eye.

Clena and Roni had learned from their last incident in the void and were wearing light clothing under their leather tunics and armor. The leather was made from red lizard skin to protect them against the heat. They were also wearing thin veils to shield them against the volcanic ash. Roni had a particularly large veil on to cover her frizzy and abundant hair.

Unable to take the heat anymore, Rium stumbled over to me and rested herself against my back. My armor was cool and soothing, as it had been deflecting the heat in exchange for my MP. She couldn't use her flying disc among all the smoke and sparks of fire, so she had no choice but to walk this whole way.

We had asked for permission from both the temple and the Hephaestus royal family to do this investigation. They had been tormenting themselves over this issue for a long time, so they gladly welcomed any chance to finally make

progress.

“Meow then, time to skin it!”

“Mark, come help!”

“Yeah, yeah...”

The cats pranced over from behind me. Pardoe, Shakova, and Mark were all present. The three of them had come along with us on this investigation.

Since this was viewed as the country’s problem, it would have been an issue for just my party to conduct the investigation, so the ketolts volunteered themselves, as they already knew about my Unlimited Bath. Mark was supposed to be mending that old sword, but for some reason he had joined us. He was probably trying to show off to Crissa.

I was worried about taking them to a place the demon generals might be, but Mark said that it wasn’t uncommon to come across monsters in the mines anyway. He looked pretty reliable shouldering his large battle hammer with his tiny body and breastplate. They were using umbrellas to shield against the ashes.

On that note, making your own weapons and armor to wear into the mines was considered a rite of passage to becoming a professional blacksmith. Apprentices would borrow ones from their masters to wear, but were expected to start practicing making their own immediately. They normally equipped a breastplate and a battle hammer, and occasionally gauntlets. The make of the breastplate would signify that blacksmith’s skill, style, and even their personality.

Pardoe’s breastplate was the very definition of “plain and simple.” It looked sturdy and had no bells or whistles. Shakova’s was a little more complicated, achieving a fine balance between being gaudy but still practical. You could tell that Pardoe had the upper hand in pure skill. Lastly, Mark’s equipment conveyed how inexperienced he still was. I didn’t have an eye for craftsmanship or artistry, but according to Clena, he was still only halfway there. He was aiming for the plain and simple look, but hadn’t been able to keep himself from making it a little gaudy either. He was probably trying to become a blacksmith that catered to Crissa’s tastes. I see, so even his personality shone through in

the make of his breastplate.

On another note, the red lizard that Mark was currently skinning was an indispensable resource to the people of Hephaestusopolis. They utilized every part of this monster. Like I had mentioned before, the skin was resistant to fire and made into gloves for the blacksmiths to use. The meat was edible, and the teeth and bones could be made into various tools.

There was one more unexpected use for them. The image of a lizard in my mind included their signature thin tongues sticking out, but these red lizards actually breathed fire. They possessed an organ inside their mouths that secreted a certain fluid, which acted as the fuel that allowed them to breathe fire. That certain fluid was, in fact, their blood. The flammable blood looked like oil, and was indeed used by the citizens of Hephaestusopolis as their oil source. These lizards would still be fine even if they started bleeding and their blood caught on fire. They really were monsters. And above all, they lived by consuming fire spirits and fire itself.

Red lizard meat couldn’t be fried, so it was boiled instead. I had eaten it several times during our stay in Hephaestusopolis. It was light, tender, and tasted like chicken. It was especially tasty when flavored with spices to give it a little kick.

The blood of the red lizards hardened quickly unless it was extracted immediately. It would also explode if it touched volcanic ash, but there were tools to keep that from happening. The ketolts must have rushed over immediately after I killed one and started dissecting it for exactly those reasons.

Shakova shifted his umbrella over to keep the ash from falling on Mark. Looking closely, he was making sure the umbrella was protecting his son more than himself. Shakova mainly watched over Mark and gave him a few pointers as he extracted the blood. Mark had done this plenty of times before, but there were still some tricks only veterans were aware of. This must have been one way of passing the family trade down the generations. Pardoe was watching the two of them from a ways off.

Maybe it was just because I came from another world, but I was feeling rather emotional while looking at this ordinary scene. *So this is how they live in this*

world, I thought. It was affecting me on a deeper level.

And then I thought... I really was just a stranger in this world, feeling so much emotion from something the others considered so commonplace.

I suddenly wanted to see Haruno again. We were far from each other right now so I couldn't go see her right away, but I'd at least send her a letter.

They finished dissecting the red lizard while I was lost in thought. We put everything in my Unlimited Bath, then went on our way again.

Some time later, another red lizard appeared before us. There sure were a lot of monsters here, even though Mt. Lemnos was so close to the city.

"Leave this to us, meow!"

"Come on, Mark!"

"You don't have to tell me!"

Before I had even budged, the ketolts ran forward with their hammers in hand. Their arms, which had been forged through their blacksmithing work, slammed their hammers down on the red lizard's jaw right as it tried to shoot out fire. Their strength as warriors definitely rivaled that of the red lizard's. I kept alert around us, making sure no more monsters were coming as I watched over the fight.

This was the total opposite of the idyllic countryside scenery outside Ceresopolis. Over there, the guards just needed to make their rounds once in a while, but this volcano was in a constant state of danger. Not to mention the monsters here ate fire spirits as food or were made up of fire themselves. This was essentially their paradise. The monsters had the advantage in this environment. This was their territory, not ours. I imagined that the residents of this blacksmith capital were all pretty courageous for being able to live right next to all this.

The ketolts had managed to defeat the red lizard without any particular trouble and dissected that one as well. After we walked for a while longer, Shakova suddenly stopped in his tracks and pointed at the sky, which looked foggy from all the smoke gushing from the craters.

“Grr...! The birds of Lemnos are coming!”

“The birds of Lemnos?” I looked to where he was pointing and saw several dancing flames within the thick, ashen air . The flames were undulating in the air, then burned up into a large fire. It wasn’t such a strange sight in this environment.

“...Are those *birds*?”

“They look more like spirits to me...”

Clena and Rakti commented, and I stared at the bundle of flames one more time. The flames kept swaying up and down, showing no signs of dying out. I kept peering, and finally realized that they were pure red birds flapping their wings.

There were five of them. It looked like they had noticed us and were spreading their wings, approaching us. I finally grasped their full forms as they drew in closer to us.

The birds of Lemnos had wings made of fire. No wonder I mistook them for dancing flames from a distance.

They were a rare species of bird that lived exclusively on Mt. Lemnos and consumed fire to survive. They were very large, and with the way their wings were spread out, could have been even bigger than an eagle. They had keen eyesight and were extremely aggressive. No matter if the target was a human, ketolt, or red lizard, the birds would undoubtedly swoop down for an attack. That must have been the case now too, since they were flying toward us.

“Hide under a boulder, hurry!”

“Have your backs to the rock and strike them down once they approach!”

“There’s no boulders anywhere near!”

“Then face your backs to each other!”

Pardoe, Shakova, and Mark formed a circle, each of them covering the others’ blind spots. Since arrows wouldn’t be able to pierce those wings made of fire, this was the best plan of attack. Clena, Roni, and I also formed a circle so that we protected Rakti and Rium within. I was positioned so that I was directly

facing the birds. Now was the time for some magic.

“Rulitora, come over here!” I called out to our only party member who hadn’t grouped up.

“No need... I can handle this myself!” However, he didn’t bother joining the circle with us and instead gripped his glaive, faced the birds, leaned forward with his tail outstretched, and dashed off. Before I could say anything, he let out a roar and leaped up toward the birds of Lemnos. He shot forth like an arrow with his glaive in his hands. Not just like any arrow, but like a giant missile fired from a ballista.

He pierced one bird that was right in front of him, then used the glaive’s hilt and a swing of his tail to take down another two. He landed and finished off the two birds that were still squirming on the ground. The remaining two used the opportunity to swoop down behind him, but he quickly spun around and swung his right arm with the glaive in hand. The heavy blade slashed one of the birds right in half, but the other one narrowly dodged the attack. It then flew right at Rulitora’s chest, but didn’t make it in time. At the same moment, Rulitora’s left hand swung around right in tune with his right and grabbed a hold of the bird. He gripped the bird’s head and raised it up high, then using his thick fingers and sharp claws, crushed it right inside his hand. The bird of Lemnos squirmed around for a moment, but eventually fell limp, and its wing-shaped flames died out as well.

I looked at him from behind, his thorny armor made from the shell of a giant scorpion filling my vision. My Magic Eater may have looked daunting, but his armor was no better. I had thought I’d gotten pretty strong recently, but I was still nowhere near a match for him.

“...Wait, you were grabbing something that was on fire!” I finally realized, then ran over to him. “Rulitora, is your hand okay?”

“Huh? Oh, that was nothing.”

“Let me see.”

He showed me the hand he had used to grab the bird of Lemnos, but the amber-colored scales that covered his hands only looked a little sooty. It had no burn wounds at all.

“...That’s amazing.”

“The void was still hotter than this,” Rulitora said, then let out a big laugh. The sand lizardmen were yet another species highly resistant to heat.

We progressed farther, battling the occasional monster along the way, until we gradually stopped seeing signs of life.

“Sir Touya, there’s a strange scent in the air.”

“I haven’t noticed anything, but... I’ll take your word for that, Roni.”

Roni was the first one to notice the scent. We were finally nearing the region with the poisonous gas. Roni had picked up on it with her sharp sense of smell.

“Clena, shall we get started?”

“Alright. I don’t want to breathe in any of that at all.”

I agreed. Since Roni was the only one who could notice the scent, we were still far enough from it to be affected at all, but poison gas was something we wanted to avoid at all costs.

“Everyone, gather ’round!”

I opened the door to my Unlimited Bath, filled a large barrel with water, and had Rulitora carry it. Clena would use the water from this barrel for her water veil. We had proactively kept Clena away from battles for this purpose, and Roni as her guard.

Rulitora crouched down with the barrel, then Clena drew her sword that was supposedly once owned by the Dark Prince and stuck the tip into the water. She then chanted a spell, and mist shot out from the barrel to form a film of water around us. The protective barrier was almost perfectly transparent, and I couldn’t tell it was there without looking closely. However, once I stuck a finger out from my gauntlet-covered hand, it pierced the barrier and formed two streams of water on either side. The veil of water was indeed there.

“The veil is centered around me, so don’t step too far away from me. Especially you, Touya! You wouldn’t even notice if you touched the veil with that armor on, so stay close!”

She was absolutely right. The only reason I knew my finger was piercing the water right now was because I could see it with my eyes. I couldn't feel it at all. There weren't any monsters around here, so I might as well just stick close to her.

"I'll be here..." Rium had climbed up Rulitora's back and perched herself on one end of a frame that he was using to carry the barrel. The heat had been beating down on her, so she must have wanted to stay near the cool water. The water would slowly drain from the barrel while the veil was in place, and it would disappear as soon as the water ran out. If we weren't paying attention to the water level and the veil cut off while we were surrounded by poison gas, it'd be all over for us. It'd be smart to have someone keep watch.

"Tell us if the water is about to run out, okay?"

"...Okay."

It'd be too cruel to make Rium keep walking, so I thought we'd make her keep watch on the water instead, but there was no energy left in her voice. She must have been incredibly tired.

"...Rulitora, can you handle one more?"

"No problem."

"Rakti, sit on the other side and keep watch on the water as well."

"Understood! Leave it to me!"

It'd be risky to leave the task to just Rium right now, so I decided to have Rakti join as well. She looked happy to be given an order as her eyes sparkled with a beaming smile. Meanwhile, Rium wasn't saying another word. She must have realized how tired she was.

"Go ahead and rest, Rium."

We should let her take a break for now. We would need her after we located the demon generals' hideout. Her knowledge as a crystal mage would be vital to investigate it. I rubbed her cheek after telling her to rest, and she nodded with a comfortable expression.

We progressed farther under the water veil until we arrived at the top of a small hill. Looking down, we finally got a grasp on the environment the demon generals were hiding in. There was a basin at the foot of the hill where all the gas had been collecting. We were already surrounded by a yellowish haze, but the basin was an even thicker yellow. The poison gas was heavier than the air and inflammable.

It felt like we were standing above the clouds right now, color aside. Our current location was the “best” in the surrounding environment. From here, we could cross into the basin. The three other directions surrounding us were steep mountain walls. So this was what the king had meant by saying that the area was surrounded by cliffs. We saw the shadow of a rocky mountain cliff from one of the farthest ends of the hill. We could see it from here since we were above the basin of gas, but traveling there on foot would take at least a day. And even if we could shield ourselves from the poison gas, we would grow tired before then. So it was visible, but impossible to reach. It was a perfect taunt from the demon generals.

It made sense why no one had been able to travel that far in all these years. The only ways you could cross were either by having a body immune to the gas, flying through this environment, or using some technique to shield yourself from the gas. Not only that, you needed to find the hideout before getting tired.

“How’s the water level?” I asked.

“About halfway...?”

“...A little more than that.”

Rakti stretched herself upward to take a look, while Rium tried to look while seated on the frame, even though her feet weren’t touching the ground. Don’t push yourself, Rium.

“How’s your MP, Clena?”

“I’m nowhere near done yet.”

She still seemed fine. She wasn’t showing any signs of fatigue in her expression, either.

I opened the door to the Unlimited Bath and let everyone inside. Since we

were cut off from the outside world in here, the water veil would disappear once we shut the door, but the poison gas wouldn't enter either. This was one other way we'd be protected from the poison gas during our journey. I replenished the water in the barrel and decided that we take a break before heading out again. We could have Clena cast the veil spell, then fill in the gaps in the door as we opened it and keep any gas from getting in.

We wouldn't be able to reach the hideout with my Unlimited Bath alone. Clena's water veil wasn't enough by itself, either. However, we could make it through the gas-filled basin with our powers combined. The water veil would shield us from the poison gas, and my Unlimited Bath would provide safety and relief so that we wouldn't run out of energy. We had brought more than enough food with us. We would slowly but surely reach the demon generals' hideout.

It had been three days since we descended down the hill into the basin of gas, and we'd learned a few things since. For one, this yellowish poison gas affected not only creatures, but plants as well. No normal plants were growing in the area. There was only some sort of moss or mildew spread out on the ground and rocks, as well as a type of mushroom that I could only describe as enoki mushrooms with awfully long stems.

The caps of the long enoki mushrooms spread out wide and scattered the yellow mist, which made me realize what role these mushrooms served in this basin. At first I had thought they were spores, but in that case, they shouldn't have been floating within the gas for a long time like they were. The giant enoki mushrooms were indeed scattering the poison gas around.

The water veil could shield against gas, but it was effectively useless against physical contact. We had to be careful to not let any mushrooms touch our veil. We wouldn't be able to do anything against spores getting inside. In fact, we had messed up on the first day and I had to use an antidote spell to dissolve a poisonous spore, but let's forget about that.

The gas blocked our view like a heavy mist, so we advanced purely following the faint light of the sun and the silhouette of the cliff in the distance. Clena could only hold the water veil up for about half a day, considering our need to

replenish the water and keep up her stamina. Her MP wouldn't be able to hold up for longer bouts of time.

As a result, we rested for half a day each day and made our way slowly but surely toward our goal. The ketolts could use the fire altar inside my Unlimited Bath in the meantime, so they were grateful. Rulitora set up a tent in the yard to sleep in, a fair distance away from the bath. The ketolts wanted to utilize the fire altar as much as possible, so they ended up hanging around Rulitora in the meantime. Mark was using his off hours to practice mending the old equipment under Shakova's guidance.

Unsurprisingly, no monsters lived in the basin, so the rest of us besides Clena just needed to keep walking throughout the day, and we had plenty of energy to spare. On top of that, the gas blocked out most of the sun's rays and it was much cooler here than it was before.

The one issue that had caught us off guard was using the restroom. My Unlimited Bath had no toilet, so during our travels up until now, we had simply relieved ourselves in some secluded area. However, we couldn't stray outside the water veil now. We had no choice but to open the door to the Unlimited Bath and drape a tarp over it for privacy whenever someone needed to go. Far from a pleasant camping experience. Clena extended the reach of her water veil in those situations, but I couldn't blame her. Her reasons were more than valid.

Anyway, for the past three days, my primary job had become taking care of Clena whenever she became exhausted from using up her MP to the last drop. At the end of the third day, we put on our yuamigi to refresh ourselves in the bath. Rulitora and the three ketolts hated hot water, but they still stank, so I made them at least wash themselves with cold water. Pardoe was the most reluctant of them all, but he promised to follow my orders during this journey, so he was sullenly washing the sweat off himself right now. Shakova said that he couldn't remember the last time Pardoe had looked so white. Just how much had he avoided baths before? I felt like I could relate a little to Crissa now.

As for me, I was currently washing Clena's hair in the bathing room.

"Ahh... I feel alive again..." Her relaxed voice echoed off the walls.

I felt like I had gotten better at washing hair lately, maybe because I had

started doing it every day. I made sure to massage her scalp as well.

It was Roni's job to scrub her body. She didn't completely object to me doing it, but it still made her tense. I would have been more than willing—happy, even—to just wash her back, but Roni liked washing Clena's back as well, so I left it to her.

"Whenever you wash my hair, Touya... it feels so nice that I start getting sleepy..." Clena murmured slowly. Her head was drooping as she gradually nodded off.

I knew how she was feeling since I had gone through it myself before as well. The mental fatigue of wearing out your MP really brought her into a daze. She probably couldn't think straight right now.

"You can go ahead and sleep, but I'll have to touch you." If she really were to fall asleep right now, I would need to support her.



“That’s fine, but... I need to hold off until after the bath.”

“Alright, then keep yourself awake for now.” She just said it was fine for me to touch her.

“Be my lap pillow after we get out of the bath...”

She had been requesting lap pillows more often lately. I was enjoying this spoiled and defenseless side of her, not to mention getting to stroke her silver hair as she slept.

“It’ll be my pleasure.”

“That’s a promise...” A goofy smile formed on her face at my reply.

She did her best to stay awake while Roni washed her body after that, but finally reached her limit after we started soaking in the bath and dozed off. Her fatigue must have built up over the past three days. I moved in to support her before her face fell into the water.

We had already been soaking for a good ten minutes, so I carried her outside the bath. I could feel her voluptuous breasts pressing against my back and her plump thighs against my arms. There were some perks to this deal.

Roni also got out of the bath after that. She had probably predicted that this would happen and finished cleaning herself quickly while I was washing Clena’s hair. It would probably be bad for me to dry her off and dress her while she was sleeping. I left that to Roni and instead headed back inside the bathing room.

As soon as I re-entered, Rium and Rakti came running over and clung on to me with their bodies still covered in soap suds. They had been holding themselves back while I was taking care of our VIP Clena, but they took the opportunity as soon as they saw her leave the bath. Rium was normally shy around people she didn’t know, yet she let so much of her guard down around anyone she opened up to. Clena was too bashful to let me wash her body, but Rium had absolutely no problem with it. In fact, I was her first choice. She said that her teacher and pseudo-grandmother Nartha was in second place, then Sera and Haruno took up third and fourth place. I was both happy and embarrassed that she had placed me above her own teacher. The difference between Sera and Haruno was that the former was like her mother, and the

latter like her older sister. I could agree with her evaluation there.

On the other hand, Rakti let her guard down around everyone, had no street smarts, was a clumsy airhead, and made me worry just by watching her. I wasn't too street smart in this world, but she was even worse. Yet she was so attached to me, and when I saw her innocent smile, I just couldn't leave her be. It felt like I had a duty to take care of her. This feeling was something different from wanting to worship her as a goddess, but it was honestly how I felt. I had basically already taken her under my wing.

Now that we were here, I took the opportunity to wash the two of them. We soaked in the bath for a while after that, all huddled up. We then went to the wooden room, but found no sign of Clena or Roni being there. I could hear clangs of metal after straining my ears. Mark was probably working on mending that sword again. Rulitora was likely with him. All of the weapons we had found in Hadesopolis were too light for him, so he was in the midst of negotiating with Pardoe to have something new made.

Roni had probably carried Clena to the tatami-floored room to sleep, then gone to the kitchen to prepare for dinner. Though fake, Rakti was still a labor raver and had been learning how to do chores from Roni. She put on an apron to help Roni out.

"U-uuum, hmm?"

"Let me give you a hand, Rakti."

She was already confusing herself just trying to tie the apron strings behind her, so I did it for her. *I just can't leave this girl be,* I thought.

"Alright, I tied it for you. Now do your best."

"Thank you very much!" Rakti happily gave me a hug, then a kiss on my cheek.

I gave her a kiss on the cheek back, then she skipped into the kitchen full of smiles, arms swaying. I saw her off, then tried to lead Rium to the tatami room with me, but she wouldn't move an inch. I turned around to find her looking at me with upturned eyes, expecting something. She almost looked fine, but was actually holding back tears. This was the face she put on when she felt left out.

I stooped down in front of her and gave her kisses on both cheeks, which

made her smile lightly and give me kisses in return. I tried leading her by the hand again, and this time she followed, satisfied. We entered the tatami room together.

"...You're late." Clena was lying on top of a blanket inside the room, awake after hearing us enter. She was pouting. She had probably already woken up once after she had been carried to this room.

"I'm sorry."

"Come on, hurry up and be my lap pillow."

I simply apologized and sat down beside her. She sluggishly moved her chin onto my legs, then turned around—and smushed her nose against my stomach. She was too close. She shifted position a little and tried turning over again.

Restoring MP required resting with peace of mind, and apparently this gave her the most peace of mind at the moment. She had tried using Roni as a lap pillow, but kept worrying if she was too heavy.

When I first heard that from her, I jokingly asked, "Then how about me?" She replied by saying "I'll be fine if I imagine it's just my boobs and butt that are making me heavy." And to that, I had replied, "Don't think of yourself like that. I can support all of your weight."

I didn't know if that was the reason specifically, but we had gotten closer since then. Clena said that she had finally found a place where she felt like she could belong. She had doubts on her possible half-demon identity, had abandoned her family and run away from home, and didn't have anywhere else to go. She was thankful for me, but there were plenty of things we couldn't have accomplished without Clena's help as well, so the feeling was mutual.

Rium sat down and leaned against me, then opened up a book to read. It was a textbook on crystal magic. I had tried going through it once before, but couldn't understand a word. It was a bit of a surreal sight to see a girl as young as her reading such a difficult book. I didn't want to lose to her, though. I opened up my cleric magic textbook to study. Clena would start sulking if I didn't pay attention to her, so I rested the book on the blanket and used my free hand to play with her hair.

“Your hair’s gotten even prettier lately.”

“It’s all thanks to your soap.”

That made me feel pretty proud. The soap born from my MP was making her and all the other girls prettier.

“You know how we found all those jewels and accessories in Hadesopolis?”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“I think your hair is prettier than all of them.”

All the other girls had nicer hair now, but Clena’s stood out above them all. Her shiny, glossy silver hair was a sight to behold.

“...You say some pretty ridiculous things sometimes.”

“I’m serious. Though I admit it’s also rare for me, since people didn’t have silver hair in the other world.”

“...Thank you,” she said, then turned around again and buried her face into my stomach. She gripped the edge of my pajamas and didn’t budge after that.

Apparently she had gotten embarrassed. She probably didn’t want me to see her blushing. I didn’t say a word and just stroked her hair. I think I had a huge grin on my face right now.

“.....”

I felt a gaze coming from Rium’s direction, so I turned around to find her still leaning against me, but looking up with a pleading expression. I wasn’t in the proper position to stroke her hair right now, but I could wrap my arm around her shoulders and give her a hug. That made her drop her book and lean all her weight against me, putting her in the perfect position for me to bury myself in her hair and rub my cheek against her head. She responded in kind by rubbing her cheeks into my chest.

“Hey, let me join too.” Clena sat up while we were messing around and gave me a hug as well. She would normally have been too embarrassed to do something like this, but she was acting more bold now under the pretense of healing her fatigued mind with peace and comfort.

Clena's weight made all of us fall onto the blanket. We continued playing around for a while afterward, then eventually fell asleep. We continued sleeping until Roni and Rakti came over to get us for dinner. My alarm clock was Rakti's flying body slam of jealously against the other girls. It surprisingly didn't hurt, either because Rakti was so light or because I had gotten a bit more tough.

The next day, we once again set out from the Unlimited Bath under the guidance of the faint sun and the cliff's silhouette. We took a break and refilled our water a little before noon, and then after walking for about another hour, we encountered a shadow distinct from the cliff's.

"What's that?"

"I can hear something... is it an earthquake?"

There was a low tremor beyond the barrier of our water veil. We would normally have Rulitora scout out the area ahead, but that wasn't possible now with all the poison gas. For the time being, we had no choice but to stay alert and keep walking.

We hid ourselves in the shade of a nearby boulder and slowly approached the shadow until its silhouette barely came into view. It was fairly large—about the size of an elephant.

"I-is that a...?!" Roni was the first to recognize the silhouette's shape. She readied her sword and stood in front of Clena. It was a magic short sword, one of the many weapons we had retrieved from Hadesopolis.

Pardoe and the other ketolts had their hammers in hand. You could tell they were alarmed from the way their tails pointed upward. I couldn't blame them for that reaction, though. If I had a tail, that would have been my instinct, too. Rakti was the only one looking ahead with her eyes glistening in wonder.

"Is that... a dragon...?!"

Yes, the shadow formed the shape of a dragon. Scales covered its gigantic body. It might have been a dinosaur too, but I opted for the more fantasy-like possibility.

It had a wide and stout torso, a short neck, and a huge head. Its arms and legs

were also short and stout, making it seem slow—almost like a hippopotamus. Though it had an even larger chin than a hippopotamus would. Its chin was the largest feature on its head, drooping all the way down to the ground. It was moving slowly right now because it was eating the enoki mushrooms. Still, it must have possessed amazing strength purely from being able to hold its head up. The scales on its body were covered in moss.

We continued watching it from the shade of the boulder. The dragon slowly ate up the giant enoki mushrooms growing off the rocks.

"...Is it eating up the entire rock, too?"

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

Just as Rulitora said, the dragon was gulping down entire rocks along with the enoki mushroom it was munching on.

"It sure sounds like that, too."

The crunching sounds as the dragon chewed on the rocks and mushrooms were impressively loud. Its jaw was strong enough to easily break down entire boulders. Its teeth must have been incredibly sturdy as well.

"...Look at that, Touya." Rium was pointing to the dragon's back. Six protrusions ran along its spine. They looked like horns at first, but I noticed that yellow fumes were puffing out the tip of each one. Each protrusion looked like a chimney.

"Is that poison gas coming out of there?"

"...Spores, probably."

"Spores? You mean from the mushrooms? Don't tell me that dragon's a mushroom, too?"

So it looked like a dragon, but was actually a plant? I thought that might have been within the realm of possibility for monsters here, but Rium shook her head.

"I read about it in a book before... There are some monsters that can change their environment to suit their own needs..."

"...I see." That dragon was exactly one of those types of monsters. It could

spread spores and make the mushrooms thrive, and was the very cause of all the poison gas in this basin.

According to Rium, the dragons in this world were a variety of monsters that could alter their environments in various ways. Even if this *was* a plant monster, calling it a “dragon” would have been accurate considering it had the power to turn this basin into a poison gas dump.

That would explain a few other things, too. For example, how the demon general managed to find a hideout under such perfect conditions. The location seemed like it had almost been custom-made. I had wondered how they’d managed to find this place, but it was a different story if some being had created it for them. If that dragon had the power to change its environment, then all the person at the hideout had to do was set it off into the basin. The dragon would diligently spread the spores and fill the basin with poison gas. And just like that, this somewhat obscure mountain hideout transformed into an impregnable stronghold. The only question was how they had managed to lure the dragon along, but considering this was a demon general we were talking about, they must have found a way.

And then the dragon suddenly stopped moving. It slowly looked around, then stopped again in one direction. No good, it was looking at us. We braced ourselves to start running at any second, but then heard an abrupt blast, and the top half of the boulder we were hiding under got blown to smithereens.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“They were rocks! It shot rocks from its mouth!”

“You mean the ones it was eating with the mushroom just now?!”

Rulitora had managed to follow what just transpired. The dragon had stopped and stared at us, then spat out several rocks it had just been chewing up in our direction. The power of the blast was enough to pulverize the upper half of our boulder. Even a shotgun couldn’t compare.

We had underestimated it. Its sluggish movements made us assume we could run away anytime with time to spare. The water veil protected us against the poison gas, but it was ineffective against physical damage. We’d be goners if the barrage of rocks hit the barrier.

“We’re running away!”

“Got it!”

Fortunately the lower half of the boulder we were hiding under was still intact. The dragon had also fired off all the rocks it had been chewing, so there shouldn’t have been any left in its mouth now. Using the boulder as our shield, we could gain some distance and then retreat inside the Unlimited Bath.

...Is what we thought, but the next moment, the lower half of the boulder also got blown to smithereens. I quickly used my Magic Eater to shield everyone against the blast. The armor prevented me from taking any damage against the rocks, but I could feel my MP seeping away.

“What did it shoot out this time?!”

“The same as last time!”

“Rocks? Were there still some left in its mouth?”

“Touya, its jaw...!”

“Wait a minute!” I finally realized from Rium’s words. The barrage of rocks would be the strongest and fastest weapon for this enormous, sluggish dragon. Not to mention its giant, heavy jaw. It had the ability to chew up and store rocks inside its jaw whenever it ate those mushrooms, so that it could shoot them back out at any time. Or maybe it used rocks as its weapon because it had that kind of jaw in the first place, but that was a “what came first” kind of question.

“Tsk! Summon spirit!” I noticed it was preparing for another attack and pressed my left foot into the ground, summoning earth spirits from the sole of my foot. A wall of dirt shot up before us, which I compressed until it turned black. The sound of multiple rocks slamming against the wall arose not a moment later. The wall was dense enough to protect us against this first wave, but it wouldn’t hold up against more streams of attacks. We were trapped. There no way we could escape the rocks now.

We had two choices. Either defeat the dragon right here and now, or escape inside the Unlimited Bath. I didn’t know whether it was by sight or sound, but it managed to detect our presence while we were hiding behind the boulder. And it attacked us without any provocation, maybe because this was its territory.

Even if we hid inside the Unlimited Bath for now, it might chase us down again now that it recognized us as enemies. In that case, we'd have to constantly stay on guard against a possible bombardment of flying rocks from beyond the thick veil of gas. We'd have to defeat it right now. Our options were limited inside this water veil, but we had to do *something*.

First, I summoned earth spirits from the ground, formed several black spears, and threw them in the direction I estimated the dragon to be. In the next moment, I heard an anguished roar. Bull's-eye. Now I knew that physical attacks worked against this thing.

The dragon picked up its attacks, probably angry now. My wall looked like it was about to break, so I summoned another black wall to cover us. But its attacks were powerful. The new wall formed cracks in an instant, almost collapsing from the barrage.

This didn't look good. Its attacks were faster than mine. Unless I could handle both firing my spells off and defending against the attacks on my own, we'd eventually be overwhelmed. I had considered having Rulitora and the others put up their shields as well, but even my wall couldn't hold up against that attack, so what could a few shields do?

I had just one option left. I summoned one more black wall, then used fire cleric magic to shoot a ball of fire off in another direction and made it explode, drawing the dragon's attention. Just as I had planned, the barrage of rocks ceased. I couldn't tell because of the wall between us, but the dragon was probably looking in another direction right now. Now was my chance.

"Clena, I'll leave the veil to you!"

"Huh? Wait!"

Before she could react, I jumped away in the opposite direction I had fired the explosion. I crossed the water veil's barrier into the sea of poison gas. This wasn't just some desperate attempt. The poison gas was nothing to me right now.

A white light glowing from one of the horns on my helmet scattered away the poison gas as I ran. This was the antidote spell I had used to nullify the poison spores once before.

Yes, I was conjuring an antidote from my helmet's horn and using it to erase the poison gas around me. From the outside, I must have looked like I was spouting a white flame from my horn.

I drew a large arc to make sure the dragon wouldn't hit the black wall as I approached it. The dragon noticed my presence and fired another barrage of rocks, but thanks to the Magic Eater, I didn't feel it one bit. In exchange, I felt my MP diminishing more and more. When I drew even closer, I noticed that my spears had pierced its stomach. The spears were already broken, but blood was streaming out of its belly. Now this was a matter of which would run out sooner —my MP or its life.

I was the faster one at this range. I grabbed the hilt of my Crescent Moon magic axe, ran to the dragon's flank, and before it could turn around to look at me, leaped toward its ribcage.

"Eat this!" I swung my Crescent Moon down with all my might. My axe was met with tough resistance, but the swing managed to slice across the dragon's side. Blue blood sprayed into the air, and at the same time a deafening roar pierced my eardrums.

The dragon immediately pointed its jaw in my direction, shooting out a stream of rocks, but before that I circled around to its tail and avoided the attack. Fortunately, its tail was also similar to a hippo's in that it didn't have enough power to knock a human down even as it swung around. I kept slashing at it, then circling around behind it. This would be an easy victory... or so I wished. After I swung at its right leg, it focused its attention on something other than me.

"Screech!"

Maybe because my figure was completely out of its sight, it started preparing an attack against something still—the black dirt wall I had set up before jumping out of the water veil. Perhaps it was just trying to vent its anger onto something nearby, but if it broke down the dirt wall, then Clena and the rest would be subject to the dragon's attacks.

The water veil wouldn't do a thing against an onslaught of rocks. Even Rulitora wouldn't be able to hold up against it. Unfortunately, my slash at its

side wasn't enough to bring down this elephant-sized monster.

"Oh no you don't!" There was only one thing I could do. I jumped in front of the rock barrage, turning my own body into a shield. As long as I could protect my eyes, the Magic Eater would absorb all the damage in exchange for my MP. I felt the lethargy seep in as my MP was gradually shaved off. But I was the only thing that could act as a shield right now, so dodging wasn't an option.

My helmet was enveloped in a white flame, the cleric spell "antidote." This allowed me to move freely within the poison gas, but it was consuming my MP as well. I could tell my MP was draining fast. It was a race between my MP and the dragon's life—which would end first.

My offensive spells got their power from me pouring superhuman amounts of MP into basic spells. Of course, I couldn't risk using them now. It was the equivalent of shortening my own lifespan.

I was in front of the dragon's face now after turning into a shield, so I used the chance to swing my Crescent Moon into its nose. It was fairly effective, as the dragon roared and bent backward.

"Now's my chance!" I slashed at the dragon's tender neck now that it was fully exposed. The blood that spurt out disappeared as soon as it touched the white flame surrounding my helmet. Since it was reacting to the antidote, the blood must have been poisonous as well.

In any case, the cut on its throat seemed to have done a good number on it. It wouldn't be able to breathe anymore, which meant it couldn't use its lungs to blast another barrage of rocks at me. I slashed at its throat again after realizing that, making it writhe in agony.

"Whoa?!"

I thought this would be the end for the dragon, but then it slammed its large chin down at me like a hammer. I jumped to the side and just barely dodged the attack. It then tried to step on me, but I rolled back on the ground to avoid it.

"Summon spirit!!" I immediately stood back up and summoned earth spirits to raise the ground below me, forming a slope toward the dragon's back.

Attacks on its neck were effective. I couldn't aim for its throat anymore with

its chin in the way, but next I'd try aiming for its neck from behind. If it had a spine, then attacks there should be potent as well.

I used the conductors at my feet to control the ground, riding the slope like a wave at breakneck speeds until I jumped onto the dragon's back. Then, I swung my Crescent Moon down with all my might at its medulla, assuming it had one. A moment later, the dragon started convulsing wildly as blue blood spouted out from the open wound.

My swing met some resistance. It was softer than I had expected, as the axe sliced past its scales into its meat, but it couldn't cut through bone.

Crap, I'd be shaken off at this rate. I desperately clung to the dragon's back, kneeling down to maintain balance. I raised my Crescent Moon in an attempt to finish the dragon off, but couldn't put strength into my arms like this. My Magic Eater could protect me against damage from a fall, but all the MP in the world wouldn't be enough to guard me from what might happen if I fell near the panicking dragon's feet. Or maybe I could jump off myself and try to gain some ground? I started loosening my grip at that thought, but then an idea suddenly sprung to mind. One thing could completely turn the tables in this situation. It wasn't too late to try this out.

This would be my last attack. I mustered up all the strength in my body, then slammed my head into the dragon's neck. The loudest roar yet resounded in the air. It sounded like a death cry to me.

I had stuck my head into the wound in the dragon's neck, which was still spurting blood. The antidote that was still wafting out from my horn purified and erased any poison. And this dragon's blood was poisonous. If you had questioned what would happen if I applied antidote to this open wound, this was the answer.

"Disappear!!"

My vision was all blue beyond the white light after sticking my head into the wound, but I didn't flinch and kept clinging to the dragon's back, pouring all my MP into casting the antidote spell. The poison was the dragon's own form of vitality. I kept purifying it, making it vanish. This was even in an area close to the dragon's head. If this didn't kill it, then it shouldn't have counted as a living

being in the first place.

Sure enough, the dragon's cries eventually died down as it toppled over like a giant string had snapped, making the ground rumble. That sent me flying to the ground. The impact was absorbed by my Magic Eater, but I couldn't put any more strength into my body. I hadn't noticed at all during the fight, but my physical strength ran out before my MP did. My breathing was ragged and I couldn't move an inch.

Now I was in an even bigger pinch than before. If I lost consciousness, my antidote would stop working. That would leave me entirely exposed to the sea of poison gas. I had to get back to Clena somehow.

"No...!" I somehow managed to stand up, but couldn't put strength into my legs and was about to topple over again. However, a pair of strong arms lifted me up before that could happen. It was Rulitora.

"Good work, Sir Touya."

I looked around me and noticed the gas was gone. I had entered the water veil again without realizing it.

"...I see, so you guys got here first..."

The water veil followed Clena's movements. Maybe they had noticed from the dragon's death cry or from the sound of it toppling to the ground, but they had come over to retrieve me. Pardoe and the others used water from the barrel to clean the poison from my armor, then stripped it off me. Roni made me drink some water while I looked at Rakti, who was about to cry, and Rium, who was already crying. I slowly realized that I had managed to return alive.

"Oh no..."

The moment I let myself relax, both the mental and physical exhaustion took its toll on me. If I let myself continue, this would become a repeat of the aftermath of the battle against Goldfish, where everyone else couldn't recover themselves in the Unlimited Bath until I woke up again.

"Open...!" I used the last drop of my power to open the door to the Unlimited Bath, and as soon as I confirmed it was open, let my consciousness slip away.

And then in my dream, the Goddess of Light doted on me with a face brimming with smiles. She hugged me tight the entire time, refusing to let go. She seemed awfully pleased by the fact that I had used light cleric magic to defeat the dragon.

“Where am I...?” When I woke up again, I was inside the tatami room in the Unlimited Bath. They had carried me here after I fainted. They had changed me into pajamas, too. I guessed that Roni had done it for me.

“...Hm?”

The buttons on my shirt were off by one. So Rakti had helped, too. A smile formed on my face as I imagined her clumsily trying to button me up.

I stepped out of the bedroom into the hallway that doubled as our storage room and met eyes with Roni. Her eyes grew round as soon as she saw me, then they started forming tears, and finally she leaped into my chest, overcome with emotion.

“Sir Touyaaa!”

I braced myself and supported her weight. Alright, my feet were steady. It looked like I had recovered just fine after sleeping.

I buried my face into her frizzy cream-colored hair that smelled of shampoo, hugged her tight, and patted her head. Since she had recently gained an understudy by the name of Rakti, she was acting more like a proper servant lately, and rarely put her raw emotions on display like this. I used the opportunity to pamper her as much as I could right now.

The others noticed the voices and started filtering in one by one. Roni realized how she was acting and tried to get away, but I wouldn’t let her. Then Rakti jumped onto us, making it even harder for Roni to peel herself off of me. Rium circled around behind me and jumped onto my back. I could still maintain my posture even with the three of them clinging onto me, which was a sign of how much stronger I had gotten. Maybe it was just my character to pay more mind to something like this over killing a dragon.

Clena didn’t cling on to me, but I could tell that she was getting a little teary-eyed. Rulitora looked even more like he was about to burst into tears, though. I

had gotten good at discerning the facial expressions of sand lizardmen lately.

“I’m so glad you woke up, I really am...”

“You’re exaggerating... well, maybe not. How long was I out for?”

“Two days.”

“Two days, huh...”

Rulitora answered my question. I had been even more exhausted than I thought. Had I not opened the door to the Unlimited Bath before passing out, Clena would have run out of energy and our entire party would have been done for.

“We could still use the Unlimited Bath, and Rakti said you’d be fine, but...”

“Sorry for making you worry.”

“I don’t want to say we had no choice, but we really had no choice. We couldn’t have continued the expedition without taking care of that.”

“And we didn’t have many other options for taking it down.”

I had honestly braced myself for them getting angry at me for doing something so rash, but both Clena and Rulitora had realized that we had no other options at the time. If I never woke up again, though, they’d have been stuck within this poison gas forever. I needed to apologize for making them worry about that.

Even the ketolts held off from using the fire altar to give my MP some rest. That being said, they hadn’t just sat around doing nothing these past two days. Clena expanded the water veil to encompass the dragon’s corpse, then they began dissecting it.

“We got our hands on some purretty rare goods!” Shakova said, then held out a star-shaped scale about the size of my palm.

I accepted it and saw that it was faintly transparent. I flicked it with my fingers and it made a hard sound, like a mineral. I held it up to the light, which made it look almost like jade.

“...Is this really one of that dragon’s scales?” I asked in awe.

“It really is. I was surprised too when I first cleaned one up.” Mark nodded with a meek expression. It was initially dark and dull from the poison gas and mushroom spores, but after putting on a pair of gloves and washing it, the scale showed its true colors.

I couldn’t believe it. That slow, elephant-sized dragon that looked like a hippo had actually been adorned these beautiful scales that could pass for jewels. Since it was as big as an elephant, they had managed to collect a huge amount of scales. They were still in the middle of washing them.

“We gathered sooo many, meow!” Shakova was hopping around in joy. I could understand how he was feeling. Since he loved flashy things so much, this was the best possible thing for us to find.

Mark sat next to him, sighing. He must have been depressed, thinking about how many they still needed to clean. I wanted to help, since it seemed like they had a lot of work remaining, but apparently cleaning these scales required a delicate touch, and they wouldn’t let the rest of us participate.

“By the way, can you use magic again yet?”

“Hm? Ohh, I think so.”

“Just one spell. We’re still in the middle of dissecting this, so you need to rest up in the meantime.”

I was about to take on whatever request Pardoe had for me, but Clena interrupted. I felt perfectly fine already, but Clena was forcing me to rest again after fulfilling Pardoe’s request.

“So what would you like me to do?”

“We’d like you to purrify the dragon’s corpse.”

“Purify it?”

“We heard there were purrification spells among cleric magic.”

There indeed were—a light one and a fire one. I only knew the light one right now, though.

“We got all the scales off it, but the rest of its rotten flesh might turn it into a zombie dragon.”

“...It can turn into a zombie?”

“It had so much vitality that it’ll definitely start moving again even after it’s dead.”

Since undead skeletons existed in this world, I shouldn’t have been surprised that zombie dragons existed, too. Now I understood why Clena was letting me cast one spell before resting again. I needed to purify the dragon’s corpse before it could turn into a zombie. I was still in my pajamas, but it would be fine to step out to cast a single spell. We couldn’t go outside without the water veil, so I followed Clena’s lead and exited the Unlimited Bath.

“.....Ugh.”

I didn’t want to describe it. The scene right beyond the door was doing no good for my mental well-being. Though it couldn’t be helped after all its scales had been stripped off of it.

I didn’t want to look at it for any longer than I had to, so I started casting the spell right away. I stuck my hands out toward the dragon’s corpse, then started chanting the light purification spell like a prayer. A bright light formed a circle around the corpse, grew to the size of a pillar, and engulfed the entire corpse.

“Purification complete!”

The spell ran its course, and after the light faded away, all that remained was the dragon’s bones. The bones weren’t part of the purification process, but they wouldn’t be reanimated like skeletons now, either.

“Ohh! Look at all the purretty bones! I thought they’d be burnt to a crisp after the purrification!” Pardoe exclaimed in joy after seeing the remains of the dragon.

The fire purification spell was essentially the equivalent of cremation. It really would have burned everything to a crisp, so that spell wouldn’t have left all these bones intact. I had assumed I only needed to learn one purification spell, and I was glad that ended up being the light one. The Goddess of Fire had also agreed, though hesitantly, to my suggestion, which must have been because she knew that that would have happened as well.

In any case, we needed to carry all these bones inside. We’d be safe as soon

as we shut the door to the Unlimited Bath. Clena could put her water veil away and take a break as well.

“Alright then, let’s carry them inside.”

“Sir Touya, let me take care of that.”

“Yes, Touya, go rest.”

I tried to help, but Rulitora and Clena stopped me.

“No, you need to take a break too, Clena. You had your water veil out the whole time they were collecting the scales, right?”

“I’ll take a break right after we finish this.”

“We’re only transporting them inside, so it won’t take long,” Rulitora said, then swiftly picked up the entire dragon skull. I see, so it really wouldn’t take long with him around.

The three ketolts also adorably picked up a bone each, hauling them inside with a heave-ho. They’d all be fine. I went ahead inside to lie down in the tatami mat room.

“...I don’t smell, right?” I could detect a bit of a rotten stench from my clothes, so I changed into a set of spare pajamas just in case. All I needed to do now was lie down on the futon, but I devised a little plan before that.

It wasn’t anything major. All I did was place two pillows right next to each other on the futon and lay down on the edge of it. Clena would come here to rest after she finished her work outside. I wanted to play a little trick to see how she would react to the open space right next to me.

“.....”

“...Wanna sleep here?”

She nodded in reply... Rium, that is. The one who ended up getting caught in my trap was Rium, who arrived before Clena and snuggled into bed next to me. I was disappointed that I wouldn’t see Clena’s reaction, but cuddling Rium to sleep was hardly a bad outcome, either. This was a sure way to heal my mind back to tip-top condition. And this was a secret, but when I woke up the next day, I found Clena sleeping next to us, huddled up in another futon she laid out

herself.

Fourth Bath – A Visit to the Ancient Bath

After the ketolts finished tidying up the rest of our spoils from the dragon and I fully regained my energy, we walked for another day and a half, and then finally made it to our destination.

The ledge turned into a sudden and steep cliff that didn't look possible to traverse on foot. My solution to that was summoning earth spirits to create a foundation for us, then using it to hoist us all the way up the mountain.

The landscape that greeted us when we arrived above the ledge could be described as nothing more than bleak and barren. I didn't know if the poison gas had caused it, but the trees that surrounded the edge of the cliff were completely withered. Once we crossed the ring of dead trees, we saw sand and rocks, then a building that we could only assume was the demon generals' hideout beyond it.

I hadn't been able to tell how large the hideout was from far away, but it was actually fairly small. At least that was my first impression as we stood on the ledge. The cliff itself was big, which made the building look even smaller in turn. Beyond the cozy-looking cabin was another larger building. The two of them combined still didn't match the size of Pardoe's mansion.

And then there was all the sand and rock in front of the buildings. This might have been the garden.

"It's a dried-up zen garden..."

"...Zen garden?" Rium asked, clinging to my waist.

"What's that?" Clena was also confused as she stood next to me. So the people of this world didn't understand what a zen garden was.

"It's a dry garden. The sand is supposed to represent water and imitate a scene in nature." I gave a brief explanation since I was no expert either.

Rulitora scanned his eyes across the withered garden with a quizzical expression. "...This is a garden? It looks like nothing more than a wasteland to

me.”

It was no surprise that Rulitora would think so, considering how he’d grown up in the void. If I were to pick an environment that this garden reminded me of, I’d choose the Torano’o settlement as well. I only realized that this was a zen garden because I was from Japan, but the people of this world would only see it as a dreary garden with rocks randomly strewn about—or not a garden at all.

“Um, Sir Touya? Is this ‘zen garden’ something from your...?”

“Yeah, from my homeland. It’s a traditional Japanese garden.” Roni hesitated in asking her question, but I gave her an assertive reply.

Indeed, this was a type of Japanese garden. It would make sense for the demon lord and the five great demon generals, who were summoned from Japan 500 years ago, to know what this was. I would never have expected to find a zen garden in such a remote place in another world, though.

“So if the sand is water... are the rocks land?”

“I would assume so.”

Rium picked the idea up surprisingly fast. The others slowly showed signs of understanding after they heard Rium’s comment. The three ketolts had their eyes especially wide. They might have been taken aback at the sight of artistry from another world.

Rakti, however, was looking somewhat scared. Rium was already at my left, so she circled around to my right and hugged my waist.

“Um, so does that mean... there’s really a demon general here...?”

“Seems like it. One of the Five Great Demon Generals.”

Rakti looked up at me with fear in her eyes. The Five Great Demon Generals and the demon lord were all summoned by Goldfish, a cleric of the Goddess of Darkness, and were given the blessing of Darkness. The demon lord had yet to rise again, so whoever made this hideout must have been among the Five Great Demon Generals.

Rakti had nothing to do with Goldfish’s past deeds, but she must still have felt related to it as the Goddess of Darkness. Goldfish was definitely the one in the

wrong there, not Rakti. She had never given an order to summon anyone. I tried to soothe her by patting her on her head. She could only feel my heavy gauntlets, but still looked a little happier.

We started approaching the two buildings, opting to circle around the withered garden because we'd feel guilty for trampling over it.

Our party neared the first building, but it was still completely silent from within. I checked with Rulitora and Roni, but neither of them detected any presence spying on us. Maybe the demon general was out for now.

I saw lush green trees behind the cabin. There was still some poison gas hovering near the ledge, but it looked like it didn't reach this far. I told Clena as much, and she ceased casting her water veil.

"That chimney..." Pardoe looked up at the other building behind the cabin, thinking to himself. He was concerned about the chimney sticking out from the roof.

"Pardoe?"

"The chimney on that house over there. It looks a little strange for a kitchen chimney... Purrhaps that building's a workshop."

"So they were making something in there?"

This drew Rium's attention. She mentioned that the building looked small compared to the smithy in Pardoe's mansion, but it was the perfect size for a crystal mage's workshop. If that really was a workshop, the next question would be what the demon general was making in there.

We decided to check out the smaller cabin first. If the other building was a workshop, that would imply that this one was their house—in other words, we'd be more likely to find the demon general in here. If the demon general was the type to create a zen garden, I considered the chance that the cabin might be a Japanese-style house... but it was just a building with white walls, similar to the ones in Hephaestusopolis.

"I do not detect any traps, Sir Touya."

Roni scouted out any possible traps for us. She had apparently become an

expert at this after helping Clena sneak out of the house several times when they were young.

“Okay then, make sure you stand to the side when you open the door. I’ll stand in front.”

There were no traps, and the door wasn’t even locked, so I had Roni open the door from a safe angle. Rulitora seemed like he wanted to say something, but I was the most suitable among us to stand in front of the door with my Magic Eater.

“No one’s inside...” I gripped the handle of my Crescent Moon as the door opened, but it was completely deserted within.

Roni inspected the cabin, looking out for any traps, but we found nothing. That wasn’t such a surprise after looking inside, though. The cabin was essentially in ruins. The tables, chairs, furnishings, rugs, and everything else were rotting away.

“Hey, Touya. Look over here.” Clena called for me from a room deeper inside, where we found a single piece of cloth pinned to the wall. The cloth was also in tatters, its colors faded. “I think it’s a flag...”

“The demon general’s?” I asked, and Clena nodded in response.

“Do you know whose it might be?”

“Sorry, I can’t tell by the flag alone...”

“...This is the Flame Devil’s.”

“Huh?” A voice suddenly cut into our conversation, and I looked down to find Rium clinging to my waist. I looked at the flag again, and the drawing on it definitely looked like a flame.

“Do you know this flag, Rium?”

“The Flame Devil fought against Athenapolis before... I saw a painting of angels fighting against demons, and this flag was on there...”

Angels, huh. Considering what Haruno had told us in her letter, those must have been the winged demi-humans, the glaupis, and not angels. So if this flag was here, that meant this hideout belonged to the Fire Devil.

Roni looked inside a basket in the kitchen, then grimaced. Rium, Rakti, and I followed suit to find a massive clump of dried-out mold. I couldn't even guess what that used to be. Though considering how he was living in this environment, maybe he ate mold itself. The one thing I could say for sure was that no one was living here right now.

"Oh, let's go check out the other building too. Purrhaps they're living in the workshop..."

"Yes, maybe they shut themselves in their workshop for a month because they're too absorbed in their work..."

"Both of you are speaking from expurrience..."

Pardoe and Shakova spoke with their eyes averted, but Mark gave them both an accusing stare. So both of them had locked themselves in their workshops before.

This looked like far more than a month's worth of decay, but who knows, maybe demons could shut themselves off for a longer period of time. We all braced ourselves again and approached the supposed workshop.

"Sir Touya, Sir Touya! There's another building over there."

"What?"

Rakti pulled my hand when we circled around to the back of the cabin. I looked in the direction she was pointing and saw a silhouette of something that looked manmade behind the trees. It didn't look very big, so we decided to investigate this first.

"Meow? These rocks..."

"Have you noticed, Mark?

These stones are lining up to form a path."

"The road is blending together with nature..."

The ketolts stared in curiosity at the flat stones that formed a path away from the cabin. It was a common feature of Japanese gardens. I believed they were called stepping stones. This would also have been a strange sight in this world.

“Mew... It’s kind of plain, but stylish in its own way.” Shakova, who was always on the lookout for designs, admired the way the path blended into the natural scenery.

We stepped on the stones toward the other building, only to find that it was in an even worse state than the cabin. The inside of the cabin was decaying, but this building itself had rotted away. It looked like this one had been made of mud.

Maybe this hideout has been abandoned for a long time now... I thought, and began inspecting the building. I could look inside the building through its windows—or rather, the holes in its walls—but couldn’t find any sign of the door.

“Where’s the door on this thing?”

“Right over here.”

“...That’s tiny.”

The door we found was so small that even the ketolts would have to stoop down to enter it. I doubted I could get in wearing my Magic Eater even crouching down on all fours, to say nothing of Rulitora. I had a feeling I knew what this building was.

In any case, there seemed to be no traps here either, so I had Roni scout it out. Pardoe and Shakova followed her inside, wagging their tails with keen curiosity. Mark only looked at them, sighing. He had it tough, too. Though I had to admit I was curious too, so I also peeked my head inside.

“Oh, Sir Touya. Look at the floor in here.”

“Just like I thought...” I was not surprised at all by what I saw.

“This is tatami, right...?”

Yes, tatami mats covered the floor inside the small house. Though I could barely recognize them as tatami mats in the condition they were in.

“Is there anything else in there?”

“Not even a hairball!”

“The floor sort of dips down in the middle, but there’s nothing in it.”

That was within expectations, too. I had a good guess as to what this building was. We stepped out of the building and made our way toward the workshop next.

“It’s a pottery workshop, I knew it!!” I unintentionally raised my voice as soon as we stepped inside.

Yep. A kiln loomed in the back of the abandoned workshop. Several pieces of what looked like broken bowls were scattered around it.

“P-pottery? They were making tableware here?” Clena asked, looking like she didn’t believe a word I just said.

I couldn’t blame her, though. We crossed a sea of poison gas, defeated a dragon, and finally arrived at the hideout where a demon general was supposedly lurking, only to find this snug little pottery workshop. Pardoe suggested that they may have conducted metalworking here, too. He recognized a few traces of cast metal in the room.

I could guess that the pottery was for tea cups and the metalworking was for tea kettles. The small building was most likely a tea house. I hadn’t gone to a tea ceremony myself before, but I remembered seeing buildings where you needed to crouch to enter on TV before.

This Fire Devil was mostly likely a tea ceremony master who had been summoned from the Sengoku period. He had built a tea house, as well as this workshop to create tea utensils so that he could enjoy the ceremonies in this world as well. He must have forged the tea kettles himself after not being able to find anyone else who could, making him quite the hobbyist.

In any case, I knew for sure now. Though this was a hideout, it hadn’t been meant for plotting something against Hephaestusopolis. It was just a personal hideout. And judging by the state of decay, it had been abandoned for a long time now. I didn’t know what to think anymore, knowing that Hephaestusopolis had kept such a concerned eye on this personal hideout that had been abandoned for who knows how many years now.

He had built this hideout knowing it was visible, yet unreachable from

Hephaestusopolis, then abandoned it fully aware that they were still keeping watch. Assuming that was really the case, he must have had an awful personality. What kind of person was this Flame Devil, anyway?

We did a thorough sweep of the workshop and found a single notebook. It looked like a historical document you might see on TV, its pages thin and decayed. The text was in Japanese, but an old form of the language that I normally wouldn't be able to read. However, the Goddess of Light's blessing allowed me to understand any language present in this world, so I could decipher what was written in the notebook.

I made my way through portions of the text I wasn't able to read before, finding that the Flame Devil had recorded details on all the tea ware and kettles he had created in a diary format. It seemed like he had gone through many years of trial and error to construct his tea ware and kettles.

"Whoa, what?!"

"Wh-what's wrong?!"

I couldn't believe it. I eventually came across an entry that might have explained why the Flame Devil left this hideout, but I was shocked at what it said. I read the entry aloud with everyone else's eyes glued to me.

The following was what it said: *The dragon that I had brought along as a guard dog has withered the trees away with its gas, and the scenery is no longer to my taste, so I shall depart to another location.*

Everyone else opened their mouths agape, speechless. That was the expected reaction. I felt the same, too. So the dragon had just been abandoned here.

There was a chance this journal had been left here as a little prank on whoever managed to find this place. If that were the case, he did well. I turned the page and found one last sentence written just before he left.

"It says *I have yet to recreate the Hiragumo*..." I see, *Hiragumo* was that famous tea kettle. He must have been forging tea ware here with that as his goal.

I still didn't know who the Fire Devil was, but he was definitely quite the hobbyist. We finished investigating the hideout of one of the Five Great Demon

Generals, the Fire Devil, and returned to Hephaestusopolis about one week later. We were mentally drained, so the hike back ended up being more taxing on us than the initial trip.

Another week passed since we returned to Pardoe's mansion. We took the time to not only rest ourselves up, but start preparing for our next journey. I thought back on the past two weeks as I washed Rium's hair in the Unlimited Bath. We had searched every nook and cranny of the hideout, but found no signs of any underground tunnels or hidden rooms. The tattered flag and journal were our only spoils. I thought it over and could only conclude that the Fire Devil had left them behind on purpose. It made the most sense, as they would provide all the answers for anyone who came across the hideout after he left.

The flag was a big clue as to who the hideout's owner was. It would at least confirm that it was one of the Five Great Demon Generals who had survived the battle between the first sacred king and the demon lord. That was the first blow. The second blow was the journal, which revealed that he left because he didn't like the look of his garden anymore. It was a two-pronged attack.

My theory was that the Fire Devil had left us those items as a couple of pranks. It was very likely a trap aimed at someone related to the sacred family —especially a hero, since the Goddess of Light's blessing allowed you to decipher any language. The hideout was within sight of Hephaestusopolis, but just out of reach. A hero would have no choice but to investigate it if he found out about its existence. We crossed a volcano and poison gas, escaped a dragon, and avoided death by a hair, only to find a few buildings that were long deserted. And then that diary entry. If anyone wanted to know how great the mental damage was, they needed to look no further than us.

I contacted Haruno to get her opinion as well, but she couldn't think of any other reason why the Fire Devil would have left the journal behind, either. If he wanted to prove his identity, the flag would have been enough.

Either way, we couldn't do anything about it. I tried to get my spirits up by telling myself that we at least protected the peace in Hephaestusopolis.

After returning to the city, we presented the Fire Devil's flag and journal to Hephaestus XIV and told him everything honestly. The shock of finding out that the hideout they had been so vigilant of had actually been abandoned for about 100 years was so great that the king collapsed on the spot. However, he made a quick recovery as a king should and immediately set out to discuss our next steps.

The reward I was supposed to receive in exchange for the sword and shield with the royal crest would now include our accomplishments during this trip as well. The dragon I defeated apparently was an achievement worthy of a medal, so they would be splurging on my rewards. They needed some time to prepare an extravagant ceremony in the royal palace, so we took care of other things in the meantime.

First, we needed to organize our loot. Though we hadn't managed to reap anything too worthwhile this time around. The hideout was barren besides the flag and notebook, so the only things we could consider loot were the dragon-hippo's parts. We had managed to recover plenty from the dragon itself, but it was still a little disappointing compared to the weapons and treasures we brought back from Hadesopolis.

Though Clena talked some sense into me, saying that our spoils from Hadesopolis were plain abnormal. She was completely right about the amount we had looted from the demon lord's castle. We couldn't even put a monetary value on it. I understood why people in my former world loved hunting for buried treasure so much now.

We discussed what to do with the dragon parts. The bones would go toward making a new set of armor for Rulitora, while the jade scales would be used to tailor a set of scale armor for Clena. Scale armor normally referred to armor reinforced with scale-shaped pieces of metal, but the added defensive power usually wasn't worth the extra weight. A few advantages it had over chainmail, which involved meticulously chaining together metallic rings, were its attractive design and comparatively cheap and easy tailoring process.

However, the armor we were making for Clena was different. The dragon scales were lighter, sturdier, and more beautiful than metallic scales. We named it the dragon scale armor. It would be more expensive to make, but

considering we were purchasing better safety, it was worth the cost.

“Huh? We should take it to a human blacksmith?”

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. I wouldn’t be tampurring with metal for this job, anyway.”

We had a human blacksmith help us forge the dragon scale armor at Pardoe’s recommendation. Of course, he introduced us to someone skilled. Apparently humans were better at dealing with leather armor too, so I also ordered a set of red lizard skin armor for Roni.

Rulitora’s bone armor required shaving away and molding hard bone, so this was better for ketolt blacksmiths to handle. Pardoe introduced us to the best blacksmith who could handle bones out of the twelve blacksmith families. We thought about calling this “dragon bone armor.”

Once Hephaestus XIV heard our plans, he decided to make the award ceremony double as an unveiling for our completed sets of dragon armor. We had made the right choice by ordering from both human and ketolt blacksmiths. The two races lived in harmony in this kingdom, but they must have had their fair share of hardships as well.

I also tried to use one of the dragon’s tusks to make something I wanted to call Dragon Killer, but it didn’t quite work out. While that dragon-hippo had molars tough enough to chew giant enoki mushrooms, it didn’t have the fangs needed for biting into meat. The teeth weren’t the right length to make any swords. I had imagined a sword when I thought up the name “Dragon Killer,” so I was a bit disappointed. I knew how sturdy it was, though, so I picked the biggest molar to make a mace out of. Of course we didn’t use the tooth as-is, but shaved it down and shaped it. Shakova was good at carving things, so I left the job to him.

As for the rest of the teeth, Clena and I decided to gift them to the ketolts as thanks for helping us on our journey. Mark wanted to create a war hammer from one of them. He happily hoisted up a dragon tooth about the size of his head with his chest held high.

Soon after we finished sorting out our loot, I was asked an unexpected question.

“Huh? Come with us?”

“Yes, meow.”

“What about Crissa?”

“She’ll come too, of course.”

Amew—I mean, amazingly, Pardoe requested that he join us in our travels. He even wanted to bring Crissa along.

“Are you fine with that, Crissa?”

“Yes. I cannot fight, but I can assist with chores like a labor raver would. Also, I’m worried about my father going off on his own...”

I checked with Crissa, but she was more worried about Pardoe getting into trouble outside of her control than the journey itself. She said that she knew basic self-defense. In that case, I had no particular objections. Rather, I’d be less worried about her than I was about Rakti. Especially since we slept inside the Unlimited Bath at night. Compared to normal travelers, we had very little to worry about when setting up camp for the night.

“Then I’m going too, meow!”

“Me too!”

Then Shakova and Mark joined the fray. Mark was acting especially insistent about it. He must have overheard Crissa’s situation.

Crissa herself simply giggled and said “my, my” as she looked at Mark acting all tough. She really did only see him as a little brother.

“May I ask the reason?” Rulitora hadn’t seen the request coming either, so he asked them about it with a confused expression.

“There’s something I got curious about after we found the demon general’s hideout. Sir Touya’s Unlimited Bath is very similar to that hideout.”

“...Well, it does have a tatami room, and the atmosphere feels similar.”

The Flame Devil’s hideout wasn’t exactly a Japanese house, but he had built it to resemble one with a Japanese flair. He probably didn’t have the right skills to recreate one exactly.

The tub in my Unlimited Bath was a Japanese cedar tub, and I had gotten a tatami-floored room from the Goddess of Darkness' blessing, so my Bath had a Japanese flair as well.

"I want to know more about these techniques I've never seen before!"

"A beauty that melds with nature! It's a whole mew world!"

Pardoe and Shakova leaned forward in excitement. It looked like Japanese culture caught their interest.

Pardoe further explained that he still wanted to study the fire altar, but Shakova was simply keen on "Japanese beauty." According to Pardoe, it was the first time both of them had agreed that something looked beautiful. No wonder they were both so enthusiastic.

Mark, on the other hand, wasn't interested in Japanese culture. Crissa, who would be coming along to look after her zealous father, was most important to him.

As for me, I wasn't exactly used to looking at Japanese-style scenery anymore, but it was so matter of fact to me that I didn't quite follow what they meant by melding with nature. I could understand them saying how it wasn't too flashy, though. That must have been why Pardoe had also seen the beauty in it. Their reactions reminded me of foreigners being amazed at Japanese culture.

"What was it called again... wabi-sabi?"

"What's that?"

"It's the term for what you guys are feeling right now."

I didn't know the exact definition, but I figured this was close. It was the term for appreciating the aesthetics in Japanese culture such as tea ceremonies... or something like that. The words by themselves meant the beauty that came with "imperfection" and "time"... I think.

"Uh-huh, wasabi..."

No, it's wabi-sabi.

Anyway, now I knew what their reasons were. They wanted access to the wealth of untapped knowledge pertaining to a culture from another world that

came with me and the Unlimited Bath. If they were to join my party, I'd be their leader, so they wouldn't mind me ordering them around like I did Rulitora. That was just in the context of the party, though.

I already knew that they weren't just blacksmiths holed up in their workshops all day—they could fight monsters, too. Though here in Hephaestus, it was "just" the blacksmiths who would venture out to gather materials amid dangerous monsters. We would also need Crissa's help if our party grew in number.

"What will you do about your houses?" Clena asked the next question. As the daughter of a noble family, a worry like that was second nature to her.

"We've asked the other ten families to look after them."

"We've already got purrmission to travel!"

Pardoe and Shakova answered promptly. Not a surprising reaction from the ketolts who have given up the throne to focus on their smithing work.

They already had everything taken care of on their side, and I had no objections of my own. They had plenty of potential to contribute to the party, and we had already worked out the kinks in living together while they were tailoring my Magic Eater. I looked over at Rulitora and the others, but none of them gave any particular reaction. Besides being a little startled, at least.

"Got it. Pardoe, Shakova, Mark, Crissa—welcome to the party!" I decided to take them up on their request. I addressed the four of them as the party leader, then shook each of their hands.

"....."

"Meow? What is it?"

"No, it's nothing. We're planning to set off soon after the ceremony is over, so let's keep preparing until then," I stated in as calm of a voice as possible, but my mind was elsewhere. Their little paws were so soft and squishy.



A few events happened over the next two weeks. The blacksmiths we had ordered our armor from knew the award ceremony couldn't be conducted until the armor was completed, so they rushed to get the orders done. Now we had everything we'd requested, and the ceremony would be held this afternoon. Right now, we were getting ready for it by bathing ourselves.

"There, all finished."

I slowly poured water over Rium to wash the suds off her, and she shook her head and splashed beads of water all around. She really did manage to soothe my nerves.

It wasn't quite the same with Roni or Clena. Roni was slim, but still had a shapely and feminine figure, so I got a bit embarrassed whenever I washed her hair. Clena, on the other hand, made my breathing go wild. Frankly, her figure was several steps above any of the other girls'.

In contrast, Rium and Rakti soothed me. I wanted to pet them on their heads forever.

"Let's get in the bath now."

Rium nodded softly, then took my hand and headed to the cedar bathtub where Clena, Roni, and Rakti were waiting.

A few hours after we cleaned ourselves, we changed into our formal wear and gained an audience with the Hephaestus royal palace. Though my "formal wear" was simply my Magic Eater armor while I held the helmet under my armpit, an extravagant ceremonial mantle, and a sash across my chest. I didn't bring any weapons, of course.

I wondered if this was okay since I could still use magic, but the king himself had commanded it, so we didn't need to question it any further. He was as broad-minded of a fellow as always.

A large crowd had gathered to take a look at the ceremony, and they greeted us with a thunderous applause as soon as we stepped into view. I was getting stage fright. I took one step at a time, making sure to not fall over or swing my arms in tune with the wrong leg.

Rulitora was wearing his dragon bone armor. Its most impressive feature was the exaggerated shape of its left arm, made from the long jaw of the dragon's skull. He didn't have the spikes from the giant scorpion armor anymore, but he looked even more menacing now. He had a dignified look with his head held high, but I could still see a hint of nervousness in his expression, probably because he wasn't used to this either.

Clena's dragon scale armor was beautiful enough to be mistaken for jewelry. But those were dragon's scales—the armor wasn't just for show. It had been signed and certified by Pardoe and Shakova.

Roni's brand new red lizard skin armor might have been commonplace in Hephaestusopolis, but we had gotten a skilled craftsman to tailor it, so it was an impressive piece as well. The leather armor that adorned her chest was neither too plain nor too gaudy, and was top-notch in terms of defensive abilities as well. Both Clena and Roni stood composed, maybe because they were used to this sort of situation.

Rium and Rakti didn't wear armor on a regular basis, so we prepared adorable dresses for them for the occasion. They both looked splendid. The dresses would just become luggage after this since we'd rarely come across the opportunity to take them out, but they'd be fine inside the Unlimited Bath. They couldn't wear them right now, but of course we picked out dresses as gifts for Clena and Roni as well. Roni had gotten incredibly flustered, but accepted the gift as a token of my appreciation.

Rium was acting coolly, entirely unaffected by the scene, but Rakti looked anxious and kept glancing around her. She was the most inexperienced of all of us with these situations.

Following us were Pardoe, Shakova, and Mark, who had all helped us during the expedition. The three of them were wrapped in what looked like togas from ancient Rome. Pardoe and Shakova were unsurprisingly acting no different from usual.

Crissa was waving at them from the audience. She was being a little more audacious than usual since it was her little brother's big moment.

Mark was covering his face shyly. He wasn't nervous, but rather embarrassed

about Crissa's behavior.

We walked forward until we were in front of Hephaestus XIV. He didn't look stiff at all with his usual beaming smile. The butterflies in my stomach flew away after I saw him. In fact, I felt silly about being nervous in the first place. I was thankful for his personality at that moment.

"Hero Touya! We thank you for your courageous deeds on this occasion!"

We had already gone over the order of events in the ceremony, so the king proceeded to present me the medals without delay.

I would be awarded three medals today. The medals were simply an easy way to recognize certain achievements, so they weren't my reward by themselves. Though I'd heard these medals were worth quite a bit on their own.

The actual reward consisted of various treasures and a lump sum of cash, but I would just be handed a certificate for now. The audience wouldn't get too excited about the money—or rather, they'd just get envious instead.

Back on topic, the first was the Volcano Warrior medal. The medal depicted a relief of a ketolt holding a sword, and was granted to those who achieved many merits within Hephaestus. Apparently the ketolt in the relief was the first king of the old Hephaestus royal family.

They were recognizing us for the expedition that uncovered the demon general's hideout, which had troubled the kingdom for many years. The medal was given not just to me, but to everyone who had participated in the expedition.



The second was the Slayer medal. This was awarded to anyone who successfully defeated a powerful monster, and depicted two dragons wrapped around a sword. The design on the medal changed depending on the type of monster you defeated. I suppose this one could be called the Dragon Slayer medal.

Third was the Golden Cat Ears medal. This one was a cute medal in the shape of a cat's head. It was granted to anyone the old royal family, or the twelve families, deemed worthy. It was proof that the twelve families accepted you and a pledge that they would offer assistance in times of need. It was probably thanks to this medal that Pardoe and Shakova could join our journey.

I took my award certificate, had the three medals pinned to my sash, and turned around to the audience, who offered loud cheers. It almost felt like the entire room was rumbling. I wondered if Haruno had gone through something similar when she received her medal.

Maybe I had caught up to Haruno now. I felt a little proud thinking that. I kept my chest held high and walked into the sea of cheers with a confident expression.

Bath Break – Mew Mew Quest

“This kitchen knife is sharper than Father’s.”

“What did you say just meow...?”

It all started from Crissa’s one remark...

Let’s go back to when the ketolts requested to sleep inside the Unlimited Bath one night before setting off on their journey.

That in itself wasn’t a problem. They needed to be prepared, so they conducted a test night inside the Bath. However, a series of events was triggered after Pardoe heard his daughter’s idle murmur from the kitchen.

She had a kitchen knife from the Unlimited Bath in her paws. Just like the soap in the bath, it was formed from the Hero of the Goddess, Touya’s, MP. Crissa wasn’t a blacksmith, but she could discern the quality of a kitchen knife after having used them quite often. Pardoe couldn’t ignore his own daughter’s words, so he took the knife into his own paws and inspected it himself.

“Murrr... Indeed...”

The blade was thinner and lighter compared to the ones Pardoe made. He tried cutting some vegetables and also confirmed that it cut much more smoothly than his blades did.

“Wh-what is this knife...?”

Then Shakova and Mark entered the kitchen, peering at the knife in Pardoe’s paws.

“What a purrfectly constructed blade...” Shakova rarely ever made or used cookware, but he regretted missing out on this particular one until now. The blade had a beautiful sheen, but the handle helped give it an even more refined look.

“...So what’s this knife made of?” Mark muttered, poking the side of the blade with a claw.

Pardoe and Shakova inspected the knife one more time, but they couldn't figure out what material it was made from. They tried appraising it with magic, but only learned that it was imbued with the Goddess' power and that it possessed an ability that made it an excellent kitchen knife.

"It's a metal I've never seen before..."

"It's stronger than steel... Crissa, are there any other knives in there?"

"There are plenty more in here, meow." Crissa opened a drawer under the sink. Inside were about a dozen knives in a variety of shapes and sizes.

"...Why are there so many?"

"Sir Touya said that they have different uses based on what they're made to cut. See? This one is used to slice bread." Crissa took out a knife with a strange wavy pattern lining its edge.

"Murrr..."

A cleaver, fillet knife, chef's knife, and paring knife were among the collection of Eastern and Western kitchen knives, according to Touya. There was even a gigantic one called a whaling knife that they doubted should even belong in a kitchen.

As Pardoe and Shakova stared at the glimmering knives all lined up in a row, they got the idea to try and use this material for their smithing. They begged Touya to spare them a few, and he surprisingly said yes without hesitation. The knives were a part of his gift, so his MP would simply replenish any missing ones.

Once they gathered a whole set together, the knives lost the Goddess' power, but were unchanged besides that. Pardoe and Shakova dragged Mark over and immediately activated the fire altar.

"Meow?! The heat does nothing to it...!!"

However, the knives remained unchanged even when applying heat from the fire altar to them. This was an unexpected development.

"Mark, generate more heat!"

"I-Is that okay?"

“It’s fine, just do it!”

“Don’t blame me if anything goes wrong!” Mark increased the altar’s output as he was told.

The fire altar and fire stone glowed with the brightest light they had ever seen, and Mark grimaced when he felt the heat catching bits of his whiskers as he applied the heat to the knives. Steel would have melted long ago at this temperature.

“No good, the knife’s not mewtating at all...!”

“We can’t say that for sure... let’s try hitting it meow!!”

Shakova used tongs to transport the knife to an anvil, then Pardoe swung down on it with all his might using his hammer. And then with an unexpectedly high-pitched ring, the knife split right in two.

“...What?”

The three of them opened their eyes wide, stopped channeling their MP, and stood there frozen until Crissa came by to tell them dinner was ready.

“It’s heat resistant, but breaks when you hit it... oh, maybe because they’re ceramic knives?” After dinner, Touya revealed the secret behind the knives to them. Since they were formed from his gift, he could tell what they were made from just like how he knew how to use his gift.

“If you had told me you wanted to try melting them, I could have let you know that they were similar to porcelain.”

“Th-that was porcelain...?”

No wonder they hadn’t seen anything like it before. It wasn’t even metal in the first place.

“They’re light, incredibly sharp, don’t rust, and don’t impart the taste of metal, but in exchange they’re really brittle and break as soon as you try to bend them.”

The broken knife ended up disappearing, too. The MP-generated soap would also vanish without a trace after it was used, so it operated on the same idea.

“And here I thought we could make an amazing weapon by melting up a bunch of these knives...”

“I thought I could put some detailed touches on it...”

“Well, there’s a catch to everything.”

At that, Pardoe and Shakova fell to the ground. Their quest had unfortunately ended in failure.

Afterwards, they gifted a full set of regenerated knives to the Hephaestus royal family. Of course, they also included warnings about using them.

The royal family was overjoyed since the knives had been formed from the Goddess of Fire’s blessing. They distributed the knives between the fire temple, the twelve ketolt families, and notable human blacksmith families as ritual tools. This helped cement Touya’s relationship with Hephaestus even more, but that was a story for another day.

Post-Bath – The Author's Booth

Long time no see to everyone coming from volumes one and two, and nice to meet you to everyone who picked this title up starting from volume three! My name is Nagaharu Hibihana.

How did you enjoy Mixed Bathing in a Another Dimension 3: The Chaotic Stone Sauna? It's all thanks to your support that this volume is in front of you now. I'd like to thank Masakage Hagiya, who illustrated some wonderfully exciting bath scenes again, my editor K, the editorial department at Overlap Bunko, and everyone who was involved in the publishing and selling of this book.

Now then, excuse me for rambling about my personal life, but I found something interesting when cleaning out my closet recently. I opened up a box and found over a dozen old games inside.

NES games? No, I've kept those in another box close to me for years. The NE-101 is still plugged in at my house. Though the battery in my Meg*mi Te**ei II cartridge just recently died.

Anyway, those were actually MSX games inside that box. I remember being jealous at my cousin for having an MSX and begging my parents to buy one for me. I want to try playing Buta**ru Pants again, but I bet I can't find a working console in this day and age.

This might be a nice and nostalgic story if I ended it here, but I found one slightly more problematic thing in that closet. Yes, I found manga that I had drawn back in elementary and middle school.

The rest of you older folks might relate, but my past was coming back to haunt me! So I thought, and then I slowly opened that scary box with my heart pounding. But then when I actually looked through the contents, I was surprisingly okay. I even figured I could use some of these ideas if I restructured them a bit. And then I realized... have I not matured one bit in all these years?

Maybe I’m still a kid at heart, but I hope to see you all again in Mixed Bathing in Another Dimension volume 4. Please pick it up when you have the chance.

Nagaharu Hibihana, November 2015.

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Translated by Sophie Guo Edited by C. Vanstiphout

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