
NOVEL
12
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LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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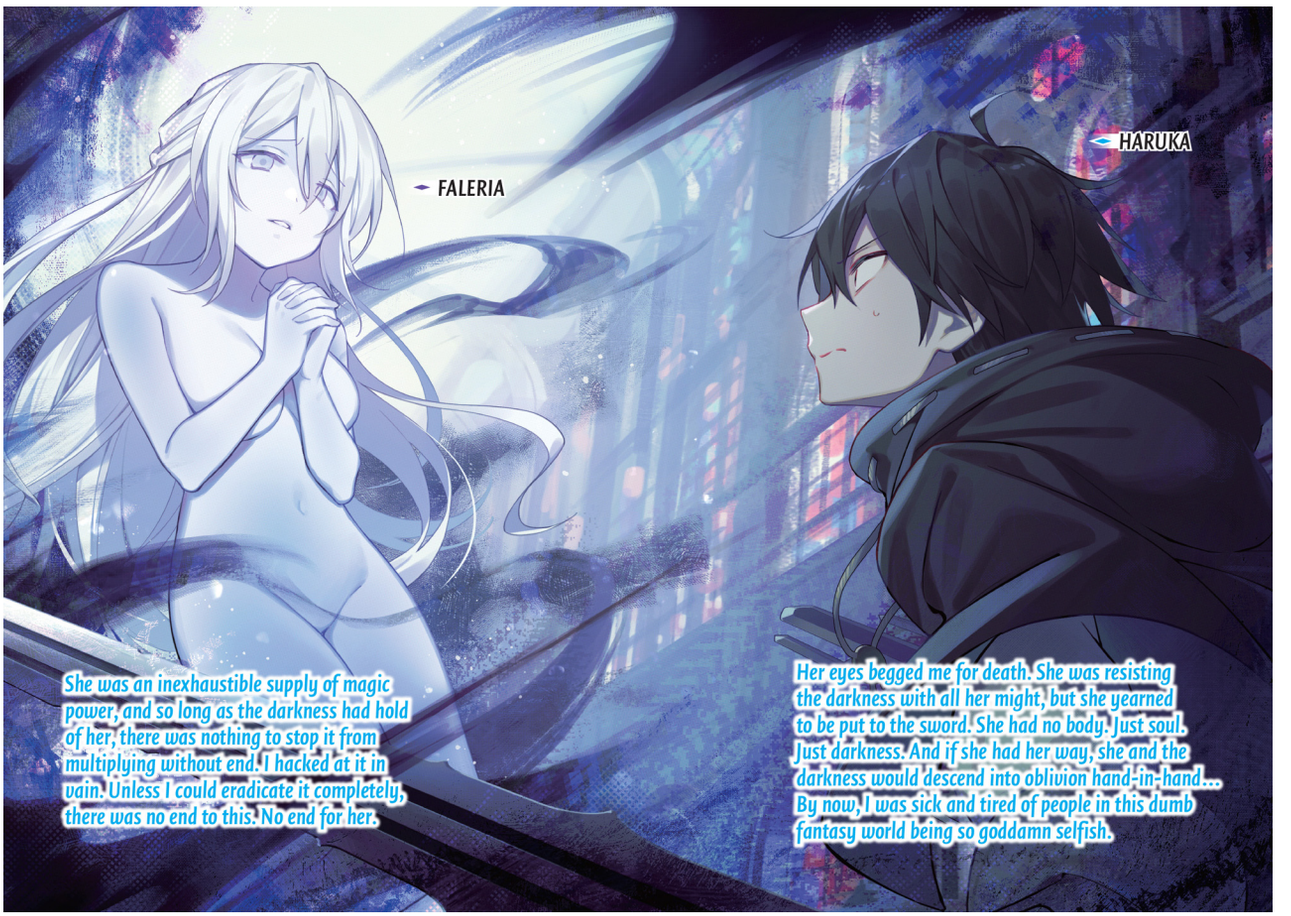
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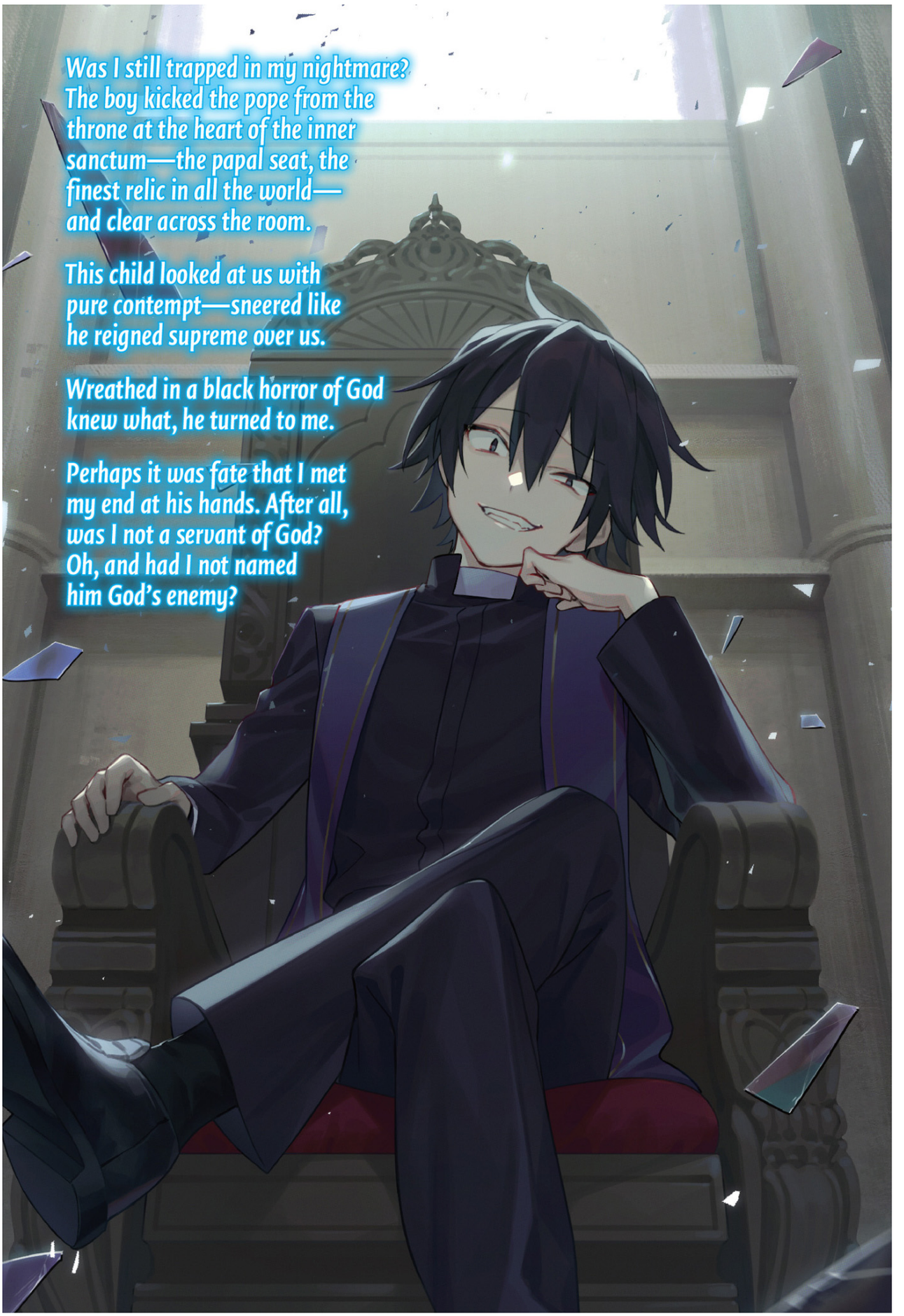
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AFTERWORD

Newsletter




FALERIA
HARUKA
She was an inexhaustible supply of magic power, and so long as the darkness had hold of her, there was nothing to stop it from multiplying without end. I hacked at it in vain. Unless I could eradicate it completely, there was no end to this. No end for her.
Her eyes begged me for death. She was resisting the darkness with all her might, but she yearned to be put to the sword. She had no body. Just soul. Just darkness. And if she had her way, she and the darkness would descend into oblivion hand-in-hand...
By now, I was sick and tired of people in this dumb fantasy world being so goddamn selfish.


Was I still trapped in my nightmare? The boy kicked the pope from the throne at the heart of the inner sanctum—the papal seat, the finest relic in all the world—and clear across the room.
This child looked at us with pure contempt—sneered like he reigned supreme over us.
Wreathed in a black horror of God knew what, he turned to me.
Perhaps it was fate that I met my end at his hands. After all, was I not a servant of God? Oh, and had I not named him God's enemy?


LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

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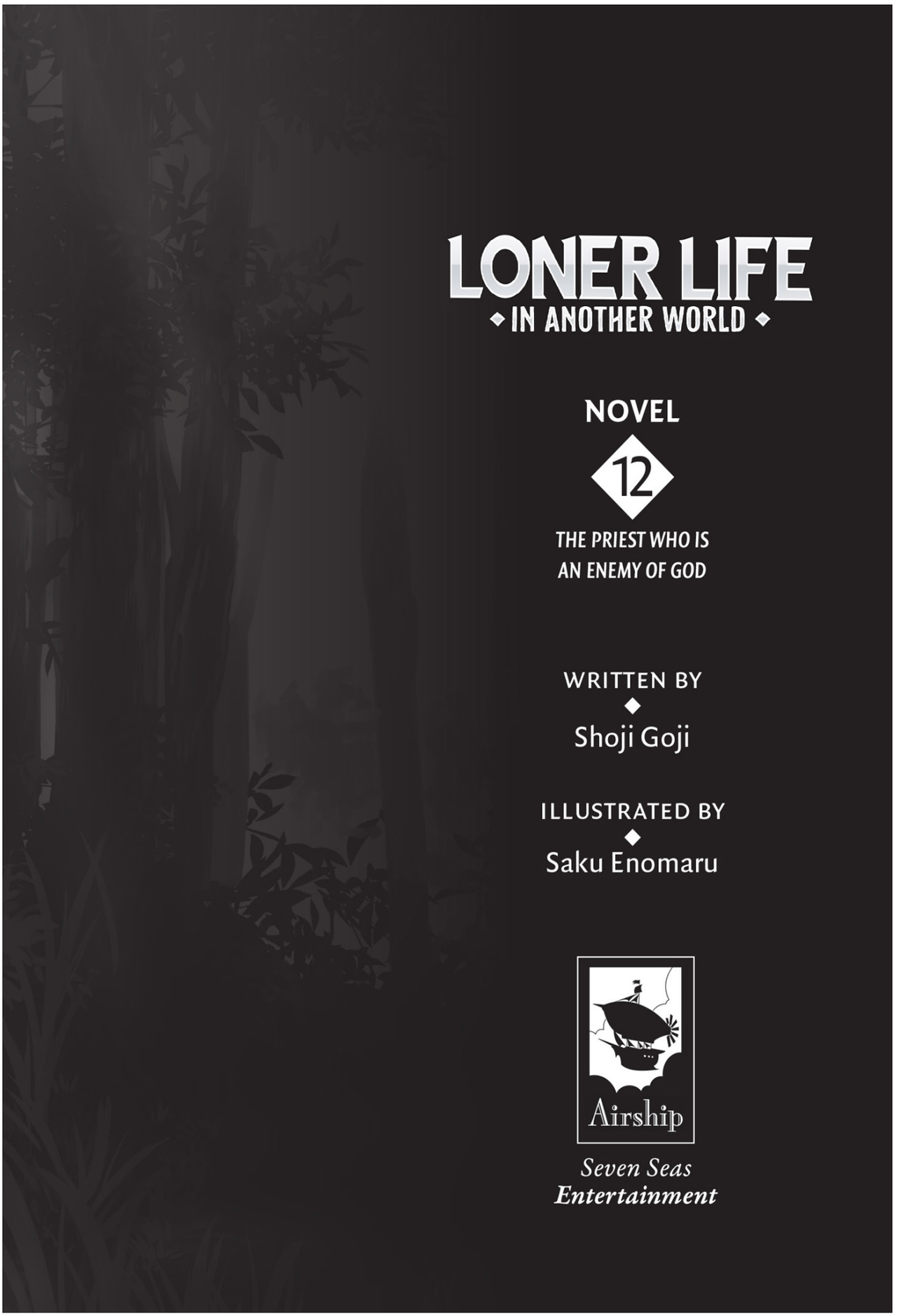
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LONER LIFE
IN ANOTHER WORLD

NOVEL

12

THE PRIEST WHO IS
AN ENEMY OF GOD

WRITTEN BY

Shoji Goji

ILLUSTRATED BY

Saku Enomaru

Airship

Seven Seas
Entertainment



VICE REP A

One of Haruka's classmates. A cool beauty prone to glaring at the guys when they do something stupid.



VICE REP B

One of Haruka's classmates. A ditzy girl who was voted the most popular student in the class. An Archsage.



VICE REP C

One of Haruka's classmates. A lively ankle-biter who longs to become an adult. She's like a class mascot.



BUNNY GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. Leader of a group of five fashion-obsessed girls. A former model.



WOLF GIRL

One of Haruka's classmates. A former candidate for Japan's Olympic swim team. Close with Fish Girl, her former swim team member.



LETICIA

One of Haruka's classmates. After getting chased around by guys in the fantasy world, deeply distrusts men...besides Haruka.



ERAILIA

An elf. Vizmuregzero's sister. She recovered from a terrible illness with one of the frontier's mushrooms.



SHALLICERES

The princess of the Kingdom of Diorelle. Traumatized by experiencing the half-naked heave-ho of the pseudo-dungeon. Also known as the Royal Girl and Shillyshally.



CERES

Princess Shalliceres's maid. Has served as the princess's guard and body double from a young age.



STALKER GIRL

The daughter of the chief of the Shino clan, a family specializing in reconnaissance. A top-class spy with Perfect Invisibility.



MEROPAPA

The Duke of Omui. An invincible warrior hero known as the Frontier King and War God, among other titles.



MERIELLE

The daughter of the Duke of Omui. Unable to remember her name, Haruka calls her Merimeri, and now so does everyone else.

CHARACTERS



ANGELICA

The former emperor of the Ultimate Dungeon. Haruka used Servitude on her. Also known as Miss Armor Rep.



HARUKA

A high school student summoned to another world. The only member of his class not to receive a cheat skill from God.



NEFERTIRI

A former dungeon emperor. Haruka freed her from the Theocracy, which used her as a weapon of mass destruction. Also known as Dancer Girl.



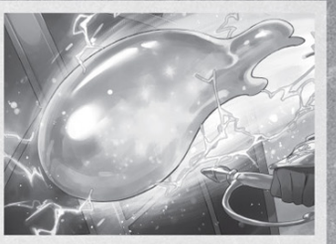
CLASS REP

The student council president of Haruka's class. Talented leader. Has known Haruka since elementary school.



ARIANNA

A cleric and princess of the Theocracy. Belongs to a political faction opposing the mistreatment and enslavement of beastfolk. Nicknamed Sister Girl.



SLIME EMPEROR

A former dungeon emperor. Acquires the skills of enemies that he eats with Predation. Under Haruka's Servitude.

STORY

Haruka's priest disguise enabled him to slip over the border into the Theocracy. His mission? Reach the church's seat of power in the Cathedral and knock the pope off his tyrannical throne. However, Haruka was soon sidetracked when his travels took him past a girl trapped in the clutches of a band of Theocracy soldiers.

Once rescued, the girl turned out to be a familiar face—she was one of the beastfolk girls that Oda (Nerd A) saved from slavers when her village was attacked unprovoked. If only her sister had been so lucky! Alas, the slavers made off with Lil Bun, leaving Big Bun no choice but to run to her rescue. Their trail led her to the Theocracy—and danger of her own—until Haruka stumbled upon her and bailed her out.

The two teamed up and attacked the city of Eastgate, reuniting the two sisters. Now a merry band of three, Haruka and friends cut a destructive path across the Theocracy before being stopped by the commander of the Knights of the Scriptures. The fabled swordsman challenged Haruka to a duel...only to be completely routed. In his heart of hearts, the commander had no love for the pope either, and a sound drubbing at the hands of Haruka inspired him to change sides.

At long last, Haruka stands at the gates of the Cathedral. The mysterious building is an architectural marvel, with magic running through its walls designed to seal away something...or someone. But who or what was the Cathedral built for? The time has come for Haruka to delve deeper and seek answers to this ancient mystery.

PROLOGUE

◆

STARS TWINKLED in the black of night; wind tousled the black hair of the girl in my arms. We hurtled through the sky, peaceful and safe during our swift passage, and touched down directly atop the Cathedral. The skylight right at the tippy top provided natural lighting in the chapel below. That, and hid the Cathedral's true purpose—sucking up ambient magic.

"Nah, nah, nah. I got this. I took us this far. I can land us safely."

"Nuh-uh! No! Stop!"

Ignoring the tantrum-throwing teen in my arms, I sent a Magic Thread down the long, mirror-lined cylindrical tube and rappelled to the bottom. Unsurprisingly, the air was thick with magic.

Crosschecking the bird's-eye view against the data from our investigation earlier in the day, I sketched a mental map of the Cathedral. Yeah...if this central tube piece had anything to do with the worship of god, I would've eaten my nonexistent hat.

"At end, of hallway. I sense someone. A guard."

There was a shockingly large disparity between the ambient magic levels around the Cathedral and the glut of magic in this chamber. All the weird fluctuations or places where the magic felt *thin* suddenly made sense—those discrepancies stemmed from this building.

The someone—or someones—in the hall on the other side of the door weren't priests or knights. Guards, maybe? Well, I had other things to worry about first. Like this girl in my arms?

"Look, we're not gonna fit in the doorway. I gotta put you down—wait a minute, how'd we slip through that narrow gap up there?!"

Dancer Girl gave me the smirk of one blessed with mad skills.

Mad skills or no, enemy territory lay on the other side of the threshold. As much as I hated to, I had to let go of that ripe rump,

those burgeoning buttocks, those gelatinous glutes. *When there's a tight hole to squeeze into, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do*. Maybe if we lined her up juuust right… Yeah, we could prolly pull it off with the ol' stand and carry? Or maybe not. Dancer Girl was glaring daggers at me.

Turned out she didn't mind if I held her face-to-face or (ass)cheek-to-cheek. Thing was, *I* minded! I had captivating curves all up in my business either way! And she wouldn't let me fondle 'em!

"Paucity of pawing aside… Is that what I think it is? Talk about a blast from the past."

It all came back to me in seconds—rich memories of that aromatic infusion, that bitter brew, the perfection of the roasted bean. Yup. I smelled me some coffee.

DAY 113

NIGHT

Uh, hello? We're two teenagers left to our own devices in an abandoned passage late at night. What do you think we were doing?

A CATHEDRAL GUARDROOM

A SINISTER BLACK FIGURE EMERGED from the ill-used janitorial skylight access. He was garbed as a priest, and far be it from me to defy a priest on Cathedral grounds, strange as his presence was. Regulations demanded I question him. Alas, regulations were a paper shield against the priests and their absolute authority.

"Er... Father...? Might I ask what you're doing here so late at night? Oh, heavens! Nuns aren't allowed in this part of the Cathedral, Father!"

"Hey, hey; it's cool. She's with me. Me and her are here on serious business. I'm keepin' an eye on her to make sure she doesn't get up to no good. And I'm a priest; and she's my guest; so yeah? We're not gonna have any trouble, are we? Huh? What are we doing here so late at night? Something. Things. Assorted stuff and sundry. Like, uhh... We heard there's dubious sorts slinking around. We're here to have a poke, figure out what's going on. Yeah, seems legit?"

The priest's cassock was a bit on the trim side but otherwise unremarkable in cut. It was its quality, both in the skillful tailoring and the fine cloth employed in its make, which belied that this priest was no ordinary man. As for his charming companion, well...her provocative garments...quite answered the question of what—or whom—the priest was engaged with in the skylight!

"Could I ask you to show me a permit, Father? I'm afraid it's in the regulations."

The permit question was the only way to tell if this man was an imposter. An outsider would have fed me some excuse—he'd dropped his permit; he'd misplaced it.

"Huh? I don't have a permit. Why would I have a permit if I'm not permitted? I'm perfectly, precisely, patently permitless and unpermitted to be here!"

He didn't have one! Of course he didn't—for such things did not exist. We'd often said otherwise to outside folk, yes. In order to catch would-be interlopers, we had made it known that all priests were required to carry permits inside the Cathedral. True men of the cloth answered that they had no such permits; those without their signet rings on their person took care to claim they were "unpermitted" to walk the Cathedral's halls. After all, what interloper would ever admit to having unauthorized entry?

My regulations stated I must perform one final check on any ringless priests, and as such, I wasted no time in saying, "Father, if you would be so kind as to take this…? I'll have a temporary ring made up for you momentarily."

"Wow, you guys are next level! You're the best guards we've seen all week. Bravo! Mmm-mm-*mm*, is that bitter! Can I get a refill? You, sirs, are credits to your job and princes among guards."

I doubted this man no longer. Only a priest could, through his years of grueling monastic practices, stomach this bitter black brew. Even lesser priests had been known to shudder at the taste; those not in service to God were liable to choke and spit it out. A priest who could drink the brew down to its last dreadful drop with such obvious relish could only have been a bishop—or higher! Even then, no ordinary bishop would have ever dreamed of asking me to refill their cup, much less quaff the second draught with glee!

"An august personage is in our midst…" I whispered to my fellow guard.

"I shudder to think of what suffering he must have endured if this terrible tea can make him smile so…"

The brew was, according to sacerdotal lore, the nectar drunk by God himself. The most holy imbibed it as a trial to bring themselves closer to God. It was nigh unto a penance. What mortal man could swallow it down with pleasure, nay, savor every droplet?

"P-pardon the wait, Your Excellency," I stammered. "Your temporary signet is ready."

"Sister, might I offer you a cup as well? No, no, please don't worry about drinking it all now—you are perfectly welcome to leave the empty cup at any of the other guardrooms. Our deepest apologies for stopping you."



The priest was a credit to his post, even if he did not resemble a priest in the slightest. Yes, he was a man of eminent virtue! Most of his kindred pulled faces when forced to sip of the bitter black tea for regulatory purposes. The moment the dreadful deed was done, many departed with a nasty word or—be the priest especially beastly—a cuff on the chin. Yet my apologies were met with praise! Commendation!

Now, if only I knew what a “true coffee connoisseur” was… The servants closest to God spoke of matters far beyond the ken of lowly men such as I!

DAY 113

LATE NIGHT

Help! This is quickly becoming Haruka and the Real Girl!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

RUNNING INTO GOOD GUARDSMEN—for the first time!—was such a surprise I began praising them to high heaven. Finally, guards who looked at my venerated vestments and pronounced me a priest! Finally, guards with the consideration to bring me a piping hot cup of Joe for late night work. Brilliant guards! Wonderful guards!

"If I must nitpick, I prefer drip coffee. It's not as bitter. But a swanky cup of Turkish coffee makes for a nice treat once in a while. Really wakes a guy up!"

The guards even threw in a matching set of rings for me 'n Dancer Girl, much to her joy... *Could I get, like, forty of them?* I would've asked, but for reasons beyond me to explain, that felt devastating to my sex appeal.

"What floor is this anyway? The layout of the Cathedral is bizarre... It's confusing my Map skill."

So we just wandered around. Our plan went like this: Go in, use Area Analyze to Map the place, verify that all the measurements were correct, and inspect any discrepancies to find hidden rooms or passages. Oh, and find the way out. Yeah...I didn't know how to get out of this place.

"Wait. There's a 1.5th floor between the 1st and 2nd floors? No wonder I can't find anything—I don't even know what floor I'm on! First dungeons, now the Cathedral—does no one understand proper signage? Would it kill them to put up a directory? How's an intruder supposed to know where he's going? Some people, I swear... Never think about us intruders and our needs!"

We found plenty of storerooms but none with any good armor. Maybe there was better loot upstairs. Except...

"Yooo, are those coffee beans? This is good paper, too. I'll take this over a lame item drop anyway. Yoink!"

Dancer Girl may have been a foodie, but she evidently wasn't a coffee gal.

Anyway, these lower floors had guardrooms at every turn—probably to keep out intruders. Sneaking around 'em all was a pain in the tuchus. Still, we kept on and continued our thorough survey of the place. Here and there, we stumbled upon walls thrumming with magic, and I appointed Wisdom to analyze them from top to bottom.

The Cathedral sucked up and stockpiled ambient magic, but there was little magic in the air *inside* the Cathedral. There were also magical detection spells scattered here and there, making me reluctant to use any of my showier skills. That's where the "Shadow Cloak: Speed, Dexterity +30%. Shadow Crows. Shadow Incarnation. Shadow Manipulation. Shadow Manifestation. Shadow Magic. Shadow Skulk. Presence Isolation." came in handy. We hid ourselves in its folds and sidled under the noses of the guards.

"How did Maid Girl stand this? Sure, it doesn't leak much detectable magic, but walking in it is slow going. Uses a ton of MP, too. I'll have to learn how she does it."

Nod nod.

Making the two of us completely undetectable put my MP endurance to the test. Worse, having two soft, perky bits of flesh pressed up against me in the dark put my teenage boy endurance to an even bigger test! I almost succumbed to the shadows, capitulated to the carnal, wallowed in the Walpurgis Night of my teenage-boy wantonness... The darkness brought all sorts of new experiences to be had!

"No wonder I couldn't tell when Maid Girl was right behind me. Shadow Skulk blocks magic from going anywhere. It's not the most usable of traits, though... Zipping from shadow to shadow slows us down and consumes tons of MP. See?"

"Shadow Skulk, normally, one person only. Two of us, makes it hard."

Well, if that was the problem... I pulled Dancer Girl closer and smushed us together with Holding magic. Did that make things easier? Nope. One of my hands happened to land on her butt and

gave it a little squeeze. She pinched my hand—hard! Yup, this skill was completely useless.

But what I gained was worth the pain! Oh, what an ass she had! Jupiter Eye's night vision didn't work in the folds of the Shadow Cloak. Oh yes, Shadow Skulk provided a total black-out that made tushy touches ten times as tempting. *You hear that, Wisdom? You need to research Shadow magic too. Stat!*

More storerooms, more stairs... The storerooms had plenty of loot—mostly food, weapons, and armor. Scattered among all that were a few magical tools of war, none of which were worth writing home about.

"What a waste of alchemical ingredients! The church should have read *How to Magic Item!* before they banned the book. Think how many lives could've been saved if all this raw material had been on the frontier instead."

I didn't need this low-quality crud, but neither did I want it to be left in church hands. So I picked up the junk and stripped it for parts. After all, it was my duty as sensei of the school of scammy schemes to pick up and pawn any unattended items.

We jumped over an alarm on the stairs, sneaked back to steal the alarm too, and headed up to the next floor. Survey, pick up loot, rinse, and repeat.

"More work than a dungeon and less lucrative..."

As I explored and filled in my Map, I realized something was wrong. There was a gap between this floor and the one just below it. I sent some Magic Threads to hunt for a way out and others crawling over the walls until one found a crack in a dead-end wall.

"Wait, we were just over here! Ugggh. I hate backtracking!"

The slim crack in the stone wall looked like a slot for a keycard. A Magic Thread did the trick, too, and the wall slid up just far enough for a single person to crawl underneath. That was, if they weren't too bulky about the middle... *Whoa!* Dancer Girl's twin bulks were squished flat as she crawled. They bulged out in all directions and sprang back with a *bo-yoing* when she popped out the other side! *What a magnificent hidden door. No notes. Except...oh boy, imagine Vice Rep B crawling through. That could be lethal!* Her massive

missiles packed enough pressure and elasticity to smash the rock! And I wanted front-row tickets to watch it happen!

"Sealed, treasure chest. A trap? Inside, ghost, I think. Is, guarding chest? Or sealing it away?"

There was indeed a long, rectangular box plastered with sealing wards resting atop an intricate magic sigil. Honestly, if it was a trap for thieves, it was kinda overkill. Weirdly, even though it was sealed fast, it was leaking a thin trail of magic.

"Hmm... Thieves aren't big risk-takers, y'know? Safety first and all. So maybe an ominous-looking box is enough to scare off thieves. Adventurers, though? Nah. To adventurers, this is a challenge."

Adventuring was all about risking one's life. Adventurers *sought out* risk whenever they could. Not like thieves—no, adventurers did the math to pick and choose what risks to take on. A wise adventurer sought out the most worthwhile risks; avoiding unnecessary danger was what made them an adventurer.

Not me, though! I didn't have a job.

"Hii-yah! Hii-yah-yah-yah! Take that! And that!"

BooooOOOOOOOOOOOooorrghhhh!

"Yup. I'm no adventurer, and I'm no thief. I'm just an unemployed NEET. I avoid all risk, be it worthwhile or otherwise. I'm only here to rip people off!"

Since whatever was in that box had been dangerous enough to have all those sealing tags, it was smarter to kill it before I cracked the lid on the treasure. Yeah, if it was probably undead, let it eat stake? I wasn't sure if the spirit whispering in my ear was my good friend M-san or a certain pirate no stranger to popping up on the receiving end of pointy things—long story short, I stabbed the box.

"'Cause the darkness is in that box. I can feel it. The Universe Staff comes in all sorts of fun shapes and sizes, so I made it real sharp 'n skinny and stabbed whatever's inside the box through the keyhole. Yeah, I gave it a good stabby-stab. Turns out, I'm a pro at sticking my rod into tight holes, so, yeah. I won."

Death glare.

“Hey! It was an obvious trap, Dancer Girl! I wasn’t about to open a trap! Besides, why would I break the seal and *fight* the darn thing? That’s just asking for trouble.”

This girl just didn’t understand the finer subtleties of risk management. Her furious stare shone fiercely and stare-y-ly from the depths of the limpid pools of her topaz-blue eyes.

“It’s just common sense! I couldn’t let the ghost out. Why would I open the box and place myself in certain danger? Plus, ghosts are too good at floating and dodging. It simply makes more sense to kill it while it’s still in the box. Besides, stabbing things in wooden receptacles is a whole thing where I come from. No, like, for real. Ask the girls; they’ll know what I’m talking about. They’ve all played the game where you trap a pirate in a barrel and take turns stabbing him with swords. It’s true! Everyone does it! I promise!”

“Do they really?!”

Ghosts were no trouble for me; I had a divine sword. If anything, I was surprised this ghost survived so many stabbings. All the more reason to have not opened the lid!

“You guys are the ones with no common sense… It drives me up the wall sometimes! We weren’t s’posed to open the chest, see? Why else would it’ve been sealed away?”

Pointed silence.

Anyway, treasure time. If this rectangular box turned out to be a treasure chest, then I knew it was packing major spoils. If it was just a ghost chest…well, at least the ghost would’ve dropped an item.

“What’s it gonna be? I can’t wait to find out… Ah ha, I’m not falling for that trick! One more stab for you!”

Booooooorrrgggghhhlll…

Fantasy worlds were something else. Who knew a ghost could play dead?

“A ghost playing dead—when one can safely assume the ghost has already died—challenges all my preconceived notions about death. What *is* death, anyway?”

Well, now it was dead for realsies. This ghost had ceased to be. It was now formally an ex-ghost.

“Tough fight, whatever you were. I guess I won’t know until I pop the lid. Now that the ghost has given up the—well, ghost—let’s crack the chest open and find… Fool me twice, why don’tcha? Stabbity-stab!”

Booooooooorrrghhll?!

I liked this ghost. It had the knack for doing a joke to death. I was on the verge of picking up the box and taking it home, half-expired ghost and all, when at last the lid came free… Oh! That was too bad. I had hoped for one more go at the stabbing, but between the two of us, we’d run that joke into the ground.

“Nooo! I’ve killed our dear, departed ghost… Hey, think it’ll come back as a ghost of a ghost?”

Dancer Girl glared at me, so I decided to quit while I was ahead. Shame, though. It *would’ve* been funny if we’d repeated the same gag a third time… *Them’s the pits.*

“Inside the box iiis… No! Could it be? A spellstone?! Well, of course there’s a spellstone. It’s from the ghost I killed.”

Nod nod.

No spellstone would have meant no ghost. I would’ve been stabbing my friend the pirate!

“There’s a necklace, a crown…and what’s that big lump under the cloth? Let me see.”

Fwish!

“Oh. Um. Uhhh.”

Let’s put this cloth back riiiight where I found it. Yup! *Not* under the cloth was a necklace and a crown. The ghost’s drop items, I figured.

“I’m just gonna forget I saw anything. Appraisal… Ooh. That’s cool. ‘Hylomorphic Necklace: Unites spirit and flesh into a single entity. (Limited to one-time use.)’ Can I equip this? Hello to you too, but my name’s not Morphic Necklace… ‘Unites spirit and flesh into a single entity’—like, returning a spirit trapped in limbo to its body? Limbo… Is that why it’s called Hylomorphic? Yeah, hy low can you go? Anyway, the crown is the ‘Sorcerer’s Crown: Intelligence +50%. Sorcery Boost (hyper). Seal Spawning. Sigil Spawning. Skilled Sorcery.’ Whoa, this kicks butt. Did this ghost moonlight as a

sorcerer? Dang! Had I known, we could've swapped tips, freelancer to freelancer."

Mysteries upon mysteries. *Right. First off…*I *want to introduce this necklace to the thing under the cloth.*

"Call that a match made in heaven… 'Cause they're dead, geddit?"

This was a dangerous operation. Very, very dangerous. "Rubbing salt in the wound, rolling it in flour, frying it in hot oil to a golden brown and serving"-level of dangerous! "Turning my mortally wounded sex appeal into a delightful fried chicken"-level dangerous! 'Cause those things were *enormous*. I admired their outlines even through the cloth.

"Wait. Why is the church keeping a dead girl in a box?! Or a doll, rather?"



Yes, a beautiful sex d—a beautiful *doll,* the ultimate weapon to banish my sex appeal to the shadow realm once and for all. Oh, the massive milkers on that mannequin…

Fwish?

DAY 113

LATE NIGHT

Getting henpecked by the wife must be tough… No wonder hubby flew the coop!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

FIRM YET SUPPLE (GROPITY-GROPE?). Cold as stone yet warm as living flesh (peekity-peek?).

"Hubba hubb—Wait, no! It's not what it looks like! This is merely an academic study of a corpse or a doll or a whatever-the-heck-she-is in order to edumacate the young minds of teenage boys in matters of health and anatomy! And she's stark naked! (Squeezity-squeeze?)"

Things I didn't know: if this gorgeous girl was dead, asleep, or just a mannequin. Things I did know: My appeal with the opposite sex was about to go supernova and morph into a black hole of repugnance. There was no time to lose. I had to get this girl some clothes. Although…I guessed the cloth covering her was a robe of sorts?

"Huh. This Sanctifying Robe was protecting her from the ghost, I guess. This robe's one of those relic whatchamacallits. Yeah, that ghost must have been biding its time, waiting for the robe's spell to fade…until it met its untimely demise in a series of pirate-related accidents. Funny thing, life."

I could feel a faint hint of magic from the robe; the Universe Staff had probably broken its ward. With its protections lifted, the robe was now starting to fray and fall apart. I panicked—I had to get this girl some clothes, fast! It was a good thing I just so happened to have a spare sexy nun costume on me.

It looked great on her. The girl had a beauty of a body and a distressingly distracting derrière. That wasn't the part that distressed me, though. It was everything that came afterward.

Hot girl = loot. Ergo, I pick her up → Outcome A: She's a corpse. → I go down in history as a necrophiliac.

Hot girl = loot. Ergo, I pick her up → Outcome B: She's a doll. → I go down in history as a guy with a sex doll.

I leave her here. → Outcome C: I get arrested for the crime of abandoning a dead body!

No matter my justifications, taking her home with me was a bad idea. Just think of the hit to my reputation!

"A full-fledged false accusation of a Pygmalion complex is bad enough! Straight-up slander of agalmatophilia is worse!"

Yet the false accusation of necrophilia could be lethal too. No matter what I picked, I feared my sex appeal had a one-way ticket to the realm of imaginary numbers.

That didn't stop me from carefully lifting the girl out of the box and into my item bag for safekeeping. I couldn't just leave her! Not after how Dancer Girl cried at the sight of her! A charge of possession with intent to bang would probably destroy my sex appeal's last hope of existing, but even if my sex appeal was an irrational number or a resident of the complex 2D plane, I couldn't let down a crying girl. Y'know? Not like I understood how carting around a dead body equated to cheering up a crying girl, but... *So long, space sex appeal.*

I rubbed Dancer Girl's head until she calmed down. The memories were hazy, she said, but she remembered that this girl was someone very close to her. Someone near and dear to her heart. And for that, I'd put up with any slander, stigma, or public clubbings by morning star. Yeah. I'd be fine. *Nothing I haven't handled before!*

"I bet the ghost wanted to possess the body and couldn't. Probably 'cause of the robe. Join the club—I've wanted to get my hands on lots of bodies only to get stopped by clothes... Wait, I don't want to be in the same club as a creepy ghost! Ugh! This was a trap all along—a time-delay trap causing psychological damage!"

A trap so terrible the Trap Ring didn't work on it!

"Speaking of clubs, I've done plenty of clubbing since I came to this world... Yeah, clubbing goblins? Ahh, good times. Or bad times, more like."

Compared to getting physical with girls back home, fighting monsters here almost seemed safer. At least these monsters couldn't hide their fangs. *Imagine an Emperor-class vamp—no thank you!*

"Point is, you don't gotta force yourself to remember, Dancer Girl. So long as you know you cared about her, she must've been someone real important to you. Don't worry; I forget stuff all the time, and I turned out okay! Who needs memories, anyway? All that matters is what's in the heart. I think?"

That's what they said back home in… In… What was it called again? It must've had a name at some point.

"Wasn't it something like… Once upon a time, a king on his deathbed promised to leave his lands to whichever of his sons could bring him the finest mouthful of alcohol. The first prince journeyed far and wide before returning with a flagon of wine so rich it could purchase the moon. The king tasted it, shuddered, and pronounced it too dry. The second prince hunted high and low before bringing his father a sake so mellow angels used it for a pillow. The king lapped up a few drops, stuck out his tongue, and proclaimed it too sweet. Now, the third prince forgot all about the contest, and when it was his turn, he panicked. He shot straight out of bed and only had time to run down to the local pub and request a shot of whiskey. The king took a sip, smacked his lips, and cried, 'Now this! This is the sharp tang I've been seeking!' Satisfied, he passed away in peace and left his kingdom to the third prince, who would forever be memorialized as its namesake."

Yeah, land of the Rye Zing Son?

"Well, all that matters is that you care about her. Right? Who needs names? Who needs history? She's someone you've cherished for, what, centuries now? In its own way, that's enough."

Pat pat pat pat…

Eventually, Dancer Girl's tears ceased. Still red-eyed and sniffling, she agreed to tuck into a crepe, provided I keep a comforting hand on her head. Personally, I thought combining whipped cream and red bean paste was sacrilege, but as passed down through ancient lore, there was no arguing with pretty, crying girls. I mean, there was no arguing with Dancer Girl to begin with.

Even in fantasy worlds, the entrenched and evil social hierarchy went like this: women and children before high school boys before old men. The only way to vent my frustrations was to beat up those occupying the lowest rung of the social ladder!

"Since you're in no state to fight, let's call it a day... Well, I say that, but I don't know where this secret passage ends. If it was someplace on one of the lower floors, we would've seen it, right? This passage just keeps going and going... Where's it gonna dump us out at?"

Dancer Girl was putting up a convincing show that she was back to her usual self (she was demanding more crepes from me), but I could tell that her lost memories unsettled her. No doubt the white, creamy mess smeared across her face was a product of that emotional turmoil. Just like the slow, seductive way her tongue played around her lips, teasing the gloppy goodness off her face—great googly moogly was that hot!

"You've been kinda on edge ever since we started planning this expedition, y'know?"

That was why Miss Armor Rep and Slimey had deferred the Haruka chaperone role to Dancer Girl. The more I watched her, the more I was sure something was eating at her—speaking of eating, was she not done yet? Didn't she consume so much dinner she made the violent old dude cry?

"You're gonna get fa—never mind! Ignore me! Might I offer you a nice cup of cold tea, ma'am?"

Hmph!

During our search for the exit, we stumbled upon storerooms, cleared them out, and kept filling in our Map as we climbed flight after flight of stairs. Eventually, we discovered another secret—a hidden room filled with traps of all kinds. I disabled the ones that used magic, but that still left plenty of physical obstacles.

"So... To make a long story short, when I open the chest, a ball embedded in the lid rolls away, drops down, hits those blocks, which get knocked over, tilting those scales, pulling that string, dropping a bunch of iron balls from that basket on the ceiling, raising a pulley, slackening a string, sending a guillotine blade crashing down, severing a rope in the groove on the floor, firing

bows on both walls, turning me into a pincushion for arrows? And they all live happily ever after? Oh, and the hidden slit makes the floor collapse."

Which, come to think of it, explained why there was a room on the floor below with no doors… Oh well. That one was a trap room, too.

"What if I just hold the ball when I open the chest? Like this? See, 'cause that's what triggers the trap?"

Nod nod.

Actually, holding the ball was the real trap. Not whatever was in the room below—I couldn't tell what it was; there was a force field on the room itself. 'Course, I'd find out if the floor fell out from under me. But anyway, the frustration of not setting off such a carefully constructed Rube Goldberg machine made me want to set it off anyway—and *that* was the trap!

"Man, I'm so curious now! I mean, it's a pretty childish trick, and no teenage girl will fall for a teenage boy who falls for grade-school traps. On my honor as a teenage boy, I opt to give it the cold shoulder! Hmmph! What a childishly childish trap fit only for the likes of childish children!"

Resisting the overwhelming temptation to let my hand slip, I kept the ball in place and opened the box—except it turned out to be a jack-in-the-box.

"Guess you can say I didn't find jack. Anyway, I've got bigger problems."

Namely, the spring-loaded toy hitting the basket on the ceiling, sending its load of iron balls raining down on me, and when I jumped out of their way, a guillotine blade came hurtling down, and when I leaped out of *its* way, a bunch of arrows shot at me from both walls, and when I used the Universe Staff and the Replicant Sword's copy of the Staff to bat them all away as fast as I could… well, that was when the floor dropped out and sent me crashing into the room below. Which kinda ticked me off.

"Grr! It got me! What a sneaky trap to catch poor me as I sat there smirking away, thinking I was hot shit for holding the ball in place! That dagnabbit trap wounded my pride! My dignity! Ohh, that

makes me mad. Ohhh, that really chaps my hide. Ohhhh, that really rustles my jimmies. Ohhhh, that really butters my butt and calls me a biscuit!!!"

Sure enough, this doorless room turned out to be a trap room. Trap hall. Large, dank, gloomy trap hall. The air was thick with magic, and I could hear something enormous *wriggling* in the center of the room.

"Thank goodness the twins aren't here... Whatever that thing is, it's strong. Could rival a dungeon king."

A thick, deadly miasma choked the room. Probably an instant death poison, I figured. It soon blanketed the walls of this large chamber, this tiny arena for a creature so huge.

I took a deep breath—poison didn't work on me, remember? I let magic fill my whole body, sent breathing-tempered *lianqi*—powerful tempered qi—surging through my veins, and harnessed the power of qi activation and magic. I Entangled it all with my physical form. The massive volume of magic and skills made me bend double; the air near me groaned under the strain. My thoughts lurched into hyperspeed as if to twist and warp the flow of time. Deeper and deeper I sank into a world of slow motion.

Everything changed color around me, losing its edges and merging together into a heavy, gelatinous monochrome blue. The powers raging inside of me and the vast, Entangling forces around me waged fierce battle on one another, making every part of me moan in agony.

Because I had equipped the Universe Staff—already doubled in power via the Replicant Sword—the Aegis Shoulder Shields, the Plunder Glove, the Venom Sword, and the Sorcerer's Crown just to see what they would do, my skills were abnormally OP. Too OP for me to handle. The power threatened to overflow and surge out of my control, becoming a violent torrent of magic destroying everything in its path—me included!

And then, just before all magical pandemonium broke loose, the dungeon king slithered out of the darkness...'cept I think it was kinda spooked of me?

Yeah, see, there was a sliding and scraping across the stone floor, and out of the shadows winked the glittering eyes of the

basilisk—the king of the serpents. *Serpens rex* radiated power, menace, majesty; this massive lizard cloaked in scales as tough as dragon's hide loomed with the malice of a dungeon king.

"Two pairs of wings, eight legs, a cockscomb… What kinda weird, chicken-ass lizard king of the serpents is this?"

As I was brutalized by a wave of déjà vu, my own giant chickenatrice took it upon herself to steal my MP, manifest herself, and beat the basilisk silly. She caught him in one chickeny claw, raked him with her other set of talons, stabbed him with her sharp beak, and buffeted him with her wings and sword-sharp feathers. Oh yes, this most fierce of fights was…the fabled marital quarrel!

"What a matchup! A chickenatrice executing a Dempsey Roll with infinite wings, beaks, and chicken feet… Well, you know what they say. Float like a chicken, sting like a chicken. Because, yup, she's a chicken."



The beasts clucked and hissed at each other; Dancer Girl and I sat back to watch the show over peaches-and-cream crepes. The chickenatrice was spitting mad. She'd been on the hunt for her husband this whole time! When her search took her to the bottom of a dungeon, she was crowned its king and forced to stay. Not like the lizardisk could've gone to find her, either, not when he was a prisoner of the church. Still...she wasn't buying that excuse. The way I saw it, she was doing all the yelling and kicking; he was doing all the apologizing.

"This is one nasty fight even the kobolds won't touch. The mean girls might be able to sink their teeth into it, but me? Nah. Taking on relationship problems is biting off more than I can chew."

Nod nod.

They fought and fought and fought until they decided to hiss and make up.

"Cute story and all, but are you sure you're fit to be serpent royalty? No, no, I'm not saying there's a problem, but don't you think my hydra would be better for the role? It's a snake, even if it isn't a king. How did a lizard and a chicken end up king and queen serpents? No, no, I don't have a *problem* with it. I'm just *saying*."

Cock-a-doodle-doo?

Hiss?

The lizardisk approached me, an apologetic look on its lizardy face, lowered its head, and unfurled a long, reptilian tongue. Was this a handshake? A tongue shake?! *No thank you!*

"I wouldn't mind touching tongues with a hot girl, but not a freaking serpent-king-lookin', old-man-actin', lizard-ass basilisk! And right in front of your wife? Do you have a death wish?!"

Just as I thought I was going to be French kissed by a reptile, the lizardisk's tongue touched my necklace. *No, he can't be*— He was. The basilisk turned transparent, like a phantom afterimage, and began to be slorped up by the necklace. *Wait, stop—!*

"Who said you could come live here?! As a teenage boy who is constantly breaking his record for most consecutive days without a girlfriend, I refuse to let a married couple shack up in my necklace! I can only fit three snakes in there anyway! Am I already at max snake

capacity?! Think of the poor third wheel—the hydra! Not to mention me! Gaaah. I should have put on the listing ‘single snakes only.’”

It had never crossed my mind that I could have had a married couple making kissy faces at each other in my equipment. It hadn’t been on my radar in the slightest! Completely outside the realm of potential possibility!

How many basilisks had there been in books and anime, anyway?

“A couple that got driven off by weasels, some that got beheaded with magic swords, the one that got killed by that four-eyes wizard kid, the one that died by its own poison… None of the stories said anything about a gatecrashing freeloader! Wait, if I have both the king and the queen, do I have everything I need for a snake kingdom? Could you guys *not* found a nation in my equipment? I swear, this never happens in the books…”

Now, with the king, queen, and third-wheeling hydra, I had… “Snake Charmer’s Necklace: Can insert seven items. Intelligence +40%, Snake Replication, Poison Production, Scale Hardening, +DEF.” Yup. I’d filled every snake slot.

“I feel bad. I should add mithril and up my serpentine capacity… Gah! Why am I playing gotta catch ’em all with snakes? And what happens to me if the hydra gets a girlfriend? Maybe the poor, unloved hydra has a chance to get out and meet someone nice, but poor, unloved me doesn’t!”

Even the monsters were girlfriend-getting chads… The lizardisk room was just one more terrible trap in this terrible world!

DAY 113

LATE NIGHT

Hey, I leveled up! Must be all the sexperience.

THE VIOLENT OLD DUDE'S HOUSE IN THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

We returned to the old man's house and laid out Sleeping Beauty on a bed. I felt weird about leaving her in my item bag, y'know? On the other hand, time seemed to slow or stop in the bag—or maybe all the magic in it stopped decay, I dunno; anyway, point was, my bag kept things nice and fresh. So I didn't know what was best for Sleeping Beauty. It didn't really matter, anyway. All I cared about was Dancer Girl.

She took Sleeping Beauty's hand and curled up beside her friend. She wouldn't—couldn't—tear her eyes away.

"You can stay with her even if you don't remember her name. I can't, though. Teenage boys shouldn't be left unattended with immobile female bodies!"

Dancer Girl's memories may have been lost to time, but her feelings for her friend were as strong as they'd ever been. That, and her sexpertise. Memory worked in mysterious ways.

So it turned out that trap room had an exit after all. It led to a corridor that spat us out under a rock in the Cathedral's garden. The boulder refused to move until we applied a little tongbei leverage. A lot of tongbei leverage, actually. Rolling stones might gather no moss, but they *did* set off a loud alarm when they crashed headlong into Cathedral walls. We hightailed it out of there like a Steppenwolf that was born to be wild. Geddit? Because it was both rock and roll?

Incidentally, the boulder barreling into the Cathedral didn't knock down the walls. It didn't even leave a mark. That confirmed my suspicions; the Cathedral itself was a relic—which meant it was made of magic.

"It'll prolly be difficult to besiege it from the outside with the brute force approach."

All things considered, I would have been better off stowing the boulder in my item bag. For my favorite move, Meteor, you know?

But I had bigger problems besides boulders. Namely, because Sleeping Beauty was occupying the bed, I couldn't make a move on the Awake Beauty right beside her.

My teenage boyness was swelling with zeal, with passion, with hopes and dreams and who knew what else, but it needed to cool its jets. I was sure if I'd let it, it would have spent all night hashing out its burgeoning feelings with Sleeping Beauty… You know what? Maybe I was better off sleeping in the kitchen.

We had hoped that our investigation would turn up answers, but all we found were more mysteries. Oh, and snakes!

My skills were once again out of control; this time, my equipment was not solely to blame. I had apparently leveled up while playing I'm-gonna-getcha with the pirate ghost.

"So much for having a handle on that…"

I needed Wisdom to recalculate my controls, and fast. In this state, I couldn't use Life or Death without dropping the "Life" part, and without that skill, I was in for some long, tough fights.

"I lost control over my skills again… Well, what else is new? It's just an everyday phenomenon, a common fact of life, a part of the daily routine. The smallest aberrations could trip me up. Even if they don't, this constant loss of control is obnoxious."

I took my equipment off earlier, and now… Well, I didn't *feel* any different. This suggested that my brand-new level, while a contributor to the chaos, was not the main cause of my newfound instability. Most likely, my skills and equipment traits were bouncing off one another big time. To test my hypothesis, I pulled out my Universe Staff and its Replicant Sword copy. The lightbulb in my head went off, and immediately, everything made sense. I never would've predicted those numbers on my own—far from it!

"Let's see now… I have three pieces of equipment slotted into the Universe Staff with the Power-Up trait—fifty, twenty, and thirty percent—which sums to one hundred. Multiply that times two… Huh, the actual output of these traits—going from largest to smallest—is 150% times 120% times 130% with a 2.34 multiplier on

top. In return, the load this places on my internal processing is… That high? Dang!”

Besides the 2.34 multiplier, I had to include the recoil of the original 100 percent (the first 50 plus 20 plus 30 percents) for a total multiplier of 3.34. Basically, the more high-percentage items, the better. With enough number fudging, the output growth outpaced the ballooning load on my systems.

“Hmm… It may be smart to ditch any gear with a ten or twenty percent multiplier…but I hate to lose good equipment with valuable traits.”

Regardless, I needed to min-max my multiplier, even if it made me lose control of myself or self-destruct. I had no other choice. What if I encountered a dungeon emperor in the Cathedral? Even a maxed-out multiplier didn’t guarantee survival.

However, it could be the difference between killing the emperor in a supernova of self-destruction or dying without taking the boss down with me. If a dungeon emperor did me in, I was dead as a doornail. But any destruction I wrought on myself could be healed. As long as I was alive, I had a chance. So long as I had an opportunity to tread water and rely on my ridiculous luck, pushing myself to my limits was a sound strategy.

“I mean, if we’re talking about fighting a dungeon emperor, anything goes…”

No incremental power-up was too small when facing a dungeon emperor. My chances of winning without dying may have been a decimal so tiny it only registered on the cosmic scale, its collection of zeroes merrily trailing off into the distance. But I wasn’t dead yet! I had a perfect track record of not dying…ignoring the instances where the Ring of the Destitute’s Lifesaving trait or Archsage’s Resuscitation may or may not have kicked in. I was, mathematically speaking, unkillable. Probabilistically invincible. Yeah, I’d be fine!

“No matter how small it may be, a chance is a chance. No matter how tiny…it’s bound to be bigger than my sex appeal! Yeah, I’ll make it through somehow. My sex appeal is out there fighting for its life. I’ll just have to do the same!”

Speaking of dungeon emperors, I also had a perfect track record of getting my ass handed to me in dungeon emperor training sessions. This suggested I was one of those kids who needed to feel the fire under them in order to leap into action—a version of the go-getter character type who had to wait until he was well and truly screwed before taking things seriously.

"I can't believe I fell for a trap, had my jimmies rustled, watched the fantasy version of a family feud, and all I got from the treasure chest were some stupid accessories. This veil thing, those long gloves… I bet they're amazing pieces of equipment, though. Judging from the size and style, they're probably Sleeping Beauty's clothes."

Things that were best not to have in my possession, in other words. I gave them to Dancer Girl and asked her to take care of them for me; I could feel my sex appeal withering away with every second I left Sleeping Beauty naked!

"Grr! Just thinking about it grinds my gears! I was so mad at that jack-in-the-box I stole it. Then, when I brought it home and opened it up, whaddya know? It was made out of mithril. That explained why it was so springy—and nothing else! Beyond that, the mithril didn't do jack!"

Anyway, the newest member of my savvy snake set—"Basilisk: Spell Eye (Deadly Poison, All Status Ailments). Poison Mastery (Physical and Magical Devastation, All Poisons, Status Ailments, Equipment Fracture). Secretions (Perfect Antidote, Petrification, All Poisons, All Status Ailments). Flying Bonus (small)."—was the poison version of my "Cockatrice: Spell Eye (Petrification). Curse (Petrification, All Poisons, Status Ailments). Venom (Perfect Antidote, Petrification, All Poisons, Status Ailments). Flying Bonus (small)."

"A poison version of the Spell Eye… Grants every kind of status ailment… Man, I'm really feeling déjà vu."

Yup. I could feel my sensitivity getting another bonus.

"Physical and Magical Devastation is kinda rad, though. That'd be killer in battle."

In myths, basilisks possessed venom so powerful the scent alone would slay other serpents. The basilisk's breath could shatter

stones, and looking into its eyes spelled sudden death. Still, the question begged—why was the king of serpents a lizard?

"In the Old Testament's Book of Jeremiah and Book of Psalms, the basilisk is a representation of the devil to be slain by the messiah. And yet all I have is a miserable freeloading yes-man henpecked by his chickenatrice wife."

I wanted to try on the "Sorcerer's Crown: Intelligence +50%. Sorcery Boost (hyper). Seal Spawning. Sigil Spawning. Skilled Sorcery." with the "Wisdom Crown: [Fits five items.] Intelligence, Resistance +40%. Control Boost (hyper). Sorcery Boost (hyper)." and see what that did, but there was so much else to do. It could wait until later.

"I'm curious about those Seal Spawning and Sigil Spawning traits. Are they just booster abilities for Skilled Sorcery? Whatever they are, I bet they'll come in handy in my crafting side gigs."

The requests were so grueling, the demand so high, that no matter how many traits I employed, I could never keep up with the mountain of work. There was no end to commissions for teenage girl undergarments!

"Let's wrap this up and get some rest. I wish I could censor out some of my least desirable titles... Too bad Hiding can't Hide that... What a useless skill! I guess it doesn't work when the number one thing I want to Hide is myself... Whatever. Let's check my stats."

NAME: Haruka RACE: Human

Lv: 26 JOB: —

HP: 633 MP: 730

VIT: 529 POW: 552 SPE: 731

DEX: 623 RES: 670 INT: 747

LUK: Max (Above Limit)

SP: 2774

COMBAT SKILLS: Ultimate Cane Mastery Lv3, Magic Entanglement LvMax, Life or Death LvMax, Eye Mastery Lv4, Random Fire Lv7, Limit Break Lv5, Martial Qi Wizardry Lv2

MAGIC: Demolish Lv3, Teleport Lv9, Gravity Lv9, Holding Lv9, Composite Sorcery Lv8, Alchemy Lv9, Void Lv7, Qi Wizardry Lv6

SKILLS: General Health LvMax, Sensitivity LvMax, Body Manipulation LvMax, Walking Mastery Lv9, Servitude Lv9, Presence Sensing Lv8, Magic Control LvMax, Presence Concealment Lv9, Stealth Lv9, Hiding LvMax, Insentience Lv9, Physical-Proof Lv7, MP Absorption Lv8, Revival LvMax, Airwalk Lv8, Jupiter Eye Lv8, Lascivious Lv9, Lovemaking Lv5

TITLES: Shut-In Lv8, NEET Lv8, Loner Lv8, Archsage Lv2, Sword King Lv3, Alchemist Lv8, Sex God Lv 8

UNKNOWN: Wisdom Lv7, Master of None Lv9, Blockhead LvMax

EQUIPMENT: Universe Staff, Replicant Sword, Clothes Set?, Leather Glove?, Leather Boots?, Cloak?, Jupiter Eye, Ring of the Destitute, Item Bag, Monster Bracelet: Power+84% Speed+79% Vitality+46%, Black Hat, Wisdom Crown, 100-Poisons Anklet, Fortune Ear Cuff, Godly Aegis Bladed Shoulder Shields, Sorcerer's Bracelet, Magic Blowgun

Whew, no wonder I felt so light. I lost four skills at once in combat skills alone: Avoid Lv9, Rapid Movement LvMax, Bend Not Break Lv9, and Diamond Fist Lv8. I also lost Dash Lv9 and Overclock Lv9. They had probably merged into Martial Qi Wizardry Lv2—the sublimation of the physical and magical fighting arts.

"Probably because I get so much use out of Qi Wizardry and Lovemaking every night. Wait—who decided that tussling with two dungeon emperors every night made me a martial arts master? Are you okay, Skill System?"

If nothing else, my new skills proved what a workout those dungeon emperor battles could be. I threw myself into those nightly brawls with alacrity, devoting every skill, every magic point, every drop in the teenage boy tank, everything but the kitchen sink. I labored on that fearsome battlefield; verily did I take up my weapon and toil in that struggle, oh the struggle unforgiving as storm winds—no, a raging conflagration!

“Yeah, I definitely put more effort into those battles than any other. Small wonder—the dungeon emperors are the toughest enemies in the whole world. If these ‘battles’ count as battles, no wonder my skill levels are shooting through the roof!”

All the physical training and Alchemy-driven body transmutation wasn’t reflected in my stats—at least, not dramatically. But I did get a nice boost in HP and Vitality, both of which were necessary to withstand self-destruction. Unfortunately, the body-destroying Power and Speed stats also received a boost. Then again, so did my Intelligence stat, which governed my ability to control myself. So at least things weren’t going to get worse.

“You might even say I knock out dungeon emperors every knight! Heck, I even go for multiple rounds… Ah, the stamina of youth!”

I probably would have had an easier time of proper battles if I unequipped the Requiem Sword, but the double Universe Staff multiplier was drool-worthy. Unfortunately, the multiplier also applied to the load on my internal processing.

“I know! I’ll use the ‘Sorcerer’s Crown: Intelligence +50%. Sorcery Boost (hyper). Seal Spawning. Sigil Spawning. Skilled Sorcery.’ to give Wisdom a control boost. I’m counting on you, Wisdom!”

Honestly, that basilisk would’ve been trouble if not for the chickenatrice. With Dancer Girl, I stood a chance at fighting and beating it, but it would have been too dangerous for my liking. The load caused by my equipment could’ve torn me limb from limb—and that would’ve been only the beginning of trouble.

“‘Cause we don’t know what will happen when Sleeping Beauty wakes up. Who’s to say she’ll be friendly?”

No ordinary girl could’ve stopped such a high-level ghost from possessing her body. No ordinary girl had such a drop-dead gorgeous body either! *Three cheers for this fantasy world’s assortment of hot babes!*

DAY 114

MORNING

No, I don't think "meathead" is a viable career...

THE OMUI ORPHANAGE

IT WAS THE SAME QUESTION every morning. It was part of our routine now. Every morning, me and the other kids got together and chanted the question on everyone's minds:

"When are Big Bro and Big Sisses gonna come home?"

Every morning, the same question. Every day, the same waiting for our friends to come home. Us big kids understood what was happening, but the littler ones didn't. That's why they kept badgering the nice ladies who took care of us.

"If you all behave like good boys and girls, they'll be home before you know it."

"Okay! We can be good!"

We'd all settled into our new home by now. We didn't have to worry if there was gonna be food on our plates tomorrow. We didn't have to ask for permission to eat the yummy meals. 'Cause Big Bro said we'd have food to eat forever and ever.

Mrs. Murimuri took care of us. She was the director of this orphanage, see. She was super nice to us and told us we'd always have a home here on the frontier.

The grown-ups back home said the frontier was scary, and that was true. The orphans who were here before us said they lost their mommies and daddies in monster attacks. But they were safe now, they said. Big Bro and the Big Sisses had scared away all the evil monsters attacking their towns and villages. Then, just as they had done for us, they built a beautiful orphanage and cooked up lots of yummy food for all the kids. Big Bro didn't have a mommy or daddy either, the other kids said. If they were good, and if they worked hard enough, they could grow up to be just like him.

"Now, I want all my good boys and girls to put away their toys. Clean up!"

"Clean up, clean up, everybody, clean up!"

Back home in the capital, Big Bro and the Big Sisses destroyed the mansions of all those mean aristocrats. Every store we slaved away in, just to get yelled at and paid in crumbs, our new friends turned into big piles of rubble. “See all that cash we made off those suckers?” Big Bro said as he cooked feast after feast for us. “That’s your money. So eat up.”

It all felt like a dream. My friends and I whispered to each other, “Is this Heaven? Did we finally die from no food in our tummies?”

I hadn’t wanted to move to the frontier. I was too scared. The king and Princess Shalliceres told us it was safe, but that didn’t change anything. If I had to go, I wanted to go with Big Bro and the Big Sisses. All the other kids felt the same way, but none of us wanted to say it. We thought they might get mad at us for being selfish, so we just cried in secret. That’s when Big Bro came around to talk to all of us one-on-one and asked us if we wanted to come with him. I was thrilled. We all were. We all cried tears of happiness all the way to the frontier.

Us bigger kids spent our days studying in the orphanage school and working in town, which Big Bro hated. “A kid’s job is to play,” he said. But all the townspeople liked having us work for them, and they kept telling us we did good work. They were so nice to us. They gave us lots and lots of money—and candy! They patted us on the head and gave us yummy things to eat, so we loved working. The nice lady at the Guild always had a kind word for everyone, and the general store lady gave the tightest hugs you’d ever felt in your life. The blacksmith had a pat on the head and a piece of candy for any kid who came by. No matter where we went, no matter who we met, we never found a mean soul in town. Even the duke would ruffle our hair when we went to his palace. The frontier was the bestest place ever!

But...I still felt lonely. The town just wasn’t the same without Big Bro and the Big Sisses. The grown-ups missed them too. Sometimes, even they asked when Big Bro was coming home. They were as bad as us kids!

“Haruka and his friends are busy fighting the bad guys,” Mrs. Murimuri or one of the other ladies who took care of us explained.

“Our lives are so peaceful because they beat all the bad guys in Omui for us. Now they have to fight the bad guys in a place far, far away so the people who live there can be happy too. Just like how they did for Diorelle.”

Still, we kids couldn’t help but miss them.

“I’m gonna grow up to be an adventurer!” we all promised. “Then I can go along with Big Bro!”

A buncha stores in town said we could come work for them when were all grown up. They’d give each of us lots and lots of money, plus a room of our very own. But we didn’t want to work in town. We wanted to be adventurers. We wanted to be strong like Big Bro, all our Big Sisses, the nice “meet-heds,” and the nice “nurd-ee” guys. We got the receptionist lady and the adventurers at the Guild to train us! ...Not that it did any good. They told us Big Bro would have defeated all the evil monsters in the whole, wide world by the time we were big enough to be adventurers. If we wanted to help him, we were better off studying up to become amazing shopkeepers one day.

We came around eventually. “Okay!” we said. “We’ll grow up to be ’mazing chefs like Big Bro!”

Every meal in the frontier was super-duper yummy. Even at the orphanage! There was always something to fill our bellies, and no one ever said we couldn’t ask for more.

Still, Big Bro’s food was special. The way he cooked could bring tears to our eyes. I still remembered the first time he made me a meal... That was the moment when everything changed. That was the moment life started to feel like a dream. Whenever I ate any of Big Bro’s food, it brought back that magic moment and made me tear up.

“Is Big Bro gonna be home tomorrow? No? How ’bout the day after?”

“Don’t worry about when he’ll be home. Keep studying now. He’s going to be so surprised when he comes back and sees how much you’ve learned, now isn’t he?”

“Yeah! I’m gonna learn lots!!!”

He gave us compliments, candy, and kindness in equal and enormous measures. We used to be starving. Freezing. All colds and runny noses. Now we glowed with health. We shot up like beanpoles! Our tummies had been empty only weeks ago; our limbs, too weak for us to do much more than stumble around and get yelled at for being slow. Now, we were so healthy we were unrecognizable.

When the nice ladies were here, they cooed over us and gave us lotsa pretty clothes. It didn't matter if we got them dirty or ripped, neither, 'cause they'd just give us new ones. Then they'd comb our hair, bathe us, and stroke our hair. Now Mrs. Murimuri and the other orphanage ladies took care of us, and every day felt a little more like a dream.

Cold and hunger were just nightmares fading into the past. Not loneliness, though. Loneliness was a constant companion.

The town of Omui was busy and bustling with kind, smiling people—but there was something missing in those joyful voices. They could have been *happier*. How it was way back when, see—whenever you heard laughter, Big Bro and the Big Sisses weren't far behind. Just being around 'em made me smile. Now that they were gone, it was like a hole had opened up in our lives, filled with loneliness. Without Big Bro sprinting for his life or the nice ladies chasing him, things were just a little too quiet around here.

The lady at the guild missed the screaming matches in front of the bulletin board every morning. The crush of customers in the general store didn't stop the store lady from feeling alone. All the grown-ups kept sighing, "You know, I do miss those mushroom bento boxes."

We felt the loss of Big Bro in the blacksmith's, in the inn's dining hall, at the food carts on the streets, in the clothing store... It hit the inn lady the hardest of us all.

"When are they gonna come home?" the little kids whined again. Always the same question, from the smallest toddlers to the biggest grown-ups.

"Be good, and they'll be home soon."

"Okay! We'll be good!"

“Soon! Soon, soon, soon!”

We ate the tastiest food, learned the bestest lessons, and got the most encouragement ever. We worked as hard as we could and got treated as nice as could be. We trained. We ate goodies. We took baths. We put on pretty clothes and snuggled under warm blankets. We fell into a contented sleep, dreaming of another bright day ahead.

My nights went unbroken by sad or scary dreams—every day was a dream enough for me. I could sleep without fear, secure with the knowledge that tomorrow would be a better day.

But when my eyes flickered open the next morning, I found the same question waiting on my lips:

“When are they gonna come home?”

DAY 114

MORNING

Girl, I must be an antivirus, because I wanna strip the spy wear right off of you.

THE VIOLENT OLD DUDE'S HOUSE IN THE CAPITAL OF THE THEOCRACY

I WOKE UP to the bright rays of the morning sun slanting in through my window. I exited out into the garden, took my time performing my daily radio calisthenic stretches, and switched to a tai chi routine.

I wasn't wearing any equipment—just casual clothes. With nothing but me and my body—no skills, no nothing—I worked to fine-tune my control over myself. Partway through, the beastfolk twins joined in. Their casual clothes were a little *too* casual. Crop tops, short shorts, and knee-high socks? The preteens in this world were a terrible temptation for teenage boys!

"Good morning!"

"U-uh, hi there?"

Oh, those boobs had no right to bulge so brazenly or swing with such salaciousness! Worse, their tails tagged along after every twist and turn of their tight tushies! Those thick thighs led to my demise. I knew not where to rest my eyes!

Looking up, I was treated to a view of rabbit ears a-twitching; looking down, a fluffy wolf tail swam into view. As much as I wanted to sink my fingers into that fur, I knew I would be accused of putting my paws on a preteen girl. Then my sex appeal would've been sent to the slammer, and when it came to trial, all my protests that I wasn't *trying* to slam her would've fallen on deaf ears. My sex appeal was about to end up behind bars for life!

"Ah, what a terrible trap for a pure-hearted teenage boy of the zoophilic persuasion!"

"Good, morning."

As if things weren't bad enough, that was when Dancer Girl showed up. Now I had *another* girl with next to nothing covering her

generous badonk. The cloth bib on her shirt fought for its life to stay on. Even the letters spelling out N-E-F bulged as the spherical solids underneath swung to and fro!

“Hoo haa, hoo ha!”

I turned my mind back to the puzzle of recalibrating my controls. Over time, I whittled down the discrepancy between my internal image of my body and my true physical form. The two synchronized with practice, my mind and body becoming one. I felt lighter. Stronger. Perhaps thanks to Martial Qi Wizardry, the simple breathing and stretching exercises refined my qi and suffused my meridians with renqi. At least, I hoped it was thanks to Martial Qi Wizardry. Not blue balls.

“Huff, huff, huff!”

“Hey! You guys are too young for panting and moaning!”

I felt an icy heat spreading through my veins. I channeled power to increase its efficacy; I mixed it with magic to further refine it.

“Huh. Even though I’m a wizard of the martial arts, tongbeiquan doesn’t show up on my Skill List. Is it not a skill? Well, that explains everything! Then again, I thought the same about Shinto-Muso Cane Style, and we all know what happened there… That style turned out to be terrible for sniping. Who ever heard of sniping with a cane, anyway?”

“Hff, haa, hff, haa.”

As I ran through the routine, I picked up the pace with each kata. The repetitive, minute movements fine-tuned my control further and locked the kata into my subconscious muscle memory.

Drilling complete and comfortable in my body once more, I donned my equipment and challenged the girls to a match. For safety’s sake, we elected not to use weapons—no Universe Staff or Replicant Sword for me.

“Ready or not, here we come!”

“Take that!”

The twins flew at me with astonishing speed. Bunny Girl leaped and launched a flashy, bullet-like barrage of low Rabbit Fist strikes at me. No sooner did I parry those than I had to deal with a

feinting, weaving Wolf Girl and her lightning-fast Wolf Fist. I deflected those with one hand while fighting off her sister with the other. Finally, I sent them both flying with some well-timed tongbei forehead flicks.

The girls were fast and furious, but it was all too easy to read their next attacks in the ways they carried themselves. I could simply weave through their repetitive spiraling fists and break their stances with my tongbei pokes to the noggin. The girls were so naturally athletic they didn't know how to think their way through a fight. It was almost too easy to dip, duck, dive, dodge, and defeat them. Problem was, I was scared to lay a finger on them. They were preteens, y'know?

"Pretty, Ravishing, Extraordinary Turn-ons—Ergo, Entertaining the Notion of Sex. Yeah, PRETEENS? What am I supposed to do when they come flying at me, luscious legs first? Why can *they* attack *me*, but the moment I put my paws on them, it's a crime? Where's the logic?!"

Then there was the real star of the show: Dancer Girl. She stood in a relaxed stance, the pose elegant in its languidness. Her legs tantalized me just as her threat level terrified me. Oh, the indomitable might of a gym-shorts-clad girl in her natural habitat!

"Wait! There's nothing natural about that clothing at all!"

"Is your, weakness! My win, assured!"

She moved with the ease of flowing water. One moment, the picture of relaxation. The next, she had stepped right into my personal space and was wailing on me, her long, supple, oh-so-soft limbs lashing me like a whip, like a lance, like fury itself!

"Oooh!"

"Wonderful!"

"It most certainly is *not*! One hit, and I'm a goner!!!"

She feinted a tongbeiquan strike, added the circular motion of reeling force, and accentuated her energy with a stamp at the moment of impact. The combined power of her rising thrust and sinking force turned her attack into the ultimate high-speed technique! *Wait... I thought this was a sword-and-sorcery world. When did we branch off into martial arts?*

“If that hit lands, I’ll be blown sky-high like a freaking manga character!”

“Nothing, impossible, with power, of gym shorts!”

In the interest of not being launched into the stratosphere, I simply redirected the force. Forming a spiral with my full body, I caught Dancer Girl’s fist in the palm of my hand and used silk-reeling force to let the attack slide off me like water. Thing was, Dancer Girl’s punch packed so much—well, punch—that it knocked me off balance. I started pirouetting like a top, and there wasn’t exactly a market clamoring to see pirouetting teenage boys.

“Power of gym shorts? Don’t you mean the power of kung fu?!”

I let the momentum of my spin convert into rotational force, dropped into a low sweeping kick, and tried to knock her off her feet. She hopped over the kick with grace, almost floating in the air, and—holy shit! Reversed direction mid-spin to strike me with a barrage of whirlwind kicks!

“Too slow! No one, resist my, high kicks! Power of gym shorts!”

“No, that’s the power of me being a horny teenage boy! I’m not just scared of taking the hit…I’m scared of my reputation taking a hit too!”

With no time to waste, I slammed my palm into the ground and launched myself into the air. I intended to throw a spinning kick from a capoeira handstand; alas, Dancer Girl bent backward and let the attack pass harmlessly above her head. Then she suddenly began to *spin vertically* and rained a flurry of axe kicks on me!

“Bravo!”

“Incredible!”

“How the hell are you doing axe kicks *upside down*?!”

Panicked, I somersaulted out of her range and tried to roll to safety. But Dancer Girl was only getting started. Fire pulsed through her veins; she was nigh unto an incarnation of the god of martial arts. Maybe she was riled up by what I did to Sleeping Beauty. Maybe, god forbid, it was the power of the gym shorts.

“All I did was cop a feel or three! Can you blame me? I was a poor, lonely boy who hadn’t seen his slime in days! All I wanted was

a little loving of round, squishy objects… And hey, there were two prime specimens in front of me!”

Then I started experimenting. I used the arrhythmic Life or Death to close the gap between us and tai chi to force myself right up into Dancer Girl’s personal space. After all, maintaining distance against a gym-shorts-clad gal put me at a disadvantage. As Wolf Girl and Bunny Girl paused their own attacks to watch and learn from us, Dancer Girl and I pummeled each other using literally everything we had—hands, arms, elbows, shoulders, whatever. These were all weapons, and we launched them too fast for either of us to catch our breaths. *Wait! I’m up close and* still *at a disadvantage?!*

“Gah! Where the hell did you get this terrifying technique?!”

“You mean, wear gym shorts? Angie gave, to me.”

“Curse her!!!”

Dancer Girl tried to grab me. I evaded her, and in the opening that gave me, aimed for her legs. She did the same right back at me, and soon, we were flailing at each other in an attempt to break the other’s guard. We brawled at a distance so minuscule any touch was liable to bring the police bearing down on me, knee striking and leg sweeping in the vain hope of destroying the other person’s footing. Our bodies twisted and turned, our torsos going one way and our legs going the opposite, each of us desperately trying to outdo the other.

“Wow!”

“You two look like you’re dancing.”

“If by dancing, you mean Dancer Girl kicking my ass, then sure!”

It was all I could do to defend myself against her, and on the rare occasion that I did counterattack, she dodged or sidestepped every hit. In the end, the only thing that saved me was her stomach growling.

The match revealed to her that my control over my body had gone bananas bonkers again, so she beat me to a precisely pulverized pulp. Yup, it was a very thorough training session. I launched attacks and defended myself every which way possible, I

developed a keen understanding of control over my own body, and I…was overwhelmed by the power of her gym shorts. TL;DR: Dancer Girl's training forced me to get a handle on my wayward physical abilities. I still didn't know what gym shorts had to do with anything, but hey—I wasn't complaining.

I now felt like I had my leveling-induced problems under control—well, more or less. My next concern was what to do with my equipment. Use less of it? Get used to the new load it placed on my mental processing? Or just cheat my way through?

"How 'bout we have some breakfast? Miso soup, rice balls, rolled omelet, and grilled fish at the twins' request! Dancer Girl, let me know if your chopsticks give you any trouble. I'll cut the fish into bite-sized pieces for you. Old dude, you can pick it up in your hands and eat it—bones and all! Ma'am, here's a knife and fork for you. Now, dig in."

"Thank you!"

"What a feast… But why the cuss am I singled out to eat with my hands?!"

The outside of the omelet was a little more cooked than I would have liked, but I blamed that on a slight lapse in control over my magic power. *You know how it is with soy sauce; it's* so *easy to burn*. I needed to find the perfect sweet spot for when to take the omelet off the heat, but that was almost impossible without a steady flame. I would have loved to run a culinary experiment or two, but I just didn't have the time.

"You can already see the smoke signals from here? That means the girls will arrive as soon as the next couple of days."

I ate breakfast in between helping Dancer Girl fight a losing battle against her chopsticks. All the other girls in our local feminine fraternity used chopsticks, and Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep didn't want to be left out of the chopstick craze. That said, Dancer Girl had her work cut out for her when eating fish with lots of tiny bones.

The beastfolk twins were just fine; people in the Beastfolk Kingdom ate with chopsticks all the time. Meanwhile, the angry old dude's wife had a knife and fork, and even though I gave him his

own pair of chopsticks, he insisted on eating the fish with his hands, the uncivilized brute.

“That was amazing!”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Haruka.”

“‘Twas strange fare indeed. Strange, aye, but not bad.”

When breakfast was over, the three girls changed into special bodysuits imbued with Hiding and Presence Concealment. Why were they blue, purple, and pink? Oh, no reason. Just like there was no reason (None! Nada!) that they had matching yellow, violet, and aquamarine sashes around their waists. This was merely traditional espionage garb, but for reasons beyond my powers to explain, the girls didn’t get the reference. Yeah, they just glared at me?

“You don’t understand. This is *the* trope for spy costumes. There’s literally three of you! You expect me to pass this chance up? If there was only one of you, well! That’d be a different story. I could have modified the usual leather suit and called it a day.”

I pulled on my cloak, and with that, the four of us walked to the Cathedral back door we had unearthed last night.

“Gather round, gang. This passage will take us straight into the Cathedral, so I want you all to keep your wits about you. Dancer Girl, I felt bad about you being left out of the animal ear crew, so I made you a pair of cat ears and a cat’s-eye calling card—which, knowing you, you’re going to use as a weapon, so I’m just gonna hold onto that… I also made a wolf’s-eye and a rabbit’s-eye card just in case. Yeah, one each? Not going to lie, I was on the fence about making more. I wanted ‘Help Wanted: Honeypot Spies’ and ‘Female Assassins Welcome!’ cards to hand out too, but…do you think there’s anyone out there fielding honeypot job applications?”

“Why must we wear such provocative outfits if we’re supposed to be undercover?!”

“My biggest concern is that wearing a bodysuit has started to feel *normal*…”

“Oh, hush! At least yours is blue. I have to be bright pink! I stick out like a sore thumb!”

“Must they really be so tight?”

Uh, yeah? Them's the rules of fiction? Boy, forget slipping into the Cathedral. I wanted to slip a hand under those suits… Ah, here came the mother of all glares.

"Hey, you're griping now, but just you wait. Never underestimate the destructive power your bodysuits contain."

These suits could elevate the already sensual to sensationally sexual and send the less well-endowed plummeting to even greater pits of depression. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the terrifyingly tantalizing trio. *Hubba hubba,* I said to myself. *I'll need to make one for Miss Armor Rep too!* Not like she had any spy missions on her to-do list, but it was a must-have for teenage boy sneaking! *Would she enjoy it? Eh… I dunno… Would I enjoy it? Oh, absolutely.* What a marvelous garment!

"Let the record show that I am not an expert, not the most well-versed, even rather uninformed in the matter—but I've heard leotards are basically full-body tights, y'know? So I made leotard versions too? Just in case? Unfortunately, getting preteen girls into that getup runs the risk of me getting it up, thus sending my sex appeal into hiding forever, so I also made chain mail miniskirts—you never know when you'll need a chain mail miniskirt—but those turned out to be jailbait too, so I sealed all those dangerous items away? They packed as much destructive power as the full-body tights! And they weren't even very disguise-y to boot! And that's the reason I chose bodysuits. It was a tough call!"

Not like these current outfits were very disguise-y either, but… One look at the girls, and there would be a sudden outbreak of guards hunching over holding their crotches, a position hardly conducive to chasing down infiltrators. And the bodysuits came with high heels. Oh, were they a sight to behold from the rear! Especially Dancer Girl, with her black cat ears and tail!

I contented myself with sneaking glances out of the corner of my eye, lest I become too indisposed to keep moving, as we made our way to that obnoxious trap room we found last night—or early this morning or whenever the heck it was. I brought Sleeping Beauty along in the item bag, but she didn't wake up for her big homecoming. I didn't blame her—her "home" wasn't well-furnished.

It had little more than that box. Coffin? Whatever you wanted to call it.

“Grave news! This grave robber has made a grave mistake! The teenage knave did nobly save a girl he craved, and now he’s known as one depraved!”

“Shut, up! We’re undercover!!!”

At any rate, Dancer Girl seemed to really care about Sleeping Beauty, so I couldn’t just drop her off here and move on—even if this dead body of hers lacked a soul.

“I mean—the idiots don’t have brains, and they get by just fine. Compared to that, lacking a soul doesn’t sound that bad. I’m sure Sleeping Beauty is ten times more intelligent than the idiots even asleep and soulless. Heck, rocks and sticks could outsmart the meatheads. At least those don’t go around making mistakes all day, every day, twenty-four-seven, ’round the clock. Yup. These stone walls are stone-cold smart compared to the idiots.”

The sexy spy squad and I came to a three-way fork in the path. I sensed some people nearby—guards, mainly.

“Makes sense. The church probably wouldn’t put their dormitories in the middle of their defensive maze. So where does everyone sleep? Further in? Man, this building’s layout is complicated…”

“I smell, lots of scents. Hear noises too.”

“Same here, but…those aren’t sounds of people sleeping. Sis, do you hear them too?”

“I do. I think we still have a ways to go before we reach the dormitories.”

We made our rounds of the storerooms and then continued upward, Mapping as we went. We didn’t run into any trouble, but Shadow Skulking with three teens in tow was taxing my mental resources. I mean, I was clinging to three beautiful babes! Whenever the twins shivered and pressed in tighter, their various convex curves did a lot of squishing and squooshing up against me. Oh, there was danger all around me! Were I to look down, I would catch a perilously picturesque view. But when I kept my eyes trained straight ahead, I kept catching glimpses of bunny, wolf, and (fake)

cat ears bobbing at the edge of my vision. *It's a trap!* I kept reminding myself. *Jailbait! Jailbait!!! These girls are fourteen, for pity's sake...* Oh, brave new world with such beastfolk in it!

"It's a bit difficult to tell because of the echo, but I think most of the noise is coming from...above us. However, I also hear lots of noise on the lower floors and around the walls of the building. The center is the quietest part."

My MP was running through my hands like water, but every minute was worth the price. Here in the Cathedral, MP recovered more slowly than it did in the frontier—on par with the kingdom, maybe? However, Martial Qi Wizardry's qi activation and regenerative powers gave MP Absorption a boost. Because I had plenty of renqi flowing through my meridians, I was doing just fine on MP. On the flip side, using all this magic was making all of my physical senses much stronger. My hands *maaaay* have slipped an eensy-weensy bit.

"I need to train before getting into a battle, but training *in* battle is faster. Training is only as effective as the strength of the opponent, but that's no issue for me—my sparring partners are too strong! They beat me up every day! Particularly when they use nasty tricks like gym shorts!"

Reality was a cruel mistress.

We found a trap room with a treasure chest at the end, and thus I was thrust into battle utterly unprepared. With neither my body, my equipment, or my skills cooperating, I was hopeless. However, there was even less hope for the level 50 Undead Gigant. Dancer Girl (for once!) used her shield to draw it in too close, at which point the twins sprang out from behind her and pummeled it to death with a fury of fists.

"Alas, alack! I can't keep up when I'm too busy ogling those sexy bodysuits every time you run in front of me!"

"Don't worry, Mr. Haruka! We'll take care of the gigant."

"Yes! We can handle this battle ourselves."

Wolf Girl ran like the wind and made the gigant weather a storm of blows. Rabbit Girl was right behind her, using her amazing jumping abilities and speed to launch a three-dimensional terror of

attacks. They never once let up on the creature. The girls were hunters. Their pace and footwork brought down the beast, and whenever it presented even the smallest of vulnerabilities, the twins' animal instincts homed in on them mercilessly. They demonstrated complete mastery over their weapons.

It made me wonder: How the hell did a race of such fierce fighters end up maligned and persecuted? *Must be the vulnerability to mass warfare. That, and many of the tribes have an aversion to heavy armor.*

"Are...you thinking what I'm thinking? The beastfolk would be perfect for dungeons."

Nod nod.

Maybe they were too powerful for their own good. Their incredible physical abilities were balanced by poor magic resistance and even shoddier equipment. However, they could run circles around humans when their animalistic ferocity was combined with proper training. They had an innate sense for how to take down even the hardiest of foes. Kind of like the idiots, now that I thought about it.

"Does that mean the idiots aren't human after all? Maybe they were from the idiot tribe all along. Them getting isekai'd was just Earth returning them to their people."

Fortunately, strength was where the resemblance ended. Thank goodness the twins didn't take after the idiots in the looks department!

The twins' tails wagged with pride once the gigant was dead, and Dancer Girl nodded in approval. Bunny Girl gave me the spellstone, twitched her tail, and flicked her ears. Her sister handed me the other drop items and did the same*. Ohhh god, not a trap to catch the underage furry enthusiast in me!* There was a time and place for letting my furreak flag fly, and around a pair of preteen girls was not one of them! The moment I touched the wrong bouncing, twitching body part located in the general region of the legs, the police would be on me in an instant! This was the ultimate trap card!!! Thus, with a will of iron, I resolved to pet the girls on the *head only* and give them both a sweet treat.

Pet pet pet pet.

The twins may have been blessed with the bodies of grown women, but it was best to give them the orphan treatment.

“How ’bout you, Dancer Girl? Do you want any French toast? Never mind all the crepes you ate last night…”

Munch munch munch.

Trying to pet all three at once was a little hard with only two hands, but apparently, I was not allowed to enlist my Magic Hands for help. *Guys?! I could literally use a hand!*

DAY 114

MIDDAY

Whaddya mean, I'm no saint? Say it sain't so!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

ON WE WENT, Mapping, Mapping, Mapping. All the passageways were riddled with magical traps, and the trap rooms had physical traps on top of them. If trap central wasn't bad enough, some of the trap rooms came with monsters—all a healthy part of any cathedral's defense system.

"The Cathedral is built like a dungeon to deter monsters. This weird maze is designed to slow down and break up monster mobs with trap damage."

Then the church moved in, renovated, and claimed the Cathedral as their base. And if the Cathedral was *this* powerful… there must have been an ultimate dungeon underneath. This explained why the church's elite troops were so high-level—they trained in the ultimate dungeon. So there had to be a way into that subterranean dungeon somewhere, right? Soldiers couldn't train in a dungeon they couldn't get into. But these passageways only went up.

"I bet the church soldiers stay on the upper floors and pick off the weak monsters. They can't go lower. Not if it's an ultimate dungeon."

Nod nod.

The church soldiers couldn't even provide the church with its own supply of spellstones—hence why they monopolized the frontier's.

That aside, I couldn't wrap my head around the gigant's drop item. Appraisal claimed it was a "Ribbon of Magic Defense: Tie around a body part to protect that appendage with magical armor. +DEF."

"Uhh… Why is a hulking hunk of undead rock dropping a ribbon? It wore nothing but a loincloth! It was all craggy pecs from

the waist up! Unless…was that a girl gigant?! No wonder it was so angry and freakishly strong!”

That explained everything. No level 50 monster had any right being a pillar of pummeling pumice. But girls? Girls pummeled me all the time.

Magic defense was a kind of armor. It used magic to protect the wearer, thus consuming MP. Magic defense could be applied to clothing and armor of all sorts, but the effect was localized to the relevant part of the body. Naturally, I snipped the ribbon in two and tied it about those tails that had been weighing on my mind so heavily. One could only wonder why the girls’ faces turned bright red.

“Hey, I didn’t touch no underage butts! I just gave those tails a little squeezy-squeeze! Is that such a crime? Boy, some of you are sticklers for the law here…”

After that, I analyzed the magic defense mechanism with Jupiter Eye, let Wisdom work its wonders, and ripped off the concept to make ear cuffs for bunny and wolf ears. They were a bit off the (ear) cuff, but the “Ear Cuffs of Magic Defense: Guards the ears with magic defense. +DEF.” were great pieces of armor for the head. Yeah, for whatever reason, the effect applied to the whole head—not just the ears.

“That’s good bang for your buck, considering how long bunny ears are. Imagine if it didn’t protect the head or face.”

Yeaaah… The whole “My head and face are brutally injured, but my ears are just fine!” scenario was kinda not great. *Call it a messed-up version of the Cheshire Cat: I’ve often seen a bunny without ears, but ears without a bunny?*

“Thank you so much! Oh, I’m so happy, Mr. Haruka. Humans hate our ears and tails, and yet you’ve found it in your heart to protect these very parts of u—mmrgph!”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Haruka! You’ve treated us so well, even our tails and ears. Those are the pride and joy of every beastfolk, you know. I cannot adequately express my gratitu—mmmph!”

I jammed a pair of sweet potato cakes into their mouths. *I knew those would come in handy.* Mouth-muffling munchies were a

necessary part of my spy tool kit, as I knew the girls were liable to raise rackets at the drop of a hat. Of course, Dancer Girl stood there with her mouth open too, waiting patiently. I had to hurry. The things she was doing with her tongue *definitely* needed an OT rating! If the young teens in our midst caught sight of that, I was doomed for a red card from the ref!

"And didn't you *just* eat a giant stack of French toast? You're on a 10+ pastry per day streak!"

Om nom nom.

Any more *om nom nom*ming, and there would be a face-off between the one more set and the growth spurt (or the vertical and the horizontal).

We kept walking and Mapping, but I was distracted by the plump bods shimmying around in those tight bodysuits, their tails bouncing from side-to-side with each step. Naturally, the objects at the base of the tails bounced too!

We eventually reached the end of the passageway and found ourselves in the Cathedral's dormitories. Security was tight, and I sensed a large number of people. Where there were plenty of people, there were plenty of bedrooms; when there were plenty of bedrooms, there was oodles of loot! However, I had to pass on the loot this time. Proper exploring would've taken too long, so I contented myself with peeking in the doors as I passed. Besides, I could sense even more people upstairs.

According to secret lore, a convocation of elders presided over the Cathedral. We also had to contend with the priests in the pope's faction, who couldn't be killed so long as they stayed within the Cathedral's walls. I didn't know exactly how that worked and was eager to find out, but doing that caused chaos. Which defeated the point of sneaky sneaking, y'know? After all the trouble I had gone to in making our disguises, I wasn't going to get caught until I'd gotten in my fill of drooling over the bodysuits!

"I can sense lots of people upstairs. There's also a guardroom just before the staircase. Uggh, Shadow Skulking past them will take so much time… We could always *nyoop* into someone's shadow and let them carry us along, but then there's no telling where we might end up."

“Are you talking about the stairs in front of us, Mr. Haruka? Let me have a listen… Hmm, I can only hear noise from the left-hand passage. The right-hand corridor appears to be deserted.”

Three cheers for bunny ears and wolf nostrils! It was too hard to get a clear reading on how many people were where, even with the help of Presence Sensing and Area Analyze. However, the twins’ fluffy ears picked up that information with ease. What I wouldn’t have done to fluff it up with the twins…

“Okay, huddle up. We’re going to use Shadow Skulk to get past that guardroom and go upstairs. Hey! Huddle, I said! Not cling to Haruka for dear life, dammit! Dancer Girl?! You get mad when *I* touch you in inappropriate places, so quit patting my butt! I prefer being the patter, not the pattee, thank you very much! And not in front of the twins. It’s not that I mind getting handsy, but it’s causing an *ahem* teenage-boy problem. Look, I am all for whatever goes on in the shadows, but we have to keep things PG with the kiddos around. Not like they can see what’s happening when it’s literal shadow, but I think going at it like rabbits in front of a teenage rabbit is a big, big problem. Mostly for my sex appeal?”

The four of us stuck together like glue and traveled as a pack. We could see the world outside the Shadow Cloak, but the interior was pitch black. Even Jupiter Eye couldn’t pierce the veil in this two-dimensional darkness. So how come my sense of touch worked? And worked so well?!

At least Dancer Girl had gotten over her funk, even if the underlying cause remained the same. Sleeping Beauty was still sleeping or dead or whatever she was. I even carefully administered a revival potion (oh, and crammed my massive mushroom into her maw) to no avail. “Sleeping Beauty” was kind of a misnomer. She wasn’t breathing, which was sorta crucial for sleep.

Anyhoo, we made it to the top of the stairs and emerged from the shadows in the deserted right-hand corridor. I couldn’t stay under that cloak for another second. It was teenage-boy mayday! A direct hit of sexy catsuit-clad girlies in super thin fabric rubbing against my most animalistic part of me! One wrong move, and I’d have popped up faster than a certain pirate!

“Pop-up pirates are one thing, but a teenage boyness popping up around a couple of junior high schoolers is a ticket straight to the prosecutor’s office! Get me *out* of these shadows!!!”

Rub rub rub rub.

Much to my distress, I got away safely. Then off I went Mapping while using Area Analyze and Presence Sensing to keep an eye out for people. The left corridor led to, it turned out, a kind of workshop for magical items. Not ones worth my attention—just assembly line schlock. Stuff made by *put your head down, follow instructions, and bang it out* kinda work. I doubted the people making the stuff understood what they were doing. What was the point of churning these things out en masse? Even if the workers put their blood, sweat, and tears into their work, there was no point to it. It wasn’t creation in the *real* sense of the word.

“Just pop in a spellstone, go as fast as you can, and never care about all the potential squandered by your endless list of little mistakes… That’s just, like, an office job at that point. It’s not the act of creation.”

These processes were *de jure* efficient ways to make lots of magical items at once. They were *de facto* means to mass produce inefficiency and waste. All output; no artistry. The workers could carry on assembling for a hundred years and never, not once, produce an improvement in their product. What a waste of time and space.

“The church robs the frontier blind for these spellstones, and you’re telling me this is how they end up? The goblins and kobolds who died for those spellstones must be spinning in their gobby, kobby graves. No two spellstones are ever the same size or shape! Why would you cram them into the same setting regardless? Did anyone use their brains before embarking on this exercise in stupidity?”

This workshop made magic lanterns, each with vastly different brightness and lifespan. Because the lanterns were so shoddily made, there were huge gaping spaces between the base sigil and the spellstone that powered it. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to realize every lantern must have been leaking magic by the boatload.

“And I’m no rocket scientist! I’m a friggin’ hustler! I hustle my butt off, so how come I’m the only one in my class without a job? It’s weird enough that I’m a NEET with the grindset mindset; let’s not even get into why a shut-in is performing recon.”

The church had a monopoly on the spellstone market. That meant no competition. Anything they made, sold. No wonder they fell into the bad habit of assembly-lining magical items without any good ol’ R&D. No wonder they ended up with no artisans or craftsmen—just unskilled laborers.

The final nail in the coffin was the lack of desire to make anything good. No one put any thought into their work. Any love. Work that was only done because it had to get done could never improve. Advancements served only to increase the efficiency of churning out mountains of crud—the art of making the work easier for the laborer divorced from actual craftsmanship.

“These old farts have spent so much time locked up in their own Cathedral, they’ve forgotten the meaning of the things their hands are creating.”

Ignorant of their customers’ suffering, they worked. Confident in the eventual sale regardless of ever-sinking quality, they worked. Bereft of imagination, they worked.

“Wish I could give ’em one of those lights and throw ’em into the woods for a night. See how they like being scared of the dark. See what they think about fearing the light failing on them. Make ’em *understand* that their light breaking equals death.”

Because anyone making a product had to know the mind of the consumer, dammit!

“The people on the frontier were once desperate to work ’cause their homeland was in that sorry state. Now they’re rich because they understand what it’s like not to have anything. To have no money. They know just how much money means. Making money for money’s sake is what leads you here—to busywork.”

The people of the frontier understood that creation was like taking a person’s life into your hands. They knew poverty like an old friend. They understood the meaning of truly *earning* money, and in turn, they sympathized with the feelings of anyone who purchased their goods.

And so did I.

Why else did I labor and fret over whether my products were good enough? Why did I agonize and always try to improve? Why else did the question, “Yes, but what if it could be *better*—” plague me through endless rounds of trial and error?

“Frontier people, smile. Everyone, happy. No one smile here. What waste.”

Welp, at least the kingdom’s wares were guaranteed to blow this crap outta the water. The technology gap was widening by the minute, and the church didn’t even want to play catch-up. The frontier was full of people who took it upon themselves to develop new technologies and sharpen skills. Here? Here, nothing changed. Nothing would ever, ever change. How could it, when the church had no artisans?

“The magical products suck, but I can still use their materials. Sooo…if I think of them as resources instead of utter trash…gimme gimme! Don’t just consider the consumers! Consider us scavengers, too!”

The frontier blacksmith, lacking iron, fashioned spears and clubs out of wood, sharpened stone to form rudimentary blades, and fought to create strong arms and armor with whatever other material he could get his hands on. He understood the value of the lives that rested on his shoulders and searched with a passion for weapons to arm those who went out to fight the monsters and keep the darkness at bay.

Here, in the church, no one fought for anything. No one searched. No one even began to imagine venturing deep into the woods in the dark of night with nothing but one of these lanterns to light their way.

While the left half of this floor housed the workshop, the right side was more of a storeroom. Even the goblins-and-kobolds-turned-spellstones didn’t want to be caught dead in the trash on this half of the floor. *Poor, poor resources…* It was only right that I took them and gave them a better home. Things were only worth what they were put to use in, y’know?

“Jeez! With this much raw material to work with, there’s no call to be so cheap! I could scratch this sigil off with my fingernail!”

I doubted the church ever gave a rat's behind about shoddiness. If anything, they probably wanted the sigils to flake off so their customers would have to buy another. No wonder nothing of value was produced when the workers didn't even understand what it was they were making.

As I roamed about picking up loot, muttering and cursing about the sanctity of craftsmanship as I went, I spotted a doorway in the back wall hidden behind a pile of stuff.

"I smell something!"

"It's faint, but I can hear a draft, too."

I didn't see any sign of recent use; no, not a trace of the door's operation in the immediate temporal vicinity. It had a strong magic seal and some special lock that camouflaged the door—a lock featuring a combo of magic and mechanical tricks!

"I'll be danged. Locks are rare in this world. Like, legit locks. I stumble upon trick locks all the time, but my tentacles open them easily."

"Uh, Mr. Haruka? Why are you grinning…?"

Hello again (after a very long time), "Magic Key Lv Max: Opens any lock including or under LvMax!" I rammed it into the lock and gave the knob a turn. (I was pretty sure my Magic Threads could have had that sucker open in seconds, so time was of the essence if the Magic Key was to get its chance to shine.)

"What is that siren song I hear? 'I'm loot… Come take me…' I think it's talking to the soul that should inhabit this body, meaning *my* body, *soooo*, the loot is mine too?"

The room was utterly nondescript. Small. Rectangular. Empty. Sure, a magic sigil began to glow the moment I set foot in the room, but beyond that, there was nothin'. Oh, and a rod standing bolt upright in the center of the thrumming-with-power sigil.

"I-is this? Could it be? Misplaced looty loot?!"

"Misplaced? This is clearly the place for it!"

"Mr. Haruka, did you just…ignore all the dramatic magic stuff?"

Hm? When I tried to pick it up, it wouldn't budge? Not even when I Entangled my renqi? It didn't so much as twitch when I

Entangled the rest of my powers? Or when all four of us heaved on it together? And it was only when I gave it a big yoinkin' that the sigil glowed brighter, making me think the sigil was protecting the sweet, precious loot?

So, with one hand on the rod, I channeled magic into the Spearshield Gauntlets and used their "Nullifies physical and magical defense" trait while I touched the sigil. The sigil shone in a brilliant burst of light and, almost like it was rejecting the rod, ceased all protections.

"Woo-hoo! The loot is mine. Lesse now... 'Rod of Asclepius: Heals wounds, illnesses, and status ailments. Can only be pulled from its sigil or used by Saints. Intelligence +50%. Holy Magic Buff (hyper). Curing. Healing. Regeneration. Revival.' Huh. Those snakes wrapped around the handle seem kinda mad at me? Anyway, since only Saints can pull the rod from the sigil, this means all my divine deeds and saintly conduct have canonized me! Finally, I have proof that I did nothing wrong! And stuff?"

"You did not, pull from sigil! Cheated! You so not saint, you put, the ain't in saint!"

No doubt the chastity of this eternally girlfriendless teenage boy and my earnest pleas that I never, ever did anything wrong reached the rod. Sure, its snakes kept trying to take a chunk out of me, but then King Lizard and Queen Chickenatrice of the serpents gave them a good talking-to, and that was the end of that.

"I'm a Saint. The rod says so! This world has deemed me 100%, positively, purely, incorrigibly not at fault for anything!"

The fifty percent intelligence buff was also a nice perk. That strengthened Wisdom further, allowing me to delegate even more tasks to it.

The rod also healed wounds and illnesses, but so did mushrooms—*without costing MP either, I might add*. So that feature was kinda meh. *Oh, the snakes are glaring at me again.*

"Since healing is its selling point, I wonder if it can cure the idiots' terminal lack of brain cells? Those dum-dums can bounce back from missing limbs and close brushes with death, but I've never seen a more stubborn case of idiotitis. The only cure left is lopping off their heads and waiting for the new ones to grow in."

Once I get home, I just might try that out!

DAY 114

MIDDAY

The patrolling pikemen are picnic precept philistines!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

I WAS A HOLY MAN! A Saint, even! My saintly nature had been recognized, as I now possessed a rod that only Saints could wield. That's right! This world had handed down the shocking verdict—the irrefutable truth—that I had done absolutely nothing wrong!

"I gotta show this to all the girls! You hear me? I didn't do anything wrong!!"

Sure, the nerds had a Saint in their party, but nerds were inherently wicked and sinful creatures. St. Nerd was unfit to use this rod. Only the pure of heart (*moi*) could be chosen to wield the mighty weapon! …Even if it made the rod's snakes throw a hissy fit. Yes indeedy, I was a bona fide Saint.

Not only was the rod perfect for bragging rights, but it seemed like a useful piece of kit. I slotted it into the Universe Staff and duplicated that with the Replicant Sword for double the fun. *Oh baby. I can feel it kicking in.* It boosted Wisdom, too, along with the Magic Threads' Revival and Regeneration.

"It's doing wonders for my dignity, too! I might evolve the St. High School Boy title… Maybe I need to practice Meteor Fist first. Think that's a prereq for the title?"

That raised its own sticky questions—what was the difference between Meteor Fist and tongbei meteor?—but those could wait. For the time being, I was just happy that the INT boost kept my self-destruction at bay. Now I could focus on retaking control over myself.

"Thanks for making lunch!"

I took a break from playing with my new toy to spread out a picnic blanket and have lunch with three beautiful girls. Sandwiches, fried chicken, hard-boiled eggs, and potato salad—it was a feast. The girls slurped down mushroom soup while I nursed a cup of piping hot coffee.

Ah, a nice, relaxing lunch with three hot girls in sexy bodysuits. Was this that “culture” thing people talked about? If so, why did a troop of yappy old knight dudes who’d happened to wander by at just that moment have such an issue with it?

“Can you all buzz off? We were here first! We saved our spot with a blanket and everything! And can you not patrol right through where we’re having lunch? If you get the food dirty, the girls are going to slaughter you. Some people have no common sense, I swear… Doesn’t everyone know it’s first come, first serve? He who lays the sheet gets the spot to eat? Yeah, it’s mine?”

The 24 Godly Aegis Bladed Shoulder Shield funnels transformed into swords, whirled through the air, and started slicing-’n-dicing the old dudes. For all the sword stabbing going on, it was a pity no pirate popped out of their midst. Just old church soldiers.

The shoulder funnels were almost entirely automatic, and the Rod of Asclepius dramatically decreased the load they placed on my mental CPU. Speaking of that rod, it offered saintly healing powers, right? Since I was such a saint, I cast Healing on the ragged group of captive young beastfolk women trailing behind the soldiers.

“Good thing I brought the twins along.”

“Oh no! How cruel…”

“Those poor things! We need to help them, now.”

’Cause beastfolk would flip when a human tried to rescue ’em, y’know? So I opted to heal them from afar and ignore the distrustful glances they threw my way. They didn’t mind Dancer Girl; she was… Well, I actually had no idea if she was human or what, but the beastfolk girls trusted her and her cat ears. Too bad no one wanted to see a teenage boy with cat ears.

So I provided mushrooms, a hot bath, towels, a change of clothes, and a simple meal—something easy on the stomach—before retreating out of sight. I wanted these beastfolk women to feel comfortable.

It was pretty obvious what purpose the girls were captured for. See, just ahead were the priest’s dormitories. If what I’d heard was true—and it was—the priests in this church were forbidden from

carnal activities with human women. Beastfolk, though, didn't count. They weren't "people," right? *Buncha dipshits.* The priests used a similar line of logic to so-called "holy spirits" or "the blood of god"—a god I didn't believe in, nosiree.

"By that argument, no one should object to me burning a bunch of old dudes, right? Yeah, 'cause they're not people either?"

By now, Dancer Girl and the twins were probably helping the beastfolk girls into the bath or proper changes of clothes. So, to stymie any peeping toms, I burnt out all the old men's eyeballs.

"As a wise man once said, purge the real filth, y'know? And if a wise man said it, that's good enough for me!"

I sprayed a mist of oil over the old dudes with Wind magic, cut off all their escape routes, and set the room ablaze—oh, except for a small air hole. I didn't want 'em to run out of oxygen and choke.

"Gotta make sure no one passes out from carbon monoxide poisoning, y'know? Yeah, isn't that how it works? Gotta have that fresh air so they can feel every second of it. Doesn't the church claim that fire has cleansing properties? Isn't it nice of me, teenage arsonist that I am, to give you a chance to get nice and crispy? A chance to wipe the filth from your soul?"

Some priests tried to leap away from the spreading bonfire. However, I whomped them all with my staff and very courteously shoved them back into the flames. *Call that catch and release.* If the Cathedral kept casting Revival to bring them back to life, all I had to do was burn them until Revival gave up.

It was so hot that I started feeling a little charred myself. The priests, though—they were going up like tinder, blood spurting from their blistering throats as they rolled across the ground in bundles of flame. The Cathedral's Blessing must not have been as powerful as I'd been told, because the pace of recovery just couldn't keep up with the spread of my hellfire. I took pity on them. That's right—I started casting Revival on them too.

"AAAAAAAAAARGHHHH!"

"IT HUUURTS! IT HUUUUUUURTS!"

"YAAAAAAAAAGH!"

"Yup. That's fire for ya."

Their faces were warped in blazing rictuses of pain. Their croaking voices scratched their ways out of their blackened throats.

“What was that? Did you just say ‘Help me’? You couldn’t have. See, you can only call for help if you help other people. Why ever should I help you? But out of the sheer flood of kindness from my kindness-laden heart—that’s what they used to put on my report card when I was a kiddo—I’ll Revive you and set you ablaze as many times as needed. Gosh, I’m such a nice guy. Maybe this is why I was made a Saint.”

My own skin was developing deep, searing burns from the proximity to the flames, but I simply used Revival on myself as I went on turning the priests to lumps of burned charcoal, the Cathedral’s Blessing failing to keep pace with the conflagration.

The priests thrashed in pain their skin carbonizing to a deep ebony, as they morphed into effigies of anguish. The fires raged on and on, claiming the ash the priests became, until the human-shaped ash piles collapsed and dissipated—first into dust and then, when even that burned, nothing at all.

“It’s your lucky day… What? I thought you always wanted to go to Heaven.”

With that done, I went back to the girls. The beastfolk girls had all cleaned up nicely, and they bowed to me as I walked up. They looked terrified of me, though. Trembling and everything, and I couldn’t blame ’em, either. I stepped back and called Dancer Girl:

“So, what’s the game plan? Did you ask these ladies what they want us to do? Kill all the priests and take their stuff as payback, maybe? Capture the whole congregation and drag ’em back to the Beast Kingdom in chains, perhaps? Oh, wait—sorry, I already kinda burned all the priests alive. Boy, did I work up a sweat!”

“Want to be, set free. Biggest priority. We spy, no more. Only kill. Only kill every last priest here. This a church, yes—but no god, here.”

Dancer Girl was furious, and no wonder. She was a priest of sorts herself, come to think of it—she had the Shrine Maiden and Heretic Saint titles. She disapproved mightily of fellow priests committing such atrocities. And yet, why was she upset with my new status as certified, gen-u-ine, 100% Saint? I had the Rod of

Asclepius and everything? See, even the snakes acknowledged me—well, they were looking away and wishing they were anywhere but here, but that still counted! I had proof! Proof of my teenage-boy saintliness! *Hello? Is this thing on?! Is anyone listening to me?!!!*

Here, the twins turned back. If we all kept exploring, we were bound to get caught; the beastfolk girls made sneaking a challenge. Better to send them back outside with the twins as guards.

"Y'think anyone's noticed there's an intruder yet? That blazing wall of flame might be a tip-off…"

"You lit the place on fire, and you're *still* going on about being undercover?!"

Dancer Girl and I stayed back to search for any more captive beastfolk. Meanwhile, the Cathedral automatically—very slowly but surely—sealed off the area I had set on fire and began repairing itself. *I knew this building was nothing but trouble…*

"We'll guard these girls and help them get home safe!"

"Mr. Haruka, thank you very much for helping us save our kinfolk."

We could end the fighting. We could even make it so the church could never fight again. But what could we do about discrimination? Envy and hatred were untouchable opponents. The only recourse we had was murder and mass destruction. Right?

See, the beastfolk trusted the kingdom. But so long as the persecution continued, the beastfolk would never come to trust any other humans. Humanity had no one but itself to blame for that, and so it was only right that it would pay the price for this crime. So, as a token of remorse, I—being ostensibly human—gave the beastfolk girls lots and lots of sweets. To make up for the lack of head pats, y'know—I didn't wanna scare 'em, being human and all.

We waved the beastfolk girls goodbye, and when we continued our ascent, we uncovered a bunch of sneaky old dudes clinging to the ceiling? For some reason? *I guess it's their hobby or whatever? Or some weird fetish… Maybe a Theocracy fad?* Regardless, there they hung, motionless.

"Shwoop?"

"Urrhhkhk!"

I had my eye on their presence-concealing cloaks, so I used my Magic Threads to veeeeeery carefully maneuver around the cloaks, slice off their heads, and send those useless appendages tumbling to the floor with a *plop plop plop*. These old men also had some Lethal Poison Swords and other cool bits of loot. They must have been more Inquisitor assassin dudes.

I also liked the look of the Adhesion Boots and Suction Gloves they used to stick themselves to the ceiling, but the real attraction was the "Stealth Cloaks: Camouflages unmoving wearer." Like Appraisal suggested, so long as the cloak's owner remained still, they couldn't be seen…which was kinda useless. *Bummer.* But loot was loot, so into my item bag went the Stealth Cloaks.

"Finders keepers, unless the finder finds an old man. Those aren't keepers. Ooh, even their rings have poison effects. Whoa! Same with the belts!"

My Magic Hands were better employed in other pursuits, but all the same, I stripped the old men's corpses of every possession, purged the real filth, and pocketed all the goods. After that, we moved on and made good progress until we ran into a column of knights blocking off the stairs. They were outfitted in heavy suits of armor and even heavier resolve. Unfortunately for them, Dancer Girl was in an awful mood.

All it took was one swing of her chain, and the passage-blocking shield wall fell to pieces. The chain snaked across the ground toward the soldiers, tore off arms, sliced off legs, ripped open abdomens, and crushed skulls.

"You have to give 'em credit. It takes guts to stand up to an angry dungeon emperor."

Magic Hands snatched up all their loot, and on we went. Whenever the air above us grew thick with arrows, Dancer Girl's chain swatted them down like so many flies; my funnels darted through the air to decapitate the archers.

"Yaaaaargh!"

"Grrhhk! M-monsters…"

"Arrrgh! G-god, save me…!"

“Well, this just goes to the show…the church dudes don’t recognize the beastfolk as people, and they don’t recognize us, either! Man, I don’t give one fart what that old god dude has to say. Where I come from, we have an old dude with a mohawk who says ‘purge the real filth.’ Ya dig? I dunno if he was the object of worship for any religion, but…you get my point.”

When we found the beastfolk girls earlier, they were in rough shape—bruised, burned, packed together like sardines. It was clear they hadn’t had enough food or water for the long trek here. *Well, you know what?* If the Cathedral wanted to Revive its priests, I said let it. If it wanted to Heal them, it could be my guest. It could bring them back to life as many times as it damn well pleased—because I’d be there to *kill them all over again*. I’d kill them until they died for good. I’d kill them even if they were already dead.

“Hmmm… Is it just me, or is something messing with my senses?”

Nod nod.

For a minute, I thought I had simply lost control of my body again. But no. The Cathedral’s powers appeared to be sapping my strength and restricting my skills. It was still nothing I couldn’t handle, but Dancer Girl was struggling. That said, she was so strong to begin with that she easily danced circles around the soldiers.

“I wonder if it’s directly proportional to our levels? Is it impacting your physical capabilities too?”

Nod nod.

Well, that explained why it didn’t do much to me. Say a restriction kicked in at level 30. What was it gonna do to a guy at level 26? Theoretically, my Alchemically-transmuted gains weren’t affected, so it only seemed to be throwing a wrench in all my magical buffs.

“Hey, check this out.”

There was a treasure chest in the hidden room. It had an orb of some sort. A gem? The “Revival Orb: Holds dominion over Revival.”?

“Oh yeah, there was a ‘Curing Orb: Holds dominion over Curing.’ as a drop item in the undead gigant’s room. Maybe these

two are part of a set."

I should mention there was also a level 50 Undead Hellhound in this now very vinegary room, currently yipping in pain, covering its nose, and cowering in the corner. Poor thing. Whatever! Up the stairs we went!

As we traveled on, we discovered more dormitories and more captured beastfolk, not to mention a handful of elf and human captives. Also, in the very last hidden room we found, we discovered a secret passage. Turned out it connected to the secret passage in the section of the Cathedral the violent old dude was hanging out in—the quarters of the Knights of the Scriptures or whatever. Once I healed all the captives, I sent them to freedom through that passage. Dancer Girl went with them as their guard until they reached the violent old dude safe and sound.

I continued solo for a while, which was when I stumbled upon a trap. A non-magical trap. As simple as a trap could get. Yup—it was a pitfall.

"Although I didn't really fall 'cause, uhhhh, I have Airwalk?"

The corridor was pockmarked with pits that bristled with spears or burbled with pools of poison. The pits were huge—the poison virulent—in order to destroy enormous foes. The architect of this Cathedral must have expected to fight an ultimate dungeon's worth of monsters.

The route I took was a dead end. If I'd been a monster stampede, this was where my few pit trap survivors would've turned into a multi-monster pileup.

"This architect was one crafty son of a gun! It's smart to put a hidden door right next to a dead end."

Now I understood the logic behind this design. The Rod of Asclepius was in the dead center of the Cathedral, around which the orbs were situated in a spiral shape. Such was the Cathedral's Law of Loot.

"Which means there should be another hidden room directly in front of me on the next floor up."

Okay...that's kinda funky looking. So I ran into a grotesque monster, right? It looked like the body of one critter spliced with the

faces of some others, and not in a chimera sort of way. A weird sort of way.

It was a goop monster. Gelatinous goop covered everything from bugs to monsters; their faces bulged out on all sides of Goop Mountain. Worse, this thing had wriggly, jiggly tentacles… This was a battle I could not afford to lose—a battle that put my pride, my dignity, my very identity as a teenage boy on the line! A tentacle tournament! Tentacles spawned from me and surged toward the goop monster; my chickenatrice crowed; my lizard hissed!

The goop monster jiggled in fear. *And in battle, intimidating your opponent is the key to victory, y'know?* All the many faces on that horrifying mass of slime cringed in horror—no doubt at my saintly virtue. I was, after all, as saintly as they came.

DAY 11

MIDDAY

Breaking: Teenage boy's kink list leaked to media! Incontrovertible proof: Haruka is a furry!

THE CHURCH IN THE THEOCRACY

HUNDREDS OF CREATURE'S FACES writhed within that abomination—that *thing*. Their mouths yawned wide in unison as if they were about to scream in chorus, and from them issued blasts of magic and poisonous goop.

"Uh, ew?! And I'm just talking about the goop! Don't get me started on the poison and curses!"

Leaping and lunging, I dodged my way through the bullet hell barrage and attacked the mass of writhing tentacles. And then I released a purple cloud of poisonous gas!

"Word to the wise? Don't take on a guy with a bajillion hydra heads and the chickenatrice and lizard power couple? With serpents like these, I could prolly kill the poison king or poison god or poison whatever."

With two Universe Staffs, I batted down onrushing poison globules while the snakes' auto attacks blasted down other toxic warheads. My fugly tentacles speared the fugly mound of goop over and over again, stabbing every one of the numerous faces spotting that thing's goopy hide. I did a thorough job of it, if I did say so myself, but no matter how much I stabbed, no pirate popped out…

Once that ordeal was over, I used Appraisal on this mystery monster.

Turned out it was called a Lv. 75 Demon Soul Eater. The animal heads were trophies taken from the many creatures the demon had possessed.

"Explains why it had so many different kinds of poison."

It absorbed the skills of every beast it swallowed and added their HP to its health bar. Unless every one of the sub-creatures was

slain, the goop beast wouldn't die. Hence why stabbing the whole thing at once was the key to killing it.

"Guess it didn't swallow a pirate, though."

The demon was virtually unkillable otherwise—it had an inexhaustible reserve of life to draw on. It would've taken many hands working in tandem to bring it down. Probably even an army wouldn't have done the trick.

"Well...I didn't have enough hands, but I did have plenty of tentacles and snakes! Yup, lots of wriggly bois. You should see how much their ranks swell every night! Two out of two dungeon emperors recommend them! All I'm saying is, a beast with a thousand faces can die a thousand deaths—it's just gotta be all at once."

Man, I sure did miss Slimey...

Anyway, I got a new item from the resultant treasure chest: "The Tincture Thwacker: Inscribed with hieroglyphics from the philosopher's stone. A blunt, crowbar-like instrument. All stats +30%. Physical, Magical, and Alchemical Synergy (hyper). Annihilation. Perfect Nullification."

"Not crowbar-like... This literally is a crowbar."

Worse, check out what it's made of. A big problem, that's what!

"You're telling me this long, heavy whatchamacallit is a complete waste of *the* most valuable stone in all of human history? The freaking philosopher's stone repurposed into a bludgeoning object?! Roll up to enemies with the magisterium and magi-scare-i-'em by whacking 'em with a big hunk of metal?"

I had always thought the philosopher's stone would be more mystical. Holy, even. The capstone of esoteric alchemical knowledge. And then it turned out to be a glorified crowbar!

"The medieval European alchemists sought out the philosopher's stone. They claimed it was a substance or a formulaic structure, if I recall correctly. Not a crowbar!"

Also called the tincture or the powder, this pinnacle of alchemical and magical might purportedly possessed the power to create gold, function as the universal catalyst, or create the elixir of eternal youth...but all this bar could do was split skulls.

“I mean, I guess the Physical, Magical, and Alchemical Synergy trait is sort of like a universal catalyst? Annihilation, though—that’s no weapon of bludgeoning; that’s a weapon of mass destruction! Well, I guess it’s a broad term. As for Perfect Nullification…I guess that’s Annihilating magic? I must say, as an ex-middle-school cringelord and connoisseur of only the cringiest light novels and anime—I’ve seen plenty of philosopher’s stones, and this is not one of them!”

Sure, it had some funny writing and sigils on it, but…beyond that, it was a basic crowbar.

Anyhow, when I looked at the spellstone and the goop monster’s drop item—“Despair Soul Ring: EXP + Skill EXP Boost. Absorbance. ? ? ?,” I realized that I’d seen a ring just like this, albeit with a different design. I dug out my “Ring of the Destitute: For the soul of the abandoned life. Slots seven. Attack and Defense Boost? Magic Bonus? Lifesaving. ? ? ?” and held them up, side by side, to compare. They clearly were a matching set. When I put the Despair Soul Ring on my pinky and touched it to the Ring of the Destitute on my ring finger, there was a flash of light, followed by…nothing?

“Wait, but the rings have more traits. Did they just unlock some of their hidden traits?”

I Appraised the rings again. “Ring of the Destitute: For the soul of the abandoned life. Slots seven. Physical Attack and Defense Boost (small). Magical Attack and Defense Boost (small). Lifesaving. Abandoned Mastery. ? ?” “Despair Soul Ring: EXP + Skill EXP Boost (small). Absorbance. Absorbing Mastery. ? ?” Between the two of them, I’d unlocked four unknown skills.

“So if I get all the rings, will I unlock all the traits? There should be four rings, right? I guess I have two left to find.”

And if each of those four rings had seven slots, I was looking at twenty-eight rings in total. I would self-destruct by the power of my rings alone!

“I mean, I could always *not* collect them all. But being a completionist is so tempting!”

At any rate, this gave me a boost—however small—in gaining experience. It probably meant nothing, given my dismal experience-accruing state, but with some luck, collecting all four rings would

net me the experience boost I needed. Finally, I would level up. Reaching level 30 no longer felt like an impossible dream!

"I could finally become an adventurer and ditch the life of a NEET! Oh, but who am I kidding? Even then, they won't update the bulletin board. Maybe my job will be the guy who finally changes the board."

I also didn't know how I felt about wearing two halves of a paired ring all on my lonesome. For all the upgrades, I felt weaker and more heartbroken than ever!

"Are these rings really strengthening me?! I doubt it; I'm wasting away from heartache! Ah, my eyes feel misty… Wet from saliva, no doubt…"

Sniffle, sob!

I wanted to curse out those cursed things! Or, failing that, put them through their paces. I stepped out of the hidden room and was immediately assaulted by arrow volleys and magic spells flashing in every color of the rainbow.

I used Entanglement, gripped the Tincture Thwacker and used Annihilation on every church paladin and magiknight there. They stared back at me, slack jawed, as if they didn't quite believe their own eyes. Honestly, I didn't believe mine either.

"I mean, you're telling me the philosopher's stone—the object of myth that so many teenage boys pin their cringey dreams on—is nothing but a metal crowbar? An MP-guzzling crowbar!"

There was an enormous *ka-boom*, followed by a shockwave that temporarily destroyed my ability to hear. The knights formed up in front of me, their glittering silver shields forming an airtight, spear-bristling wall, and I…leaped right into the middle of them and sent the whole troop flying with a single swing. The shield wall crumpled like crepe paper. Armored knights went skyward. For an item with such a ridiculous name, the Tincture Thwacker was a real weapon of mass destruction!

"This crowbar-like instrument is unmatched! I don't know if the rings'll help, but let's combine the Thwacker with the Universe Staff. What's the worst that could happen?"

On its own, the Thwacker was a beast. Combine that with the Universe Staff, replicate it with the Replicant Sword, and I had myself beast squared. The Universe Staff was already mondo powerful, with its 21 weapons slotted into it. It was basically a cheat weapon of its own; its destructive powers were off the charts. The difficulty in controlling it and its propensity to make me self-destruct scaled proportionately, and when I multiplied that times two with the Replicant Sword… Well, see, here's the thing. The Replicant Sword had another seven weapons slotted in it.

"My self-destruction is a self-constructed act of self-obstruction. Can a little self-deduction and self-instruction lead to self-destruction-reduction?"

I picked up the loot (and wallets) left behind by the newly corpsified old men and used Appraisal on them. Compared to some of the items I found on earlier squads of soldiers, this loot wasn't half bad. It was roughly equivalent to an average frontier villager's kit, which made me even more impressed with my new crowbar-like instrument—if it could bowl through that kind of equipment in one swing, this weapon was nothing to sneeze at. In a dungeon emperor's hands, it would've been nigh on unbeatable. A terrifying thought!

I shuddered in horror as I searched for the next treasure room, beating senseless the various assassins and Inquisitors hiding around the place. Just then, I heard footsteps—someone was coming my way at a measured, angry pace. It…was…

An annoyed-looking Dancer Girl. She had ditched the cat ears in favor of a set of bear ears. She had, apparently, been telling the beastfolk girls how much I loved women with animal ears of all shapes and sizes.



“Uh, excuse me? Did you just put a teenage boy’s secret kink list on blast?! …What, and you told them exactly how we use those animal ears at night? Why are you looking away?! Don’t stick out your tongue and act cute! I mean, you are cute—but tongues are better used for slurping and sucking! And what’s with that knocking yourself on the head and going ‘Oopsie’ trick? Who even taught you that in the first place?!”

It was one thing to say I had a healthy appreciation of beastfolk girls. It was a whole other thing to explain in painstaking detail how we employed our faux animal ears in the wee hours of the morning! It added an enormous amount of nuance to the phrase “healthy appreciation,” taking my puppy love and giving it a class change to some real horndog stuff! Oh my poor, poor sex appeal, its existence vaporized in a nuclear-reactor-level meltdown, now doomed to wander in the wilderness with no home to return to…

“Couldn’t you have explained it a little more sensually, if not erotically, or even passionately? What, it’s too late for that? No way… Won’t someone somewhere take in my sex appeal?”

“Nope.”

Well, now that Dancer Girl was back, I could run a little experiment. I combined the Tincture Thwacker with the Universe Staff and made a copy with the Replicant Sword.

“Ahh, the exquisite harmony of being fried alive while my bones crack around me! And I don’t even have to do anything but a little Entanglement! Every time I move, I feel a sublime symphony of snapping and splintering. Yeah, I’m falling apart?”

The Rod of Asclepius was hard at work, healing me the instant I fell to pieces, and all the physical improvements from Martial Qi Wizardry helped as well. Here I was, trapped in an endless loop of destruction and reincarnation, a high-octane, MP-guzzling, MP-Absorption-and-Qi-Wizardry-powered lianqi-activation revival rampage!

The philosopher’s stone was living up to the hype; it was a great catalyst. Catalysts heightened existing traits of the entire system on which they acted or caused new reactions by facilitating chemical changes. When I used Entanglement to add that to the

mess happening in my body, it set off a chain reaction of unlimited transformations and buffs. My senses were alive! And on fire!

I felt my magic, my skills, my qi activation, and my equipment's traits transforming and sublimating. Revival, Regeneration, and Curing revved into high gear to keep me from flying apart. The two forces—the healing powers and the catalyzing reaction—smashed into each other with a crunch, and my poor body was trapped in the middle. It hurt like nobody's business.

"Ugh! You, being extra again?"

"No! I just picked up a new piece of loot!"

"Same thing! I keep tell you, stop, doing that!!!"

Dancer Girl fixed me with a sorrowful, pitying glare. She also sighed in resigned disgust? But I mean, what else was I supposed to do but pick up loot? And once I had loot, of course I was going to want to try it out?

"'What I, going to do, with you,' you said? What's that? A vaguely Egyptian-sounding chant imbued with ancient power?"

I was in too much pain to do anything. I shut down the magic flowing through me, shut it all down until everything—skills, magic, everything—was nothing. With nothing but qi activation, I powered myself up with lianqi and relaxed. I let myself be as loose and limber as a willow. And then...I took a step.

The moment my foot touched the ground, Entanglement exploded. All the power within me erupted and poured out, instantly obliterating everything around me. My body was all but vaporized in that millisecond, and just before my consciousness burned to a crisp and was snuffed out, Revival kicked in. I somehow managed to stagger upright before I toppled on step two.

All I had to do was hold on until Revival worked its magic. If I didn't let myself succumb to the grueling agony, then I could fire off an attack...of sorts. Life or Death never needed a second shot. Right?

Using that logic, I blew right through the wall of the Cathedral and razed the troop of knights in the hall on other side. Was it not M-san's Columbus's egging whisper in my ear telling me, "If foes lie

ahead, why make them wait?" *Man, M-san's characterization is getting complicated…*

Problem was, my brain wasn't cut out to handle the toll of multiple attacks in succession. Until Wisdom optimized my controls, my only choice was to bet everything on the all-or-nothing gamble of a single certain-death hit.

TL;DR: No matter the world, the philosopher's stone (or, in this case, crowbar-like instrument) was dangerous business. Honestly? I was kinda scared of it.

DAY 114

AFTERNOON

The masculine desire to be a completionist and fill the whole set of holes… Yeah, it's a whole problem.

THE CHURCH IN THE THEOCRACY

THE FLOOD OF POWER SURGED out of control, racing through me and enflaming my insides. To put it less euphemistically, the philosopher's stone effected Sex God too. Things were, uh, looking up? Making it hard to walk?

"The curse of the bear tail trap!"

Yes, after an eternity (it was a few days) of abstinence, my teenage boyness was bottled up with nowhere to go and threatened to burst its banks. My snakes were not the only wormy creatures lifting their heads with interest. I mean, I hadn't expected the bear tail bodysuit to look *that* cute! When Dancer Girl walked in front of me, every step made her beary butt bounce to and fro.

Oh, and in less important news, someone had taken advantage of this floor's terrain and wiped out a hall full of soldiers at once.

"What can I say? If any of them had tried to lay a finger on Dancer Bear, the animal lover in me would have had a furreaked out—in more ways than one! I was trying to keep my hands to myself, but…surely just a quick pat wouldn't hurt, right? Nope! She's pinching me! Ow, ow, ow ow!"

"Was not, 'quick' pat! You un-bear-able!"

Oh, be still my beating heart. The bear puns!!!

By the way, the wall I smashed slowly began to repair itself—this time, much more slowly than before.

"Huh. The walls have high magic resistance. Maybe I should have been using physical attacks all along."

Sure enough, a single sealed Dimensional Slash—granted, this was a strong attack even sealed—had torn through the front wall, the entire body of church knights, and the far wall behind them. Maybe the Tincture Thwacker's Annihilation trait turned it into an

AoE skill. I wasn't sure—I missed whatever happened in the momentary stabbing headache, the consequence of attempting to control and channel my entire arsenal of power. Anyway, was the Cathedral weakening? Poor tired Cathedral.

At any rate, I found the next hidden room right where I had predicted it would be. Sure enough, the hidden rooms followed the pattern I had discovered earlier. I leaped in, and with the Universe Staff morphed into its Tincture Thwacker form, I whacked and thwacked and whomped and stomped until the beast inside was dead.

"Forget the '-like instrument'! This is a crowbar for sure! Its intended function sure is bashing things to death!"

The Lv. 75 Undead Red Bear morphed into a red spellstone.

"Hey! Don't spawn a *regular* bear when I'm busy admiring Dancer Girl's beary booty! Don't you know anything, fantasy world? This is the perfect time for a hot bear girl! Red, schmed! You gotta understand, teenage boys aren't interested in bears for their *color*. Lemme say it up front—you can spawn an undead white bear or an undead black bear, and it'll make no difference. They're all gonna be undead dead bears when I'm done with them! This is not how the teenage boy audience likes its bears, okay?"

At least the treasure chest had an "Antidote Orb: Holds dominion over Antidote." in it. Based on this and other orbs I found, Wisdom proposed a new theory about the Cathedral's construction: The treasure rooms were designed to lure monsters away from the rest of the stampede during dungeon deluges, thus whittling down the number of foes. The Cathedral's walls were inlaid with magic circuits. These circuits channeled the magical power of the subterranean dungeon and the surrounding countryside through the Cathedral's walls, and the hidden rooms, placed at strategic locations around the Cathedral, amplified the flow of magic. This process essentially transformed the Cathedral into a giant magical artifact.

"So this is a defense mechanism, I guess? The Cathedral forces the dungeon to spit out magical power, which it then absorbs and uses to power its own defensive measures. This effectively seals away the dungeon and protects against monster stampedes."

The Cathedral was a fortress, then. A fortress to keep the dungeon's forces at bay, a fortress that healed its own soldiers and weakened invaders with magical traps and poison. Now, this fortress had been turned to evil purposes and had sucked the land dry of magic. The Theocracy had little magic left to give; now the Cathedral's power source was almost spent. See, that's 'cause the Cathedral was never meant to be inhabited. Its original architect had never built any dormitories, which explained why the living quarters were located in such an odd place now.

"Man, this is kinda overkill... The Tincture Thwacker form of the Universe Staff is way too hard to control. Yeah, and I'm covered in bear bits following the bear beat-up?"

Dancer Bear glared at me too.

Oh, before I forgot—the bear dropped an item. The Cathedral's monsters dropped some choice loot, not gonna lie. Given those high-quality drops and all the undead monsters, I figured these enemies were real veterans—monsters that had been around since way, way back when the Cathedral was first constructed. They'd been sustained for centuries by a steady flow of power from the Cathedral's walls.

"What's this? A spellstone? Wait, of course there's a spellstone! A bear with no spellstone is just a basic-ass bear! And a better-than-basic-assed bear is just Dancer Girl! Whatever. Let's see that drop item."

Finally! At long last! "Godly Bare Knuckles: Hand and Arm Equipment Boost (hyper). Boosts offense and defense with or without weapons equipped. +ATT + DEF." Wait. What did that have to do with the bear I just fought?

"I mean, if the bear fought bare-handed, it should barely have a bearing on the drop item. Why would a bare-handed bear bear beary Bare Knuckles?"

Very mysterious.

"Hey, Dancer Girl. This boosts your attack with or without weapons. Do you want it? It could be handy for your tongbei series of attacks."

Nuh-uh, no way!

She didn’t want it? Oh—her coffin counted as an equipment set. She couldn’t equip other armor in the same slots. That meant Miss Armor Rep probably wouldn’t want the Bare Knuckles either.

“I’m torn. The ‘Leather Gloves?’ have one slot left…but I’d love to use this bad boy to power up the Universe Staff.”

Dancer Girl glared at me. Ah, glares—the universal signifier of disapproval toward gear power-ups. But if I couldn’t trash my foes with the Universe Staff, I was bound to be deader than a doornail in this darned dastardly dungeons-and-demons-having domain. A guy needed to protect himself in a place crawling with monsters and old men.

So I combined the Bare Knuckles with the gloves.

Spearshield Gauntlets: (Left) Nullifies physical and magical attacks; (Right) Nullifies physical and magical defense.

Magician’s Gloves: Magic Manipulation Multiplier (large). Dexterity +30%.

Poisonous Gloves: Vitality, Dexterity +20%. All Status Ailment + Poison Infliction and Resistance (large).

Shell Wristband: Vitality +20%, Physical and Magic Attack Resistance (large).

Brass Knuckles: Power, Speed +30%. Knockback. Fainting Spells (Qi Wizardry). +ATT.

Plunder Glove: Speed, Dexterity +40%. Equipment Plundering (requires physical contact). Trait Copying (limited to one trait. Requires physical contact). +Technique control.

Godly Bare Knuckles: Hand and Arm Equipment Boost (hyper). Boosts offense and defense with or without weapons equipped. +ATT + DEF

With that, all seven glove slots were filled. If needed, I’d swap out number four—the Shell Wristband—later. But hey, now I had a set of gloves that gave me a nice little stat boost without too much load on my mental resources.

Next up, why not give my boots a turn? Onto the boots!

Speed-Bonus Boots: Speed +30%. Rapid Movement.

Resistance Greaves: Perfect Resistance. Physical and Magic Attack Shock Resistance Multiplier (large).

Adhesive Boots: Allows the user to stand on walls and ceilings.

Iron Greaves: Vitality +20%. Physical Defense Boost (large).

Steel Leg Plates: Vitality +20%. MP Hardening.

Metal-Tipped Boots: Vitality +20%.

Total Greaves: Vitality +30%. Body Protection. Physical Resistance.

I already had a complete set of seven, but I also had another set of boots leftover—the "Tough Boots: Vitality +10%." I had bought them back when my self-destruction was extra, extra bad. They weren't getting any use, but…I hated to part from them. What if I just didn't? What if I just held onto them? The rest of my boots were dungeon-found equipment, and I could give them away to other people if needed.

"Ooh, but I do really like the grip and cushioning on these Adhesive Boots… I can't give those up. Wait, are all my cape slots full too?"

Invisibility Cloak: Makes it difficult to detect the wearer.

Mirror Cloak: Reflects magic.

Verge of Death Overcloak: Slashing and Bludgeoning Resistance Multiplier (large). +DEF.

Steel-Threaded Cloak: Vitality +20%, Slashing and Stabbing Resistance (large). Creates armor.

Teleport Cloak: Instant Movement.

Shadow Cloak: Speed, Dexterity +30%. Shadow Crows. Shadow Incarnation. Shadow Manipulation. Shadow Manifestation. Shadow magic. Shadow Skulk. Presence Isolation.

Demon Robe: All stats +30%. Complete Strengthening. Magic Control (ultra). MP Flow Rectification. MP Cycle Multiplication. Trait Synergy Adjustment.

The first five capes were kinda shoddy, but I couldn't afford to part from their traits. That, in turn, lead to more self-destruction, but those traits…they were lifesavers, man. I could swap a cloak out for a traitless piece of equipment to give my brain a break, but

Entangling weaker equipment was pointless. Why cut back on self-destruction only to die from low defense and poor armor?

"I'm hesitant to cut back anywhere… Guess I have to keep everything! Fantasy weapons and armor are the stuff of teenage boy dreams, y'know?"

I decided to give the Bare Knuckles a test run just to get the hang of them. I channeled magic into them and…immediately fainted. Holy cow, these knuckles were bonkers. Banana batshit bonkers-level bonkers!

My skills and traits were not the fainting culprits. They were the Mistilteinn-wrapped Entwined Branch and the sixteen other things in my Universe Staff—so nineteen weapons and multiply that by two for the Replicant Sword. Then on top of THAT was the philosopher's crowbar-like instrument. Then THAT was multiplied by the Replicant Sword AND the Godly Bare Knuckles' traits piling on.

So what felt like a little oopsy-poopsy dizzy spell was actually me hurtling toward the jaws of death. If not for the Rod of Asclepius, I would have been in deep doo-doo!

"All I need is a little elbow grease, some training, and I'll be used to it no time!"

"No! Take off, some equipment! Take off!!!"

The more equipment I added, the more the buffs stacked with each other and outpaced my ability to control them. Yet surely I'd be able to handle them once Wisdom finished optimizing me. Surely.

Alchemy's bodily transmutations were so unobtrusive I barely noticed them, but I noticed them growing stronger every time I broke myself. Maybe Alchemy would catch up someday! If I ever stopped equipping new gear, that is.

"But I can't *not* try out the nice loot I pick up! And I feel remorse every time I get glared at. That's building character, that is! Problem is, I don't build character or gain experience points fast enough to keep pace with my scaling equipment. Oh, fantasy loot… You trouble me so."

I needed practice. First, I wanted to focus on my body's recovery rate, so I switched out to the Old Dude Slayer and got glared at, big time.

See, I sensed several old dudes up ahead. This world had a dearth of hot female knights (read: teenage boy hopes) and hot female magicians (read: teenage boy dreams)! It was a crying shame…

Once the old men were taken care of, we had dinner. I Appraised and fiddled with my equipment while Dancer Girl ate meatball udon with dried seaweed strip rice balls. For dessert, she helped herself to a big serving of pudding. The volume of her meal was a bit concerning, I had to admit. I knew seventeen-year-olds were growing boys and girls, but surely one who was forever seventeen wasn't growing the entire time. Right?

"Wait—is she still growing in the round, bouncy things department? You're telling me there's *more* room for growth there?!"

I got glared at good for that one.

I could sense a battle looming, the kind a teenage boy could never afford to lose. A battle I would give my very, beary best!

DAY 114

EVENING

Intruding, Your Honor? Perish the thought! I'm merely trespassing and stealing!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

AN INTRUDER? IN THE CATHEDRAL? Preposterous!Should anyone enter by some strange mishap, they would not go far. The Cathedral's passageways were treacherous with traps. Verily, the Cathedral was a holy place under the protection of the Lord—a sanctuary upon which no intruder could impinge. Thus we had taken it for our seat of power.

"These useless cretins! What do *my* Knights of the Scripture think they're doing? I am their pope! How dare they defy me! Capture their families and drag them before me in chains! They will pay for their insolence when I torture their loved ones for all to see!"

"Your Eminence, half the Knights man the city walls in anticipation of the princess's army. The rest of are posted around the Cathedral's perimeter to stymie her entry."

He would have us bend the Knights to his will in terror—a surefire way to make enemies of them all. The pope would own their loyalty in their words, but not in their minds. Never in that. Our personal army of paladins was well-armed, aye, but they could not stand against the Knights of the Scriptures. Any one of that fabled order was worth a thousand of our soldiers. After our ruinous defeat at the hands of the frontier armies, the Knights of the Scriptures remained the only force in the Cathedral fit to fight. To raise their ire here meant certain death for us all. *A curse upon that addle-pated ape!*

"What are they guarding, if not my holy person? I am the proxy of our Lord upon this mortal earth. I am of His likeness!"

"Yea, Your Eminence. We will not allow any man to so much as tread on your shadow…by guarding the *Cathedral* Your Eminence so graciously presides over."

Bimbyzaal had won the papal throne on merit of two key characteristics: his mad obsession with power and his vehement hatred of beastfolk. Once the seat was his, he cast off the last vestiges of disguising his madness. He ruled as a vile and despicable despot.

"Then go and guard it! Just do *something*, you nincompoop!"

"As you command, Your Eminence."

Royal blood flowed in his veins—by some definition of "royal." His forebears had been cut from the royal line due to their discriminatory beliefs against the beastfolk. From this poisoned line sprang the creature known as Bimbyzaal, a prisoner to his own hatred against the beastfolk and the royal family. His black passions spurred him into the hands of the Empire. He became their willing puppet, for his animosities made him an easy man to manipulate.

But what good was a witless puppet? Bimbyzaal was little more than a madman. The rest of his lackies were no better. Those thrice-damned archbishops, good for precious little else but putting on a mummer's farce of piety for the laypeople, dropped the act and abused their powers the moment Bimbyzaal became pope. The Church was surrounded by enemies, even inside our walls. Once the Knights of the Scripture turned on us too, no straggling remnants of our private army could stand between us and our doom.

"What word do we have from the Knights of the Scriptures? Tell me! Now!"

For all we were impervious behind our stout walls, we would be trapped behind those very same walls, unable to produce any of our daily necessities—not even food—should the Church fall. The Cathedral was a prison. It sapped the strength of the strong, but we were impervious to its curses—as were the Knights of the Scriptures. We were outnumbered and ill-disposed to victory. Oh, only a fool would make an enemy of the Knights of the Scriptures in a battle he was sure to lose.

"None, Your Eminence. All communications have ceased."

Though all the power of our kingdom and all the glory of the Church should have been mine to take pride in, I felt naught but the cold touch of fear in the presence of this howling, fit-pitching, spittle-spraying madman. What price did we pay, I asked myself in

my heart of hearts, for power and fortune? Was this but the glory of the soldier marching straight into the jaws of death?

"We've raised checkpoints around the site of the fire. We've sealed off all entry to the upper levels. Is this not too much fuss for one little rat?" an advisor whispered to me.

Yet if we were to extend tidings of peace toward the beastfolk, we would inevitably incur the Empire's ire and be crushed under their heel. Our alliance with the Empire saved Church and country, and still, the idealistic orthodox sects never tired of quibbling with us over it.

"Tell that to His Eminence yourself, then. Or if you cannot, capture the rat. Better yet, kill him."

My interlocutor was a fool. They were all fools, all of them—the Knights were good for little more than violence; the rest of this blasted faction, good for little and less. Yet I was forced to rely on them. I had no one else. No, none of us had any other savior. In the course of revising the doctrine, raising the pope up from among our ranks, and claiming dominance, we had purged all dissenters—exiled all who were brave, honest, and true.

"Rat catching is not work fit for knights. Let the *animal* be our mouser."

The pope sneered at us—us, who had only ever wanted some of the glory for ourselves. He cast us aside when we now stood on the cusp of falling from power.

"Now, to other matters. Have you an answer as to why the Cathedral is growing weaker?"

"No, Your Eminence. However, we have word that it may only be temporary."

"Do you take me for a fool? If you do not know the cause of the affliction, how could you possibly know it is temporary? You nincompoops! If you want to talk big and advance theories, then I demand to see your reasoning! Or, if you are so ignorant, go to the elders and find *out* the cause!"

The Cathedral's preservation was the onus of the convocation of elders, for it was they who safeguarded the Cathedral's secrets.

“We have lost contact with the paladins and magiknights sent to the middle floors.”

“So too with the Inquisitors.”

“I have word from a scout. The scout was able to apprehend the intruder with the aid of a magical device, but beyond that, I’m afraid I don’t know… The report cut off with a series of agonized screams before the scout perished. The intruder is still at large and undetected.”

Yet that was impossible. Clearly, we were being fed false information.

“My lord, we have word of the slaves escaping! The Knights of the Scriptures have recaptured them and taken them into their custody.”

“It appears the fire has been extinguished. The rescue and inquiry squads are refusing to set foot anywhere near it, so I am afraid I cannot confirm the accuracy of this report.”

“Set fire to the city! Make an example of all those who would defy the man who speaks with God’s voice! Now!!!”

The pope, the lord captains of the Church paladins and magiknights, and the High Inquisitor snapped and bayed at each other like men who had gone mad. All four hated one another fiercely and were loath to share information. At this most crucial of moments, when our control of the country was at stake, stoking their petty egos remained their priority. *This is what happens when we lower ourselves time and time again in our thirst for power. We are left as a circus of fools.*

“Your Eminence, if the church armies within the city and the princess’s army outside join forces under the banner of the royal family, we will be in grave danger! What if the fighting should reach inside the Cathedral? We must cooperate to strike at the common enemy or else perish!” I exclaimed.

The pope sneered, his smile a mocking jeer. All others around the table directed their gazes into their laps, afraid to meet my eye.

“Fool! I am the pope. God does not suffer men to defy me! It is your lack of faith that has driven us to this wretched state. Come!

We shall urge the common man to take up swords and fight a crusade in the name of God. In the name of the pope!”

“Y-yes, Your Eminence!”

Here sat a man elected on the basis of his bloodline and narrow-minded prejudices. A man who tortured the talented with the justification of heresy. A man who drove away the wise with his incessant executions. *Tell me, who would ever protect such a man?* Who would pledge their loyalty to a man whose delusions robbed him of his crumbling power base, whose zeal brought on his inevitable destruction?

“Do not think so low of our paladins, Lord Consul,” said their lord commander. “We are not sniveling craven magiknights who cower and cast charms behind the shields of stronger men. We do not torture random smallfolk of no consequence like the Inquisitors.”

Each man acted of his own accord. There was no cooperation, and with all of them hiding information from his fellows, it was impossible to glean a true understanding of the situation at hand.

“Fool! Had you not lost communication with your knights, we wouldn’t be arguing so. Your inability to hold on to your *mighty paladins* is our exact problem.”

They jostled to oppose the others and sent out only small parties of men, eager to keep their cards close to their chest. They would leap at the chance of sabotage, and perhaps it had already happened. How else could we have an intruder? The intruder had friends in high places!

“How have your scouts failed to find him? It matters not where he is! I simply want results!”

Why make attempts at fair governance in this fair of fools? Could the others not see the power slipping through our fingers?

“I hate to suggest it, but perhaps your scouts fear the curses that befell the first men you sent? Perhaps they are merely pretending to scout. Hm?”

Should the Cathedral fall, we were done for. We had no other shield. Should the Cathedral fall…then everything we had gained would have been all for naught.

“We have lost contact with all the middle and upper dormitories, Your Eminence.”

“I’m afraid I’ve likewise lost contact with the great Sir Hasimos.”

“Alas, I know not where my Inquisitors have gone…”

We had already been brought to our knees. At this final bit of news, the two commanders’ faces finally drained of color. Recognition dawned too late. The embers underfoot were noticed moments before bursting into a bonfire.

“What do you fools think you’re doing?! I’ll have you all arrested and tortured! I’ll have God strike you down in His wrath!”

There was shouting and pandemonium. This pack of incompetents, good for little but dodging responsibility and henpecking one another, burst into a flurry of orders…but that did little to stay the chaos. Even the messengers understood not the contents of their messages.

“Tell the knights—”

“What do the Inquisitors think—”

“Where are you, damn you?!”

These delayed missives only served to further the mayhem. For how could they not? Without understanding the foe we faced, how could we possibly hope to mitigate it?

“The Cathedral’s magic levels are deteriorating even further! We still don’t know what could be causing it!”

At that shout, the clamor ceased. We knew what this portended. Our wounds would no longer stitch themselves together. Our artificial strength would wane and soon flicker out altogether. Our knights, once so proud of their Blessing-enhanced armor, now trembled in fear. It was too late to act. Too late. Yet if we did not act now, everything would fall and shatter around us. There was no choice but to abandon the Theocracy. Abandon Central. Abandon the Holy City. But the Cathedral… Here, we would make our last stand. We had no other option left to us.

DAY 114

EVENING

Man, don't you hate when you're slow to get it up? And by "it," ha ha, well. Let's just say. My level.

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

SWITCHING TO DUAL-WIELDING the Old Man Slayer was the right choice, since my self-destruction outpaced my healing. I made my way down the corridor, dodging arrows, boulders, and guillotine traps along the way. I batted down the peskiest of the arrows and ran through the air to sidestep boulders. Dancer Girl swung her chain in circles, knocking back arrows and stones with glee. *Remind me, why do you have a shield again?*

The Replicant Sword's MP and HP Absorption traits made healing a breeze, even if it contributed to me falling apart. Problem was, traps had nothing to absorb. Using the Replicant Sword would've been wasting resources.

So the Old Dude Slayer was a superior choice. It didn't have any self-destructive properties. As much as I valued collecting data with the Universe Staff, I sort of needed my MP to recover. And, like, a functioning body? Not being in constant pain was a perk, too!

"Each attack only lasts a moment, so I can bear the pain if I need to. But if I attack over and over again, the pain will eventually drive me to delinquency. Next thing you know, I'll be racing horses, stealing the stained glass right out of the Cathedral windows, and like a bat out of hell, I'll be gone when the morning comes! It's not a phase, Mom?"

There was also the oddly surreal sight of a pack of old men flattened up against the wall holding their breath. They all held some weird pose like they were lying in wait for someone to come by. They probably thought their "Stealth Cloaks: Camouflages unmoving wearer" let them blend into the wall. 'Course, I could see them just fine. I'm telling you, it was surreal. *But do you* need *to pose?!*

"Aww, man. Not again. Okay, Dancer Girl, you take the would-be sneaky squad on the right. I'll peel off the old dudes stuck to the

wall on the left, and we can meet up in the middle to beat them all up. Sound good?"

Nod nod.

The old dudes' camouflage only worked when they stood stock still, so they were sitting ducks. They waited for us to pass by, and the moment our backs were to them…they stayed exactly where they were, up against the wall? Well, I couldn't have that. I picked up the pace a little, kicked off from the ground, and launched myself skyward.

"Eat my tongbei double dropkick! Then how about a tongbei lariat? And for my pièce de résistance, a flurry of tongbei wall stomps! Nothing beats a tongbei thrashing!"

Even with no weapon equipped, I was dealing major damage. The "Godly Bare Knuckles: Hand and Arm Equipment Boost (hyper). Boosts offense and defense with or without weapons equipped. +ATT + DEF" were super effective. That said, I couldn't see how knuckle gloves were in any way related to tongbei double dropkicks, but hey…who was counting?

"Let the stripping begin! Too bad these aren't hot babes…" *Single manly tear*.

As I spoke, I got to work with the Plunder Glove. Its "Equipment Plundering (requires physical contact)" trait certainly made the process easier, but this was still a tedious task.

"Where's the fun in touching old dudes? The day people take up fondling old men, it's game over for us teenage boys."

Meanwhile, on the other end of the room, the sleeping old dudes were in for a rude awakening at the hands of Dancer Girl's chain. It was kind of unsettling watching them in real time develop a fetish for being whipped by a cute girl with bear ears, but at least I could comfort myself with the fact that none of the old men would ever wake again. At that point, it looked like this light warm-up had helped me make a full recovery from my self-induced injuries. The pain, too, had reached a manageable, everyday level. I sheathed my sword, equipped the Universe Staff, and gave that a whirl.

"I'll be damned—my Universe Staff is growing longer. Maybe combining it with the philosopher's stone caused some kind of

chemical reaction. The philosopher's crowbar-like instrument, that is."

I used Appraisal on it. "Universe Staff: A staff that encompasses all of creation. Absorbs EXP. Slots seven items. Synergy. Super-Speed. Power-Up. ? ?" Holy cannoli!

"Now that I think about it, I realize I haven't used Appraisal on this thing since before it was the Universe Staff! Back when it was the Wooden Stick?, all of its skills were Unknown? This thing gained EXP like a mofo when I wasn't looking! This is a legit cheat weapon now."

The Synergy trait had a hand in it too, I wagered. Between all the traits from the other weapons, Super-Speed, and Power-Up… well, this staff was stacked.

"One of those late bloomers, I s'pose. Whenever I grow, the Universe Staff shows. Wait. If it's constantly stealing my EXP, does that mean its self-destructive power is constantly increasing too?!"

What was this? A power struggle over power? A literal struggle to survive? A hostile encounter over experience? I didn't know. The one thing I did know was that I had no choice. I had to use the Universe Staff, because the powers that be considered it a wooden stick. I was still only level 26! I could only equip the crappiest of weapons!

Um, *actually*, I could equip and use any weapon I wanted, but the weapon effects wouldn't activate for me at my low level. Anything like divine swords were too much for me. I did a little human experimenting on the nerds—all well over level 100—and made them try equipping one of my divine swords. This lasted for all of a second before the nerds collapsed under the strain. And if one had managed to swing the darn thing…well, it wouldn't have been pretty. There would've been no nerd left to scrape off the ground. They'd have gone from otakus to notakus. Anyone who wanted to use a divine sword probably needed a level solidly in the triple digits.

"But if I combine it with the 'Wooden Stick?' it's treated like the 'Wooden Stick?'. Then I can use it just fine."

I was, in fact, the only one who could use the OP Universe Staff. It was life-threatening in other hands—Wisdom-less and MP-

battery-less hands. Many of my other weapons were likewise too dangerous to leave lying around. Instead, I stuck them in my Universe Staff. That staff was quickly becoming a HAZMAT storage facility!

"Yup. Shove 'em all in, that's my motto."

I wanted to give all my classmates a set of strong weapons, but if weapons were too powerful, they could overload and hurt their owners. *Call that a (heh heh) double-edged sword.* Worse, those powerful weapons could fall into enemy hands. It was best to play it safe and bundle them all into one horrible, uncontrollable beast of a stick… On second thought, I wasn't playing it safe either!

"But that's the only way to defeat the undefeatable or trounce the un-trounceable. It's just math. If you have a weapon as horribly OP as mine, you can beat just about anything. Y'know?"

It was a necessary evil for someone like me who couldn't level up easily. Although, come to think of it, wasn't the Universe Staff partially responsible for my glacial leveling?

"So the experience boost I get from the Despair Soul Ring is all for nothing! It all goes to the Universe Staff! Alas, there goes my plan to ditch the NEET title… Hey, Dancer Girl. Don't shake your head and sigh. You're supposed to commiserate with me. I mean, it's cute when you shake your head and your lil bear butt shakes too, but that causes a sudden uprising of teenage boy forces, and walking around bent over clutching your junk is bad for your spine? Bad posture weakens lianqi activation too. Yup, gotta watch out for my posture; watching your posterior can come later."

The bear tail was a mighty, malicious thing indeed! When the blood and the magic concentrated in my teenage nethers, the *yingqi*—hardened qi—accumulated there and caused a certain *stiffening* that made it hard to walk. *C'mon, qi! Hey there, blood! Get moving! Stop congregating in my privates!*

"Be careful, now. Don't push self, too hard. Promise me?"

I nodded, dropped low to the ground, and charged at my foes—well, crawled. I was kinda hunched over, y'know?

"Eat my slip-n'-slide-past-enemy-attacks-while-caught-in-a-crouch-due-to-certain-teenage-boy-related-reasons-look-it's-

complicated-okay? Fear my mighty crouching somersault kick!”

With one arm in front of me, I threw myself into a forward roll, axe kicked the shield right out of one old man’s hand and used the recoil to launch myself into the air. I soared over the heads of the soldiers (by the way, I was still clutching my junk while all this is going down) and cut through the back line of mages at a furious tilt. Sliding forward (hiding my crotch), I launched into my attack. The mages didn’t know what hit them. (Hint: It was me, just bent over.)

Oh, I’m better now! I could walk like a normal person again!

“What’s with all these random knights? I’m busy here, people! I’ve got lots of sneaking and spying to do! Get a clue, old farts.”

I dropped into a battle-ready stance. Then, as anxiously, carefully, cautiously, deliberately, delicately, gingerly, prudently, *and* warily as I could, I fed magic into the beyond OP “Universe Staff—Crowbar-like Instrument Edition” one eensy-weensy bit at a time. Doing my best to hold the beast at bay…I gave that thing a swing.

The magiknights kept reloading and firing their magic weapons at me in rapid succession as they tried to fall back. These magical attacks were invisible, but I had no trouble dodging, dipping, and ducking my way through them before bonking the magiknights into pulp. Sure, the magic was supposed to be undetectable to the target…but I could see it just fine? All magic was visible to Jupiter Eye. Even attacks that were supposed to be undetectable. Even traps enchanted to be invisible to the naked eye.

“Yikes! If I let this go on for much longer, I’m going to lose control of the staff entirely! I already hear an ominous snapping sound. Yup, and there’s the sound of my muscles ripping themselves apart. *Owowowthatreallyhurts!!! Heybodycouldyounotfallapartonmethisfast?!*”

On I went, slashing, sliding, and turning the battlefield into a bloodbath with lightning-fast strikes.

“What is it with girls and shields? Why can’t they understand that shields are supposed to be protective equipment? Okay, that’s not fair—the idiot boys throw their shields too. Yeah, ’cause they’re idiots? They use their round shields to slice through bird monsters. Then comes the fun of bounding after them.”

By then, Dancer Girl had smashed the vanguard to bits. The shield wall of infantry in full suits of heavy plate were nothing to her. She tongbei Shield Bashed her way through all of them, smashing shield, armor, and body alike. Snippets of splattered soldier sailed through the sky.

"You're killing it, Dancer Girl! Killing them, rather. No, snack time will have to wait for later! You've already eaten way too much. You'll grow a belly to rival the Tiny Tanuki's at this rate, and we all know where that leads. That's right—the frantic, sobbing one more set situation! How come all the calories go to your boobs, anyway? Huh?! Why did you write down what I just said?! If the Tiny Tanuki sees that, she'll gnaw me to pieces! If you bite my head, do I not bleed? It'll be an epic battle between her healthy gnashers and my stalwart scalp! Okay, okay, okay! I'll give you *one* crepe. Wait—is that a peace sign or a demand for two crepes? Dancer Girl, you're wilier than you look!"

Heh heh!

On we went down the corridors of the Cathedral. Dancer Girl was well armed, with a bog-standard whipped cream crepe in her right hand and a bacon-and-egg crepe in her left. *Whatever makes her happy, I s'pose...* With a waistline as slim as hers, I figured she had nothing to worry about.

"I wonder if Miss Armor Rep and Slimey have enough snacks left. Good thing I gave them their share separately—the girls would've gobbled them all up otherwise."

Just to be on the safe side, I had made the largest item bag I could and filled it to the brim with goodies. Even then, I knew it wouldn't take long for the lot to run out. My classmates gave out desserts to kids left and right, and the whole country was full of beastfolk in dire need of something sweet. Not to mention...the girls themselves would've scarfed down the lion's share of the sack.

"Is that a side effect of Eye Mastery's imprinting ability? IF (homesick AND stressed) THEN (eat nummies OR blow budget buying cute things)? That's the teenage girl routine—one more sets and empty wallets!"

Imagine if I imprinted that *instruction into their minds. The one more sets would never end!*

“It’s the hard knock life for us teenage boys who have to see teenage girls in terrifically treacherous leotards doing one more sets, day in and day out! Yup, three cheers for athletics!”

Anyway, so we were in a hidden room now, and there was kinda like a crocodile in it. Not an old Egyptian god dude with a crocodile head either. Just your ordinary, everyday crocodile—except not really? I mean, it was standing up? It reminded me of a dinosaur standing ’cause it stood on it hind legs, but it was definitely a rockin’ croc? Crocosaurus was roughly two times taller than me when standing up, and it had a big ol’ tail too. Appraisal said it was a level 75 Undead Dragon (Crocodile). *I don’t know about you, but anything that is purportedly a dragon but has a little (crocodile) hanging on the end ain’t no dragon!* But then the question begged—since when did crocodiles stand on their hind legs?

Weirdly enough, a fair number of lizards were once called dragons, but I’d never heard of a crocodile that stubbornly insisted on its dragon identity. Especially not a bipedal one!

“No, if you ask me, that creature doesn’t have one bit of dragon in it. I don’t sense so much as a whiff of Australian water dragon about it—not even one so faint I almost hate to mention it. This here is a crocodile through and through.”

Rrraaaarrgh!

What a waste of a perfectly good crocodile. The frontier spawned monsters a-plenty for the whackin’, and I heard in more remote regions of the map, monsters mated with one another to keep their numbers hovering just above extinction. These baby monsters had small spellstones, and their bodies didn’t disappear when they died. So if we’d landed a giant crocodile born the natural way, I could have made croc-skin purses or wallets to turn a profit ripping off the girls! Alas, all the Cathedral’s monsters were magically spawned. Even an ostentatiously upright crocodile couldn’t be turned into a handbag.

“What a shame. Croc leather sells at a premium, and I hear the meat is tastier than you would expect. Yup, this here crocy creature can be turned into leather, which can be used to make handbags, which are very popular high-end luxury goods, and the meat is quite refreshing yet juicy and is said to taste like chicken and can be

fried just like chicken too and that tastes good as well. With a crocodile this big, there's so much more skin and meat for the taking… Hey, Dancer Girl? Your drool is turning into *droooooool.* Y'know, if we kill this thing, all we'll get is a spellstone! Oh, and you're giving the crocodile the heebie-jeebies. Can you stop licking your lips? Yeah, and maybe not have a creepy look in your eyes? I mean, if this was sexy lip-licking, I'd be ready to ignore the croc and slap down a futon—but this? This is just weird. Look, I'm sure the crocodile would taste delicious, but a roll in the sheets right in front of it…? I dunno, exhibitionism is a little too wild for me. It's a threat to my ability to fit into society? And stuff?"

The behemoth beast roared, and then it charged straight toward us. For a creature that looked so slow moving, this crocodile could hoof it. I mean, it ran fairly slow, but it used its strong hind legs and enormous tail like a spring to launch itself into the air—and let me tell you, that was a super speedy form of locomotion. The difference in its apparent speed and its actual ability was what made it so threatening. Then, whenever it cracked its tail like a whip, a mass the size of a battering ram barreled straight toward us. With that said!

"Aw, this cheeky bastard! You got me good! I could've sworn you were tail whipping me, but then you tried to bite my head. Oh, you naughty stockpile of luxury handbag material! You saucy little monster, you!"

Its skin was tough, too. As I leaped out of the way and the crocodile surged past me, I fired off a round of Magic Threads. Every one glanced off the surface of the croc. Didn't leave so much as a scratch.

"You would've made a lot of rich housewives very happy, crocodile… I could've turned you into a luxury armor set and sold you for the big bucks. What a shame! If there had been a pair of crocs, I could've bred them and gotten some in children's sizes, too…but this crocodile is single. What am I supposed to do with only one crocodile? I don't even have a crocodile ring?"

Its pure power, massive might, and broad bulk gave it super-sized strength. Dancer Girl wasn't going to be happy with me if I worked up too much of a sweat, though, so I un-Entangled myself

and let my magic power sink into my body. I relaxed and then, with the ease of a dancer, floated over to the crocodile at blinding speed to touch the point of my Seven-Branched Sword against its throat.

By the time my mind caught up with the action, everything was over. My magic had taken the wheel, and a moment later, it was done. Yeah, the crocodile had a great big hole in it now? I'd rent it from throat to tail in one sword strike, and now empty air gaped through.

"Hey, at least it makes it more aerodynamic! In case this croc wants to evolve into a pterosaur or something."

Okay, so maybe I used a little (a lot) of super energy-efficient Entanglement. I did experience a momentary crashing of all my mental faculties, but before it could completely obliterate my body, I healed myself back to normal. It was perfectly safe! It was only a little reckless! Yet Dancer Girl glared daggers into me nevertheless.

"Oh, come on! I was barely in there. Can't a guy take his sword and be in and out like a flash? You know the ancient saying—it's fine; I pulled out quick!"

She didn't buy that one for one instant. Now why was she glaring at me with such pity?

"What, are you sad you didn't get to eat the crocodile? It's gone. It's a spellstone now, y'know?"

Glaaaaaare.

Anyhoo, the crocodile dropped an uber chic celeb-worthy crocodile skin armor set, available for a limited time only, call now and get yours—nah, jk. It was a "Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water: Gets out the toughest darkness and the stubbornest stains. Best scrubbing and purifying power on the market! Call now and get a FREE limited-edition Darkness(?)-B-Gone (one-time-use) hankie!" And hey, since I picked it up myself—free shipping?

"Wait—not only is this crocodile in the wrong income bracket, but its drop item is too darn cheery! The hankie even has little crocodile on it... Thanks, I hate it. Oh, and of course it's a bipedal croc!"

Appraisal made it out to be some snake-oil cleaning product, but it was actually holy water. Anti-darkness holy water, at that.

“Hey! What if I wanted it in family size? Can I call and order another bottle? Will they send another crocodile? Or something? (Wait…but that’d be so cool!)”

I waited, but evidently there was only the one crocodile. *I guess that was the one-time-use part?* Oh, and there was also a “Regeneration Orb: Holds dominion over Regeneration.” in the treasure chest.

“I’m up to…four orbs now, is it? Yup, and if I get all seven, then gimme a pair of girls’ pantie—nope, ignore me! I didn’t say anything! Say, can I see what you’re scribbling down over there? I just feel an inexplicable sense of dread at whatever you’re writing, you see.”

Nuh-uh, nope.

“What? You made a promise to Miss Armor Rep and Class Rep? Wait a sec—aren’t I supposed to be scouting? How come they never asked *me* to write any reports?!”

I’d done lots and lots of sneaky spying and scouting all over the country! *Lots, I tell you!* Yet they wanted not one word from poor old me!

“And my report would’ve been full of all the sneaky freaky desires I keep locked up inside my heart! Yeah, and it’d be indecipherable?”

In the end, I was able to bribe Dancer Girl with a new type of sticky dumpling treat—*mitarashi dango*—and get her notes. Her verdict? Priceless.

Anyway, while she’s eating, let’s talk about how dangerous collecting all seven orbs will be. Scratch that—I didn’t know how many orbs there were to begin with, and regardless of how many I acquired, I still had a side hustle making girls’ panties virtually every day.

“FYI, so there are no misunderstandings, teenage boys like what goes *in* the panties more than the clothing item itself. If I’m gonna demand anything, then gimmie girls’ pus—nope, I’m not saying anything!”

Put the pen down, Dancer Girl! You’re terrifying me!

DAY 114

NIGHT

My experience with anklet models went like this: I came, I saw, I...came again.

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

AS WE MADE OUR WAY to the upper floors, the Cathedral let slip an Undead Hound, which was promptly defeated.

Next to its prone body stood five knights, weapons drawn. They carried themselves with an arrogance not fully explained by their exceptional equipment. I mean, that undead hound was level 50. Defeating such a beast with a party of five was no small feat. These elite warriors were enhanced even further with magic accessories and trait-toting equipment. Finally, the best of the bunch had come out to play.

They were the cream of the crop, but this was no fresh dairy—that cream was curdled rotten. The knights devoured Dancer Girl with their eyes. I just knew there were indecent leers hiding under those helmets. *I would know, because I do plenty of leering at Dancer Girl myself!*

The knights lunged forward in unison, intent on killing me and nabbing Dancer Girl for themselves. In one coordinated movement, they focused on me—the unwelcome obstacle standing between them and Dancer Girl—and lashed out with their blades! Excellent blades, too, I might add. These knights must have been high level enough to wield them. Yeah, the swords were something to write home about, but the swordsmanship...was not. They had a ways to go before they could hope to match the violent old dude and his order of whatever.

If their swords moved with grace, it was only because of the traits in their armor. Naturally, I traced the path of that magic with Jupiter Eye and predicted where their blows would land. Slipping through the gap between the swords and the swords' trajectories, diving into the holes between two pieces of steel whirling faster than the human eye could follow, I moved quicker than time itself. I closed in and swung a sword of my own. There was a great flash as

the weapon whipped around—and okay, look. I did my very, very best to soften the blow and control myself. But if I may toot my own horn for a moment, there was no stopping a Life or Death merged into a Dimensional Slash. Their Physical Defense plate armor, Physical Reflection shields, Slash Resistance gauntlets, and Hardening helms might as well not have existed.

"Yeeeaaargh!"

"H-how? Oh Lord, why?!!!"

"My arm! My *aaaaaaaaarm!*"

Someone must have been watching me fight my way up these endless flights of stairs. That's why they decided to stop sending Inquisitor assassination squads after me. This time, they sent their tankiest of elite knights.

See, Eye Mastery was one tricky bugger to fight against. It was a great skill to have, don't get me wrong—it let me know what my opponents' attacks were before they ever happened. It was just what some might call, well, *cheating*. In human vs human battles, the goal on both sides was often to ruin the opponent's line of sight. Sometimes, sword fighters used their shields to hide their swings from enemy eyes. In other instances, ranged attackers hid behind friendly cover to shoot surprise projectiles. Having an opponent who could see through those tricks was a real pain in the pooter. Source: Me. Because, yeah, that was my bread and butter?

Speaking of seeing, I could still feel a distant pair of eyes trained on me. I glared back at it with the full might of the chickenatrice and lizardisk's curses. I hoped whoever-the-hell was watching me from afar liked four eyeballs' worth of Evil Eye.

"Huh. Looks like whoever was watching us is gone?"

Nod nod.

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

Fisssk!

The chickenatrice's Evil Eye petrified its victims; the lizardisk's poisoned. Even locking eyes with those nasty peepers across a magical connection made the watcher vanish eventually. The things a guy had to do on decoy duty! Yup, I got stuck causing a diversion

for the slaves—oh, did I mention there were enslaved beastfolk?—to make a clean getaway.

"I don't care if you look at me, but don't let your eyes wander too much in that other direction. Oh, and I should mention—that bear butt is for *my* viewing pleasure, thank you very much."

Dancer Girl turned her (glarey) eyes on me for that one.

Anyway, I picked up the old dudes' nice equipment, the undead hound's spellstone, and the undead pupper's drop item. Dogs really were man's best friend; this one had butchered scores of my enemies for me. It also left a sick item: "Dash Anklet: Speed +30%. Acceleration +30%. Sprint. Dash. Leap. Fancy Footwork. Blinding Step. Hyper Super-Speed." A surprisingly solid find for the Cathedral, this one. As solid as leg armor could be, at any rate.

Ignoring Dancer Girl's glued-on glare, I added the Dash Anklet to the 1000-Drugs Anklet. Who cared if it only made me self-destruct faster? I needed the speed. Honestly, speed was all I had going for me.

Truth be told, I really wanted the Fancy Footwork trait, even if it required pushing myself to dangerous limits. Footwork formed the basis of such crucial skills as Blinding Step and Hyper Super-Speed.

"It's not that I have a leg fetish, you know? Besides, I'm the one wearing the anklet? Not to suggest that I have any opposition, objection, or resistance to anklets on hot girl legs either. Yeah, legs are leg-celent?"

I simply had no time to test out the anklet on Dancer Girl's lovely, lovely legs. I had a building to dismantle. Wait. Was I just a glorified wrecking ball?

"Whose bright idea was it to put a dormitory in front of this hidden room? Ugh! Now I have to be very, very careful not to destroy too much and harm any of my precious loot. Fortunately, my high-speed and oh-so easy to control personal demolition device—the Tincture Thwacker—are here to save the day! I mean, it's a crowbar-like instrument. Breaking things is what crowbar-like instruments do best."

It turned out some homeless religious group had illegally squatted and built an unauthorized, *illegal* structure on the property just in front of my hidden room. And now they were blocking my way!

"I've never heard of the philosopher's stone being used to knock down a building... Remind me, what does demolition have to do with philosophy again?"

Well, if the son of god was both a carpenter and a prophet, who was I to spit on the notion of demolition men philosophers?

"Still, I can't imagine they get much work done at the job site... All those miracles would get distracting!"

I walloped walls, smashed shelves, tore up tiles, and labored long at scooping up any valuables I got my hands on. I sized the building up, determined where the load-bearing points lay, and slammed my crowbar-like instrument into those vulnerable spots.

From there, the dormitory did the rest of the work. It crumbled under its own weight in the world's first ever self-destructing dormitory. The first things to go were the cramped quarters that held the slaves. I healed all of the fresh escapees to full health, asked Dancer Girl to play guard duty again, and sent them all running for freedom.

In the meantime, I had a scouting mission to continue. I made myself busy causing the very distracting diversion of demolishing the Cathedral around the priests' shoulders. All these demo gigs were making me quite rich for a broke teenaged manual laborer indeed, but one had to wonder why I was treated like an unemployed NEET when I could never escape the call of work. Instead of going to a batting cage to work off some stress, I had taken to swinging a tongbei crowbar-like instrument!

"Hiiiiyah!"

Once I picked up the rubble for later use, a large stone passageway was revealed. At its end lay that hidden room, that sweet hidden room. *Don't mind if I do!*

"'Scuse me, coming in. Yup, I'm just a wandering teenage boy here to pick up your loot. Just the loot, okay? Not the fighting that

comes before it? If you can just present me with a bunch of corpses and drop items, that would be great?"

Actually, what I got presented with was an idol! For some reason!

"Ah, this is one of *those* stories. I see how it is. The isekai tropes that best titillate teenage minds across the globe! I use Servitude on a giggling girl and become the Idol Tamer. Well, that's how the spiciest isekai stories go, but…a level 100 Triple-Headed Evil Idol was not quite what I had in mind? I doubt it even passed the auditions!"

This self-proclaimed idol was a monster with the heads of an eagle, wolf, and ape. Not the kind of thing fans would be lining up to meet and greet!

The wannabe idol ran toward me on four wolfy paws. Its sharp eagle wings slashed at me. The sword gripped in its monkey grasp shivered in close—was this some kinda messed-up meet-n-greet, maybe? The intimidation factor buffeted me like a gale. I dodged each attack, backing up as I went.

"Yeah, uh, I don't think I can shake hands with this thing… Nor do I want to!"

Each wing flap sent a current of Wind magic my way. I wove in and out of the blasts and eyed the distance between me and the idol. The creature was fast, and it had many limbs with which to attack. Worse, wolf jaws, monkey fangs, and eagle talons kept taking turns at trying to take chunks out of me!

"Heh! Now that Dancer Girl is gone, I can let loose without her finding out and ripping me a new one. The perks of a master-servant relationship!"

I whipped out Martial Qi Wizardry. Once upon a time, this skill was the path sages traversed in their journey to reach divinity. It was removed from the pollution and commotions of mundane affairs, while martial arts walked the opposite path—the path of fire, iron, and blood. Martial Qi Wizardry sublimated the technique of battle. By taking the road of the Asuras, one reached the divinity of a god of war.

“Me, though, I’m a lover, not a fighter. Yup, I’m just a mild-mannered, mild-tempered, mild-ewing (Mildewing? Whatever! I’m growing fuzz!) teenage boy, but I’ll fight if I must! I’ll pick up every damn mushroom I find, should it be necessary! Hell, I’ll burn every old man bald if I’m called to do so! Oh, and if you try to bite or scratch my precious scalp, I’ll beat the everlasting crap outta you.”

I was one of those conflict-avoidant types. I did my best conflict avoiding by utterly destroying the competition before it could evolve into conflict. Of course, if the conflict was the late-night tussling-in-the-sheets variety, then I was all for it!

“Honestly? The more I look at this thing, the uglier it gets. I don’t think it has what it takes to make it big as an idol!”

I didn’t think I could take down the idol in one shot, though. Even a single all-out attack—self-destruction be damned—wasn’t going to cut it. The idol was as strong as a dungeon boss, and the three heads meant it had three spellstones.

“The wolf head is absorbing MP and doesn’t show any signs of running out soon. The eagle head keeps messing with the magic in the air. Meanwhile, the monkey’s the one managing all the idol’s skills.”

For every razor-tipped wing I dodged, something else came up to take its slashy place. Whether it was the wind, empty space, or a loose feather didn’t matter. Whatever it was, it acted like a range-extending sword to slash me wherever I went. At first, I thought I was simply misreading the spells the idol was casting, but no. This was a blade—air-cutting air. A blade of pure vacuum formed at the boundary between two patches of air. *Yeah, a hassle.*

“Ignore those slashes, chickenatrice. Just protect me against the wind. Got it?”

Cock-a-doodle-do!

The typhoon of invisible air-slicing wind made ribbons of the oxygen in the room. Jupiter Eye let me see the action. Even without Entanglement, I could still see this incoming danger.

“Be careful, Entanglement. That magic-scarfing wolf head could gobble you all up.”

And that monkey was a real pest! It spread a film of Water magic across the ground to cause a slipping hazard. Beyond that, it kept warping the floor. While it played these cheap tricks, it also set the eagle and wolf heads after me. Plus it kept smirking at me the whole time, the stinker!

“That dirty cheater of a monkey… Hydra, you know what to do!”

Hisss!

I recognized another incoming transparent air blade and ducked before leaping in, closing the gap between us, and parrying a vacuum blade. Unfortunately, the monkey checked my advance with its sword. It sprayed bullets at me, and as I deflected them all, I backed a few steps away. See, my goal the entire time was to wage a mid-range battle.

“Lizardisk! When that wolf head comes to take a chomp at me, you know what to do!”

Fisssk!

At the very same instant I stepped forward, the air-blade-wielding eagle and the magic-scarfing wolf attacked simultaneously. The monkey—oh! And here I should mention that it had Wisdom; I forgot—joined the other heads in opening their yawning mouths wide. The creature’s three tongues acted like a set of tuning forks, turning their howls into ultrasonic waves. It was unavoidable! The attack consumed the space in front of me and surged forward!

“Watch where you’re aiming that thing! And pipe down while you’re at it!”

I aimed the Universe Staff at the center of the cacophony and swung. The moment the waves’ echoes overlapped, I used Life or Death and pulverized the idol.

See, I already had an ace up my sleeve for this idol. I used Entanglement to coat myself in all my skills, blitzed up to the beast, and with a flash and a thunderous boom…doused all three heads in vinegar!

“Bird brain’s going to have a case of real sore eyes for a while. The wolf head is fighting the doggone awful scent of vinegar. And

while the monkey was distracted by all the noise and flashing lights, I stuck a crowbar-like instrument right in its brain pan! Turns out, if you attack all three heads at once, you *can* take the idol down in one go!"

All it took was a little pulverizing. Many of life's problems could be solved by smashing things with crowbar-like instruments, in fact. *Now that's a philosophy I can get behind!*

"Ha! The monkey really thought its (mind the caps—they're important) Wisdom could go toe-to-toe with my Wisdom? Did it think manipulating a few vacuums and blasting ultrasonic waves were anything special? Listen, I make two dungeon emperors tremble with my Vibration magic on the daily. I put the motion in the ocean to rock those two babes to sleep, and let me tell you, I knock them *out*!"

Soundwaves? Airwaves? No sweat for a teenage boy like me. So long as it was a kind of vibration, I had it on lock!

"Also, wait. Doesn't it only have three heads? Even if all of them open their mighty maws to make music, there's only three of them? I thought the town musicians of Bremen were supposed to be a group of four? You're one shy of a barbershop quartet, fella! No wonder I trounced it so easily. Never underestimate the power of a teenage boy whose Vibration magic has been refined into an art form!"

From there, I tore through the eagle still screeching over its sore eyes and lopped off the head of the wolf crying over its poor schnoz. The idol would have been powerful if it hadn't tried that group attack. It had put too much trust into the monkey's Wisdom skill. And then, of course, there was the issue of the eagle and the wolf. You just couldn't escape biology, y'know?

"There's the classic canine smell exploit, of course. And most birds have trouble seeing in the dark. Their pupils don't zoom well, so they struggle to adapt to drastic changes in light? Shoulda got yourself an owl head, idol."

Right from the start, the idol's weakness had been obvious to me: Stop all three heads at once with a simultaneous attack. Maybe the monkey's Wisdom skill wasn't so different from mine in the grand scheme of things. However, wisdom (in general) didn't mean

nothin' unless it was properly collected, sorted, and integrated into a bigger framework of knowledge. It was an insult to compare the cunning of a mere monkey to the modern-day high schooler. Not to mention, my Wisdom had plumbed the depths of the fountain of knowledge and learned techniques that could turn even dungeon emperors into quivering jelly. And oh lordy, was that quivering a sight to see! When those dungeon D-cups started shaking... No wonder I put in my best effort every night!

"On second thought, a boss like this is probably strong enough to cause real trouble for the girls... Still. That monkey was smirking at me. Of course I had to bash its smug face in."

The biggest and brightest of the three spellstones turned out to be a "Magatama of the Pseudosoul: A relic that grants an approximation of a human life." A three-stone magatama... That was probably what had brought this statue of a false idol to life.

"Not naming names, but d'you think this would jumpstart a certain hot girl? (Totally not talking about Sleeping Beauty.)"

Maybe not. I ran the question by Dancer Girl, and she just looked at me blankly. Now, when I tried to sneak a squeeze, *that* got a reaction (a glare) out of her.

"Welp, maybe it's for the best it didn't work out. A horny teenage boy putting an artificial soul inside a soulless girl's body is sorta... You know... I can hear the nasty rumors already! I can feel my poor, lifeless sex appeal sobbing from here!"

So was this item meant to be used on monsters? Or on people?

"Eh, whatever. I'm sure I'll find a use for it eventually. Here ya go, Wisdom. Do your worst."

Moving right along! Inside the treasure chest, I found the "Eternal Trinity Rings: Holds dominion over eternity, perpetuity, and permanence. Status Maintenance (hyper). Indestructability (hyper). Reinvigorating. Restoration. Restitution. Revival." It was a set of three rings made of gold, silver, and adamantite. It gave off a very hoity-toity feel, and I liked what its traits would do for my little self-destruction problem. The rest...seemed hellbent on distancing me even further from my human status.

I tried it on. It helped Alchemy transmute my body even more and boosted my Regeneration rate in battle. I could feel my body transforming again, which was like. Kinda worrying? But it promised to keep my healthy teenage-boy appendages in fine form, and I planned to put Reinvigorating to the test often and loudly in the wee hours of the morning!

"Yup, I'm always at a numerical disadvantage in the late-night 2v1 rumble royale, and I end up fighting an endless (and quite pleasant, actually) defensive battle against the onslaught they wage on me! Restoration and Restitution, do your best to hold down the fort and keep Mr. Elephant Trunk trumpeting away! With my new ring, I just might be able to outlast the brutal beating they always give me. I've never needed anything more in my life!"

Yup, best squirrel it away before Dancer Girl realizes she's in danger and confiscates it. What a crucial weapon in my arsenal for looking at arses!

DAY 114

LATE NIGHT

Expertly executed equipment egress…equals erotic evil?! Case closed!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

THE OLD MEN dropped like flies. Every time my dear Old Dude Slayer kissed their necks—with every strike, every swing—it raised a fresh spatter of blood and a guttural shriek.

The church knights sprang back to life unless killed completely. I couldn't lop off a limb and expect blood loss to finish the job. All that got me were sobs or screams. *Yeah, can't they shut up? They're making a racket.*

I didn't need to use Magic Entanglement against these fangless foes. Martial arts moves did the job just fine. The soldiers were flinching cowards, and in their terror, they milled about and tripped over one another. I mowed them down like a Weedwacker. These knights went into battle without reconciling themselves that fighting could mean death. Once their demise loomed on the horizon, fear overtook them and destroyed their ability to fight.

"Dancer Girl sure is late. I wonder if she got held up by enemy soldiers flirting with her again. Poor enemy soldiers… Dancer Girl is in a *baaad* mood right now, and she's the last person you want to make angry."

The enslaved beastfolk had been held in captivity here in the Cathedral for a long time. By the time we stumbled upon them, the light had gone out of their eyes. It looked like they had almost lost the will to live. I erased all of their most painful memories, but the emotions of anguish and sorrow still lingered within them.

The thing about *true* hypnotic suggestion—and, in turn, mind control—was that it couldn't be done without destroying someone's brain. Skills and magic were incredible, but even they couldn't heal a broken heart.

Anyway, it felt like I'd climbed fifty million stairs by this point. There were no dormitories this high up, but there was a glut of

storerooms with loot laid out and ripe for the taking. Yup—pre-sorted loot!

And as I went along scooping it all up, I bumped into a mooing herd of nasty old men. Calling them soldiers was a stretch, even if they had been ordered to line up in formation. The fear in their eyes told me exactly what they were. A slash from my sword would have been fatal for them. Their wounds would not heal themselves. Up until now, they had enjoyed the soldier life—lording it up, dispensing violence whenever they pleased—but now, fear made them tremble in their boots. They were safe within the Cathedral's walls, or so these arrogant bastards had always assumed. But that assumption had died, and with it, their arrogance. All that remained was a crowd of sniveling cowards. I would have felt pity for them if they weren't so stupid. I could have granted them mercy if only they hadn't committed such evil.

Even a reformed old dude is still an old dude. Yeah! Die for the sin of being born an old dude!

"Eeeek!"

"P-please, spare me!"

"No, no, you don't get it. I'm just brutally butchering and savagely slaughtering? Isn't that your MO? It's frightening to be on the other end of the sword, don'tcha think?"

Panic broke out, and the herd devolved into a mob. Now the old men found the courage to do more than just stand there and shiver. Well, courage was a strong word—they still lacked the determination to lay their lives on the line. Too bad, because they didn't have the skills to protect themselves either.

"Hmm, if it's not here, does that mean there's no hidden room either? But I'm three balls short of an Eternal Dragon?"

Even if a wish-granting dragon had chosen that moment to descend from the heavens, I prolly would have beaten it, called it a snake, stuffed it into my necklace, and conscripted it into laboring at my side hustles anyway. I mean, if a chicken and a lizard counted as snakes, then a dragon most certainly did! Moot point, though, since there was no dragon.

"Which means…I'm stuck making girls' panties myself!"

I had hoped to gain a fellow hustler in the women's undergarments manufacturing industry. Alas.

"The real issue's that I'm getting orders for preteen bras and panties now too. My sex appeal is in dire, nay, catastrophic straits. If only I could have laid that all at the feet of the Eternal Dragon… Come to think of it, why do the girls need new underwear all the darn time?!"

I had asked once already, only to be told it was a feminine mystery.

Anyway—*oh shit, behind me!* I didn't have time to turn and look. I whipped my Universe Staff out and swung it behind, just in time to lock weapons with a deadly magical sword. I readied the replica Universe Staff with my other hand, used my torso to hide it until the very last second, and swung it in a beautiful arc to land on…nothing. Empty air. *Uh-oh.* I was in for one hell of a fight.

Yeah, a fight against a knight! A knight in coal-black armor. I staggered back, checking a furious rain of blows—and that was when a black flash rent the air.

"Oh snap!"

Oh, y'know. Just a sword, casually thrust at ungodly speed. Merely a flash of steel too quick for the eye to follow. A trifling, brilliant display of swordsmanship as the black knight fired off three attacks in the time it took me to blink. No biggie. At the very last second, I parried two of the three, but the third slash grazed my armor. I only barely managed to catch it with the grip of my staff.

"Whew! You got me good. Yeah, did you Seal one of my skills? Problem is, I have too many! I have no clue which one you Sealed!"

Not Jupiter Eye. That was still working. Not Wisdom or Magic Entanglement either. Yeah, I could use pretty much everything just fine? So basically, that magic sword could Seal skills *and* equipment traits…but only one?

"Well…my Universe Staff has about twenty other dungeon weapons in it. There's pro'lly fifty traits in this bad boy alone. I don't think my number of skills is in the triple digits, but if we factor in all my traits… Yeah, I'm pushing a hundred easily."

The black knight leveled a gaze of pure determination at me. Those were the eyes of a person determined to exploit every scrap of power they had, a person whose desperation propelled them to fight to the death. They would make me die, so help them, said their eyes. They would bring me down if they had to kill themselves doing it. Now this—this was resolve born of desperation.

The knight was armored from head to toe. The suit was colored darkest black, just like the ebony sword held fast in their grip. A cape, shadows made cloth, swirled from their shoulders. They launched attack after attack like a blitz of deep purple lightning. I was battered in their sword flickering here, there, everywhere—all for the same goal: death, certain death.

"Uh, you know I'm not a creepy intruder, right? I'm merely an innocent teenage boy who happened to wander by in the middle of a top-secret infiltration-slash-spy mission. And let the record show that I've been recognized as a Saint? It's been acknowledged that I've never done anything wrong, like, ever?"

The knight's armor was so black it was sinister. Yeah, that was cursed kit for sure. The curse was actively gnawing away at the knight's body, and still the knight was dead set on killing me. However, their eyes weren't dull and corroded in their sockets like most cursed folks'. They were sad. Haunting. Those eyes were filled with the determination of someone who would see their will be done by all means necessary.

"Wait, hold up. As a teenage boy, I'm a big fan of thrusting my rod into things, but I don't appreciate other people skewering me with their big, mighty swords? And ma'am, I'd be down to stick my stick in you?"

A miasma wafted off the knight's armor like a plume of thick, black smoke. I needed to get that armor off before the miasma took possession of the knight's mind. But I got the impression from their obsession with this me-stabbin' session—*don't mess with that aggression!* When I tried to retreat, they matched me step for step. Their sword moved so quickly that soon I would have nowhere left to go. With every stabbing lunge, the knight drew me further back. And when the stabbing never let up for a moment, I was being

driven to kingdom come! Their swordplay was simple—almost too simple—hence the need for the knight's furious speed.

Finally, one blow connected—well, with the edge of my staff.

"Yikes, a Douglas sidewinder shot! Wait, who is this Douglas guy anyway? Thanks for making that ominous rattlesnake noise and alerting me to danger in time, hydra. But you better get outta here. This battle's too dangerous for you. Nope, no tangling with magic swords on my watch."

Jupiter Eye mapped the power coiling in the knight's legs—like a spring compressing before springing free—before they launched into action. This was the keystone of their incredible stabbing attack. It allowed them to dart forward in a perfect and powerful straight line. Their brilliant technique and inhuman leg strength powered the lightning speed of their strikes.

The knight channeled every bit of their strength into the tip of their sword, concentrating all the power into that single point. Now, if only I could check them at that point. No matter how perfect their stance, if I stopped them there, I could throw them off balance.

"I'm outta time…"

I combined my two Universe Staffs back into one and manifested the Seven-Branched Sword. My body began to scream in pain immediately. Sweat gushed from every pore.

Now it was just a race to see which was faster: my body merrily destroying itself or the curse consuming the knight. Honestly, I didn't know which one would win, and I didn't need to. I mean, if this was a race against time, why not simply slow time?

Everything oozed to a standstill. Even the pain shooting through me shuddered to a slow creep through my tranquilized nerves. With the help of my newly acquired Rod of Asclepius's 50% Intelligence boost, Wisdom ran faster than ever before. It slowed the world around me to a snail's pace.

As time itself moved in slow motion, my Dash-Anklet-induced super speed meant I, too, moved no more than at an agonizingly sluggish plod. However, my body was decaying at a rapid pace. If I was out of time, why not stop time? Or the next best thing? I had

close to an eternity to play with. It only ended when my body finally gave out on me.

“Hwah!”

I had to hand it to the knight—their thrusting technique was superb. However, I was a teenage boy who spent his evenings moonlighting as a woodpecker thrusting, lusting, and busting in two dungeon emperors!

It was time to put an end to this. Yeah, end it once and for all. Our poor bodies couldn’t hold on much longer. In the blink of an eye that lasted an eon, I turned from a stationary figure to a speck moving infinitesimally fast. Yes. I used Life or Death.

“Yeah, ’cause I already saw right through you?”

The knight’s sword extended farther than I thought possible, faster than Future Sight could keep up with. Their speed boggled the eyes and would have forced any lesser fighter off-balance. It was a brilliant technique. It was art.

“But I can dodge it just fine? I mean, that’s basically the fundamentals of tongbeiquan.”

So I returned the favor with a staff thrust of my own. One end clasped firmly in one gloved hand, I shot the staff forward at the speed of light.

Just as rapidly, the knight darted back. Within an instant, they understood that I’d used Mimicry to copy their attack. What’s more, they didn’t let it unsettle them for even a milli-instant. They simply dodged right back into attack position again.

There was a horrifying moment when I was overextended and exposed. Oh, and the knight leaped right on that. Before I could pull my arm back, they launched a desperate attack of their own. They knew my attack too well—it was an exact copy of theirs. So naturally…they fell for my trick! Yeah, the trick of it being just a glove all along? The knight, watching the glove fall in slow mo, realized the staff was still in my hand. They hurried to pull back and stumble away, away from the glove and Seven-Branched Sword, pinwheeling away at a fraction of true speed.

Fooled ya. Yup, I played ’em.

Anyway, that basically decided the whole battle. Yeah, I won?

“That’s the way the world works! Whoever pulls off the most shocking trick is almost always the winner!”

My left hand, now glove-free, stretched out and closed the gap I hadn’t been able to circumvent earlier. My bare fingers brushed the cursed armor. In an instant, the curse shot up my arm, staining the whole appendage black. But who cared when I had finally made contact with the knight?

“Bengquan!”

This strike—taking a half step and slamming the force into the opponent—was one of the fundamental techniques of martial art called *xingyiquan*. It was a basic thrust sometimes called Half-Step Fist. According to legend, famous martial artist Guo Yunshen once claimed that Half-Step Fist could let him defeat anyone under heaven.

“Argh!”

My right hand struck the armor; my left hand mirrored its twin. At the same moment, I took a half step forward with my left foot, resulting in an ultra-close-range attack. Ultra-compressed stance, ultra-small step, an ultra-small thrust…sent shockwaves from my qi and magic smashing through the armor, curse and all.

“Bengquan is hard to dodge ’cause there’s so little movement. There’s no big wind-up motion, y’know? Opponents rarely get their guard up in time. Bengquan also concentrates all of the spiraling forces in the core into a single clean hit. That’s the secret to its efficacy.”

And even if my left hand was bare, my right hand had the Spearshield Gauntlet with the “Nullifies physical and magical defense” trait. I also had the Brass Knuckles, which I’d imbued with Holy magic. And thank goodness for that! This fight would’ve been a cock-up without it.

“Yeah, speaking of…”

See, the attack stripped off the curse, and the Plunder Glove took the cursed armor off with it. Underneath was a curse-blackened but otherwise stark naked and sexy bunny rabbit beastfolk woman! What the hell?!

“It wasn’t my fault, officer! Why the hell is she naked under her armor?! Don’t tell me that’s a kink thing!”

She wasn’t a black rabbit. Naturally black, I mean. The blackness swathing her form was a byproduct of the curse’s consumption.

“Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay, let’s not panic, let’s keep it cool, let’s keep the blood *flowing*, let’s not get it *stuck in one spot*, deep breaths, deep breaths?! A-and use Holy magic to…to… Hydra, bring me that staff! I need the Rod of Asclepius. Stat!”

Her heartbeat was fading. The life was draining from her face even as I spoke. Even then, some desperation gripped her. She had fought with the courage of one resolved to die, but something—some wish—made her cling to life. Oh, and lest we forget, she was also drop-dead gorgeous with no clothes on!

“Chickenatrice! Lizard! I need your Curse and Poison powers now. Thank you, thank you. Hydra, can you lend me a hand with your Revival skill? I said hand, not tentacle. No, I am fully aware that she has a beautiful body deserving of a tentacle touch or ten, but now is not the time. She needs a Regeneration and an Antidote. Oh god, her MP just took a nosedive… Mushroom! Gimme a shroom! This girl needs a fat mushroom in her mouth ASAP!”



I charged forward into the fray against the naked girl's curse, armed with Cursebreaking and Antidote skills of my own. I didn't care if they failed to shield me, honestly. So long as the curse left that woman alone, it could curse me all it wanted.

"...I say that, but the chickenatrice gobbled up the curse herself. What is poison but fodder for a hungry hydra and lizardisk anyway? Now, now, tentacles. Behave yourselves. Tentacles and a naked bunny girl are the only ingredients one needs for a seriously graphic scene! Wait, you're telling me my tentacles can use Cursebreaking too?"

As we cast Antidote and Purification, we healed her with Curing and Revival. My sacred staff kicked in and helped purify the curse, zapping it into the cursey coffin. On top of all that, the Sacred Severing Staff's Seal trait removed and cordoned off the last of her cursed equipment... Of *course* that was the only reason I stripped her! What else was I supposed to do? Leaving her armor on would've been disastrous! For her. Clearly. Yes.

Incidentally, she had bunny ears, but there was something kinda...wolfy about her face. She was also ridiculously strong. She could've bench-pressed the beastfolk king.

"Wait. Is this the twins' mom? They said they didn't have any other siblings, right? So this can't be a long-lost older sister. Wait, what the hell is their mom doing trapped in a Cathedral curse? And why does she have some serious melons?! Oh no. Dancer Girl is going to come back any minute, and she's going to drag me in her diary!"

Yikes!!!

"Hey, wait a minute. How come a flawlessly executed rescue culminates in my sex appeal sinking to even more subterranean depths?!"

Objectively speaking, the optics of this situation weren't... great... It was impossible to see this scene as anything other than a sex crime! Or something?

DAY 114

LATE NIGHT

Ma'am, call me a curse, 'cause I wanna nibble on you.

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

ONE DAUGHTER KIDNAPPED; the other, hot in her pursuit. One daughter stolen when trying to usher our tribe to safety; the other, willing to fight to her last breath in defense of our troubled race. Both were daughters any mother would have been proud of. Both, my dearest treasures. How could a mother live with herself if she let her children be stolen from her? What mother was I if I did not come to the rescue of such brave, beautiful daughters?

So I gave chase. I ran in desperate pursuit on land after the boat that had spirited my daughters away. Along the way, I happened upon a group of fellow beastfolk being carted off to the Merchant Kingdom. The moment I freed them from their bonds, my rabbit instincts activated, and I knew—my girls were taken *here*. This way. To the Theocracy.

From then, I traveled only under cover of nightfall. I dug myself pits to sleep in during the day before continuing my unrelenting march. At long last, I found a group of kidnapped beastfolk children—however, my daughters were not among their number. So I raced on. The kidnappers outpaced me, and the Cathedral's doors clanged shut behind my children. I strove to gain entrance to the cursed building, only for it to sap me of my powers and skills.

"But what of it? If my strength should fail me, then my speed will take me to my children! If I have no skills to employ, then I shall fight with the fruits of my training. You'll have to forgive me—I've never been in the business of losing battles, and I don't intend to start now!"

With that as my war cry, I plunged into the Cathedral and fought my way through the hordes of soldiers inside. I fought like a woman possessed, for these knights were like nothing I had ever seen. Every wound I left on them healed instantaneously. There was only one of me against the unrelenting sea of humanity, and I soon

grew exhausted. It was all I could do just to hold my ground. We were locked in a stalemate. With my children in their clutches, I dared not provoke them. Nor could I ever surrender.

It was then that the oddest thing happened—the soldiers, who had fought me in an endless wave to prevent me from taking respite, suddenly fell back. I was not fool enough to think it was any relief from the barrage of poison and magic attacks. Wary, I stood tall on my aching legs and kept a watchful eye for what was coming next—a trap? A person? But there was nothing.

That was, until a man came to negotiate with me. He told me he would free my children if I slew a fellow Cathedral interloper. He would provide me with the necessary arms, he said, but I would be required to use them. I didn't trust any human. Not one bit. I opened my mouth to tell him where he could shove his offer, but the man laid his hand on the Tablet of the Covenants—one of the Cathedral's holiest relics—and swore to uphold his promise.

I knew it was too good to be true, but I saw no other way to win back my daughters. Besides, I had full faith that I could beat the aforementioned intruder. So I, too, laid my hand on the Tablet and promised to uphold my end of the bargain. Every puffed-up braggart of a holy man who had sworn and broken vows on the Tablet had not lived to tell the tale, so I saw wisdom in this move.

Of course, it was a trap. Now that I had made my oath, I could not refuse the set of cursed armor they forced on me. What good were my demands to let me walk away free if I died in the act of saving my daughters? Oh, I had precious little time. I needed to see my children on the way to safety before death claimed me. I could not—would not—die, I swore. Not before I rescued my daughters and saw their beloved faces one last time.

I searched, and oh how I searched. I searched for the intruder who left no trace of himself, no whisper of a footstep. How curious, then, that I discovered this master of stealth from the thundering crash of the Cathedral falling down around my ears. The rows of dormitories collapsed in seconds. The cluster of rooms vanished like they had never been more than figments of the imagination.

It's to save my children. It's to rescue my daughters! I reminded myself. But this intruder, why—he was no more than a boy. Human

as he was, he couldn't have been much older than my daughters. He was just a little boy with black hair.

He was garbed in ankle-length robes of a darker black than this devil's armor, whose curse was even now chewing through my flesh. His cowl was the color of a raven's feathers. It hid most of his face, but what remained was unmistakably the features of a child. A child, yes—a child clutching a wooden stick.

My heart cried out to this child: *I am sorry.*

It went against all my honor as a warrior. As a mother, it filled me with deepest shame. But the lives—the futures—of the children of my tribe lay in my hands. And so, as painful as it was, I did what I must.

If rancor is to be my reward, then so be it. Who wouldn't have cursed the child slayer? Who wouldn't have looked in horror at the monster who stole the future, the lifeblood, from one so young? *For that, my little one, I am sorry. At least you shall not be alone in death, for soon I will join you.*

I knew I would never be forgiven for my crime, but if nothing else, I vowed to die with an apology on my lips. I swore to protect my children with remorse graven in my heart. If nothing else, I would grant this boy the mercy of a quick, painless death. I moved on swift, silent feet and stabbed him in the back—an attack so quick, by the time he noticed, he would be dead. Or...I attempted to, I suppose, but the boy caught my strike without ever turning his head. It was then that I realized what a large and very, very frightening world we lived in.

My warrior's blood burbled through my veins. My curse-blackened skin thrummed with heat, and a growl of glee ripped itself from the back of my throat. After I had beaten my husband—a man who won a name for himself as strongest of all the beastfolk—in battle, my inner bloodlust had settled into slumber awaiting a future outlet. Now? Oh, now it awoke.

My latent wild animal soul thrummed to life as it realized here, finally, was a worthy opponent. My blackened and putrefying body shivered with the final surge of ecstasy it would ever feel. But as strong—as thrilling—as my opponent was, I knew I would win. I

could not afford this boy any handicap, not if I wanted to save my girls. I would not enjoy this fight. I would simply see to it that I won.

“Hyah!”

I swiped, but the boy dodged. He sidestepped every swing, parried every slash, and knocked aside every feverish thrust. I unleashed a furious burst of speed and unloaded every technique I had devised and perfected, but not a one of them connected against the boy.

If I felt horror, it was only matched by my delight. I had reached such heights, I had thought I had no further to climb. Now, I faced an opponent who stood atop an even loftier summit looking down on me in disdain. His return thrust whispered to me, *You still have much to learn. You still have new strengths to find. You know nothing, and you are weak.* This boy, this human boy, lifted the scales from my eyes.

“Uh, you know I’m not a creepy intruder, right? I’m merely an innocent teenage boy who happened to wander by in the middle of a top-secret infiltration-slash-spy mission. And let the record show that I’ve been recognized as a Saint? It’s been acknowledged that I’ve never done anything wrong, like, ever?”

He made no sense to me. I must have been too shaken up; I even failed to graze him. I fought as well and bravely as I could, but no jab connected. This singular technique was my life’s work, and he danced around it with ease.

His eyes were pools of night as they bored into me. Not once did I shake his ebon gaze.

The fight was euphoria. It was everything I had ever dreamed of. I battled with all my talents, and he threw them all back in my face. It was bliss…

Alas, I eventually felt myself giving way to the curse. My time was near.

My mind quieted. The tension left my limbs. As the world around me descended into silence, every instinct told me that this was the moment. This was my chance to strike with the speed I had been searching for my entire life. The power in my legs sharpened

into a single line, and in a flash, I flew forward with a celerity unlike any I'd ever known. *Now!*

"Yikes, a Douglas sidewinder shot! Wait, who is this Douglas guy, anyway? Thanks for making that ominous rattlesnake noise and alerting me to danger in time, hydra. But you better get outta here. This battle's too dangerous for you. Nope, no tangling with magic swords on my watch."

He stopped it. He. Stopped. It. He touched my sword with no more than the tip of his staff, and with that singular touch alone, my almighty blow came to a screeching halt. If my sword thrust had been the mightiest technique I had ever mustered, then what else remained to me?! If my swiftest sword salvos were thwarted with the tip of a staff, then what could I have possibly done to this—this *child*, this puny level-26 boy?! And was I losing my wits, or had that been a snake darting out of his body for the barest of moments?!

My muscle memory was too deeply ingrained in me to fail me now. I reacted on instinct and struck again without the barest hesitation. I had hoped to catch him off guard in the wake of his movement, but once again, he evaded my sword like this was child's play.

What did I expect? He had barely shifted. His guard never once dropped. The boy merely stood there, almost stupefied, in a self-possessed posture bordering on insouciant leisure. That was, until he moved.

The staff in his hands contorted itself into something resembling a sword—a sword bearing down on me in a form I knew well. He moved just like I did. Yes, this was my technique, every stroke of it mine—every movement reaching the ideal I had sought my entire life.

Except, no… It was something greater. He let all the strength of his limbs coil within him like a spring, and then he used my technique as the conduit through which he unleashed his fury. So too did he improve it with overlapping circular motions to describe a spiral in the air. Here were heights I had never imagined, summits I had never dared to dream of. If I had thought I had climbed high, I was sorely mistaken. I was only wandering in the valley at the

mountain's feet... But all that mattered little when I had my children to save!

Even if it killed me, even if I had only the slightest chance of succeeding, I clung to my barest of hopes. If my eldest daughter made it this far to find her sister, then perhaps she could do what I could not. If this was as far as I could go, then so be it. Here and now, then, I would throw everything I had into this fight. I would sacrifice my rotting form and push myself to do the impossible. I. Would. Win. I wanted to win so, so badly. I wanted to go down *fighting for my daughters*!

The boy jabbed at me with more skill than I'd ever possessed, but the basic technique was the same. And if that was identical, then so too was his reach. The moment he retracted his arms was my opportunity to strike. I could stop him, yes, but I could not stab him myself—not at that precise moment. Once I was in range, there was no hope for me. But if we died then and there on each other's swords...well, then I would have fulfilled my duty.

But his sword reached farther than it should have! For a moment, I thought perhaps I had misjudged the distance between us. Yet as I made to back away, my animal instincts screamed: *Duck! Now!*

I dropped to my knees, immediately destroying my fighting stance, and the boy's staff whistled harmlessly over my head. Too late, I realized it wasn't a weapon that had almost touched me. He had...pulled off his glove and thrown it at me?! I was stunned for the barest of moments, and that was all the time he needed. Before I knew it, his bare hand was touching my breastplate. Dumbly, it crossed my mind, *He isn't carrying a weapon*—but that was when a violent shockwave tore through me. The boy's eyes met mine. It almost looked like he was *chastising* me. *Give up,* his eyes said, with a force too stern for me to argue with. Yet, for all that, I was struck by the kindness in his gaze...

And then my body, my curse-eaten and explosion-rattled body...felt warm. Warm. *Ah. So this is what dying feels like,* I thought. *It's like a dream.* My eyelids fluttered open...to be greeted with a sight that made no sense whatsoever.

Writhing tendrils of miasma wound their way up the boy's arms as he stared directly into my eyes. I flinched; I stiffened down to my soul. The fury in his gaze was so all-consuming I knew I could never escape it, even had I fled into death. He glared murderous hatred at the curse entangling my limbs. Perhaps in terror at the madness in his eyes, the vile curse dissipated into dust.

He took the curse into his own body, the black climbing higher and higher up his arms, and he never once paid it any attention as he devoted himself to healing me. I was a beastfolk woman; he, a human boy. Yet he put my life before his. Oh, what a fool I was to trade two children's lives for another, different species as we may have been. I…I… *I'm so sorry.*

We beastfolk were not innocent. We loathed the humans with as much vitriol as they—in the act of hatred, we two species were kin. This boy was the sole exception. His dark eyes were an objective mirror, showing the world the way it was, and in the pools of those eyes drowned all poison, all curses—yes, and all hearts as weak as mine. Oh, there was no defeating such a foe as him. I should have known from the start that I'd never had a chance.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. It had nothing to do with power. Nor technique. Nothing to do with heights we'd achieved, no… It was sheer determination that decided our match.

The difference in our determination was like the leagues that parted the heavens from the soil. I hung my hopes on miracles and was ready to forsake my life to save my children. But the boy, oh—the boy stood resolute. He chose to ensure that his *will would be done*. He chose to destroy anything that might stand in the way of his goals. Should fate have other ideas for him, he would slaughter fate where it stood.

Forsaking his life was never in this boy's mental calculus. He refused to accept that he might ever be defeated, might someday be cast down by a stronger foe, might one day slip into the sweet embrace of death. His cruel and unyielding selfishness refused to allow himself death, and through that, he would see his aims achieved with nothing so much as resembling remorse.

He would never allow himself to run from any pain, any torment. His ego would twist him, would bend the world around

him to meet his will, would warp destiny itself. There was no winning against egotism elevated to the point of madness. All the brute force and cunning artifice in the world were rendered useless before a mind unlike any our world had ever seen.

Bathed in a gentle light, I let myself drift into sleep. My eyes were still open, and in them was the boy, broken, bloody, and blackened as the curse swallowed his entire form. But I didn't fear for him. No, I had nothing to fear anymore.

Since long, long ago, the beastfolk tribes had taught every cub and pup the three most important things for every warrior: heart, technique, and physique. This was a lesson I had thought I knew well, but really, at the end of the day, I didn't. I didn't know anything at all. I had no idea a heart could be such a powerful thing. Such a *frightening* thing. *Heart, technique, and physique.* If the heart was lost from the very beginning, then what good was all the technique and physique in the world?

In my dreamlike trance, I thought back to my youth. For as long as I could recall, I remembered being teased for being the most headstrong and spirited beastfolk girl in all the tribes. Now I wished I could turn back the clock and respond. *No,* I would have said. *I'm just a spoiled brat. True spirit is egotism strong enough to change the world. True spirit is the will to transform destiny.* Oh, how I wished I could tell them of this new wonder.

I wondered how my girls would react when I spoke to them of this miracle. Oh, if only they could have met him for themselves!

DAY 114

LATE NIGHT

I thought the twins would be happy about this touching mother and child reunion. Instead, they're mad about the kind of touching I did!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

A MULTITUDE OF SLURPING, writhing, devouring snakes wormed their way across her perky, yet still pliable, pair of curse-soaked breasts. The reptiles explored further, slithering down her elastic abdomen slowly regaining its former pale shade, nibbling on the curse and lapping up the poison in the region of her lower belly, braiding themselves about her feminine form. Periodic (agonized, presumably) moans slipped from her lips. She shuddered and twitched—one must assume this was all very painful—from the poison gnawing its way through her flesh… Oh yeah, and I had my tentacles out, too!

"Ooh, ooh, ooooooohhhhnnnnnnnn!"

Snake tongues labored over her succulent thighs, slavering over every patch of skin until not one speck of black remained. She was in bad shape. Even now, she yowled like a wildcat, suggesting that she was poisoned very badly indeed. Alas, there was no cutting corners in proper medical treatment… *Let's add another snake. Just what the doctor ordered!*

"Hwaah! Nnn… Ahh… Nyyaaahh!"

The snake tongues found their way into every orifice, every wrinkle and fold, refusing to let even the most persistent dregs of the curse go unswallowed. They swarmed over her. They wriggled into every available cavity. The curse had an iron grip on her, judging by the way she tossed and turned; her pert buttocks strained with every buck of her hips and every arch of her bare, lily-white back. *I think she's okay now…? But better safe than sorry. One more scrub, then. Take it from the top, boys! Oh, what the hey? Let's let the chickenatrice and lizardisk join in too.*

"Yiiiiih! Auh… Hyaaaaaah, ah, ah, ahh!"

Gosh, that woman was a screamer. There must have been more poison in her system after all. And boy, only a rabbit's bits could bounce up and down like that...

"She's still heaving and twitching and spasming! Must be the curse!"

"It's you, tickling her, with chicken feathers! Her curse, lifted, long before this!"

Oh, and now she lost consciousness and went limp. Welp. She was still convulsing, though? I was sure I had done a most thoroughly thorough purification job on her, so she should have been curse-free. In theory. Why was she still yelping, then? I couldn't detect anything wrong? No status ailments? She seemed fine? Yeah, she was all healed. It was time to call it a wrap and heal my bleeding eyelids before my blindfold tore them clean off. *Ow?*

"Thanks to the hard, hard efforts of my snakes, Rod of Asclepius, and Holy magic buffs, that went faster than I anticipated!"

On the flipside, no matter how much I healed her, I couldn't get the twitching and panting to stop. Even after she fainted? Maybe she needed a little more wiggly healing action after all.

"Maybe she's just feigning fainting? Faint chance of that, but ain't it quaint to faint just as my tentacles acquaint themselves with her tai—I didn't say anything! Yeah, call that a feint?"

"Nnnnnnnhhhh, nnnyaaah! Ahh, ahh, hhh, uffhh, aafhh!"

She certainly *seemed* healthy, what with how she was arching so hard she was basically performing a reverse plank, but there was no change on the twitching front... No doubt the epic battle betwixt her mortal form and the curse left her sapped of all energy and strength. *Awfully healthy-looking twitching, though.*

"Eeeenh, ahh! Nnnyaah...ah! Ahh!!!"

"Say what? Up the ante?"

"Yeep?!"

Weirdly enough, she kept mumbling something in her state of unconsciousness. "The children are downstairs," she said. "Rescue them," she said. She was, like, bucking and heaving the whole time, so I very nicely responded, "Uh, you're too late? I kinda got all the

beastfolk kiddos to safety, and by that I mean I ripped them off bigtime? Yeah, Dancer Girl wasn't late getting back just for funsies? She was seeing the beastfolk kiddos to safety first? Which is why she walked in at exactly the wrong moment when I was tentacle'ing up your naked, defenseless body, and she started taking notes even though I didn't do anything wrong, and now I am being accused of all sorts of undefined crimes which is really not a pleasant position to be in, let me tell you, and I could very much use some help so I was wondering where I should send my SOS signal to?"

Then her lips, warped in a rictus of pain 'n agony 'n stuff, trembled, and she cried out again. Must have been having a bad dream? Was she worried about the twins, maybe?

"Nah, Rabbit Girl and Wolf Girl are fine. *Fiiine* fine, if you catch my drift. After they ate way too much candy and did a whole buncha one more sets I kinda got 'em naked and took all their measurements with a lotta oopsy-doopsy my-tentacles-slipped business and there might've been, uh, a miscalculation in the stomach region, but more importantly there was a growth spurt in the bust and badonk region, which is kinda an issue because they're too young, but one slip of the tongue and I'll admit I'm sprung? Anyway, long story short, we're keeping an eye on them for now? If you want to get them back, press 1? To hear other options, press 2? Beep beep?"

That finally made her settle down. She was making a facial expression popularized by Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, but she also had this weird sort of smile on top of it. That just went to show how worried she was about her kiddos. *Good for you, Mama. Good for you.*

"What're your thoughts, Dancer Girl? The way I see it, the church soldiers are well entrenched on the upper floors and have lots of nasty surprises up their sleeves. We could fight our way to the top, but it will take hours. Should we finish scouting the place? Or should we take Mama Rabbit home, get some breakfast, and have a breather? What do you mean, 'What's for dessert?'? Do you not have a crepe in your mouth as we speak? N-no, I meant to say there'll be *lots* of dessert with breakfast! I'm so sorry! Please don't write anything down!"

Going back to the violent old dude's house it was. It was so late at night, morning was just a few hours off. Dessert at this time of day qualified as more of a late-night snack. Dancer Girl's snack of choice was mochi, apparently. Awfully fattening stuff, moch—

"No, no! I'll give you *lots* of mochi, I promise! Let's put down the pen, shall we? I shall not say another word on the subject! We all know that you have a second stomach just for mochi. Yes, located somewhere around stomach roll two or three—No, no, that's not what I meant! Shutting up! Shutting up!!! Just a teenage boy indulging in a bit of speculation about the notion of aesthetics! Very Kafu Nagai of me. I'm a master of the demimonde!"

Furious notetaking!

I did a quick, cursory lookie-loo of the rest of the Cathedral before calling it a day. X-Ray Vision couldn't see through the walls, so I used Area Analyze and Clairvoyance instead. For a building designed to be resistant to magic, it was plenty physically robust too. Not to mention chock-full of physical traps I made sure to physically trigger.

Basically, everything from here on up was designed to kill the monsters that survived the magical defenses on the floors below. These were trap floors to kill dungeon kings or dungeon emperors. No wonder they were full of pitfalls.

"The guy who built this place really pulled out all the stops. They *seriously* did their homework. They figured out how to fight a dungeon emperor they stood no chance of beating."

This place was a fortress designed to seal in a dungeon emperor—a building too wily and deceptive to be called genius; too frenetic to be described as a work of art. Its final floors eschewed the use of magic and whittled down the monster hordes further with its carefully concocted floor plan. And also the pitfalls that were, like, everywhere.

Those pitfalls were what made the whole plan so effective, see. There was pit after pit. The place was pitted worse than that first ultimate dungeon after I was done with it. The fall damage would weaken any mighty foe and, eventually, bury them under all the heavy rubble.

The Cathedral was a tomb for a dungeon emperor. Maybe as a means to work out some personal grudge, maybe as a shield for the Theocracy—hell, I didn't know—this place was a death trap designed to take down a dungeon denizen before they ever saw the light of day outside. Everything was in service of that purpose.

The powers of the various relics in their hidden rooms masked it, but this place was little more than a ruin. The years had rotted it away, leaving it all but a husk.

It guzzled enormous amounts of power to maintain its systems and bled the Theocracy dry of magic. Right now, its precious restorative functions were being wasted on dragging out the lives of a group of senile septuagenarian squatters. The dungeon seal was weakening; its true purpose was being lost to time. The Cathedral was on the cusp of collapse.

"Scary concept, huh? Who would've thought of fighting monsters with pitfalls? Especially full-blown dungeon kings or dungeon emperors. You know what's even cooler? There's a mechanism here that acts on the monsters' subconsciouses, guiding them up and up the stories of the Cathedral. Isn't that something else? I bet this would work in practice. I bet this could kill just about anything…"

Except for a dungeon emperor. As awesome as the Cathedral was, it couldn't stack up with the dungeon emperors I knew. Granted, I had a pretty small sample size from which to make this assessment, but still…even at the height of its power, the Cathedral wouldn't have defeated the dungeon emperors as I knew them. Not with the brutal power levels they possessed prior to using Servitude on them. Now that my dungeon emperors were well-versed in more cunning tricks, they were even less likely to fall into these traps. Hell, the dungeon emperors sprung traps on me all the time.

"Yeah, 'cause the girls keep giving them ideas!"

That was enough adventuring for one night. We headed back to the violent old dude's house, me carrying Mama Rabbit on my back. The rescued beastfolk girls mobbed us the moment they stepped over the threshold. As terrified of me as they were, they were more concerned about the unconscious woman I was carrying. And then…

“Mom?! What—what are you doing here? How did you manage to make it this far into the Theocracy?”

“Waaaah, Mooooooom! Thank you for coming to save us… Look at what’s happened to you?”

The twins hugged her, sobbing. Their cheeks shook with grief; they voiced their sorrow in screams. The sight of their mother, so transfigured, made them howl in tearful lament.

“Mr. Haruka,” they both wailed, “why the *hell* is our mother passed out in a suggestive outfit?!”

Oh good, she really was their mom! *Whew, that was a close one.* Had my Magic Hands slipped three times in a row, I would’ve accidentally started a mommy-and-me tentacle play group! Then I would’ve been branded with the Player title, instantly killing my sex appeal. Yeah, beastfolk were not to be messed with!

“I mean, *obviously* I couldn’t leave her stark naked. Think of the danger to my sex appeal! For once, I read the room and realized it wasn’t appropriate to make her an outfit from scratch while we were still in the heart of enemy territory. So I took what I had on hand and tweaked it to fit! Aren’t I so thoughtful? Yes, yes, I deserve all the praise and none of the blame. Because it fits just right? And doesn’t she look fetching in it?”

What was so bad about a super sexy pit babe outfit, right? I wasn’t about to let those toned, ripe, adult charms go to waste! So I vacuum sealed her into a silver leotard. Heh heh!!!

“Poor Mooooom!” *Gross sobbing*

The twins completely ignored that I had so thoughtfully sidestepped the mommy-and-me tentacle play group problem and outfitted her in my spare stock of off-the-rack wonders. Huh?! Why were they mad at me?!

“All I did was strip her, rescue her, heal her, tentacle her, clothe her, and carry her home!”

I did nothing wrong! Never! Not once in my entire life!

“Wha—are you passing notes?! What did you just write, Dancer Girl? Gah! I bribed you into silence, but the twins fell outside the scope of our contract! You got me in my blind spot! This is a

reminder of how important it is to read the full terms and conditions before signing anything!”

“Wrote that, this is, exactly what it looks like. She was naked, then tentacles, went in her mouth, and then—*omph, nom nom nom*.”

“Okay, this time you really were just standing there with your mouth open waiting for me to shut you up. You weren’t even hiding it.”

It was a crime of premeditated conscience, as Little Miss Snitch knew her mouth would be plugged for her troubles. What a delightfully delicious crime!

“What did you do to our mother?”

“I-I mean, she is more well-endowed than us, but…in terms of yout—mmrrmph!”

“Everything written on that note is false! It may be objectively true, but it’s misinterpreted and full of personal biases! It runs counter to my subjective truth! According to the testimony of an unrelated third party—subjectively speaking, that is—I am a perfectly innocent teenage boy. And, in hindsight, I didn’t do anything wrong!”

What were these accusations?! And why were the twins glaring at me alongside Dancer Girl? Where had they picked up that trick? The Cathedral? What was this, the Glare School for Girls?

“I don’t mind the touching family reunion, but there’s no call for those harsh glares! Could I get a tender, loving glare instead? It’s not like I mind being glared at like this, but it’s kinda, y’know, uncomfy?”

Glaaaare.

That was when the twins’ mom finally came around. Considering how long she was out, she must have been exhausted internally even after her body was healed.

Despite her fatigue, she popped right up and immediately gave me a deep bow. She was still a bit woozy, but the sight of her well again made her kiddos sigh in relief, and they pulled their unsteady mother into their arms to sob their eyes out. The family had a lot to catch up on, so I made them a tasty mushroom-filled feast, whipped up a smorgasbord of desserts, and left them to it.

This was one reunion that didn't need any humans in attendance. I made tracks, being human myself. I mean—I was human, right?

"Hmmm... *Hm m m m m m m!*"

I went back to my room to draw blueprints. The Cathedral's layout was so elegant I could visualize all the components Jupiter Eye had failed to see. Anything designed with purpose could be reverse engineered by working backward. I simply had to understand the guiding principles first. The more perfect the plan, the easier the process. The freer of errors, the easier to parse. Now that I had scouted out the Cathedral, I understood its inner workings. I knew what it was, and here's a hint—the answer wasn't a Cathedral.

"It's an upside-down Tower of Babel. It's a dungeon flipped on its head."

The Cathedral was devised in such a way to draw out the dungeon emperor, bring them to the highest floor of the building, and squish them flat. When I approached Wisdom with the same problem, it popped out an identical blueprint. Yeah, *I* would have built a Cathedral just like this had I been in the builder's shoes.

Therefore, I was sure that the few parts of the Cathedral Jupiter Eye hadn't perceived were laid out just so. The top floor, also known as the final stretch before reaching the pope, was the final dungeon emperor defense.

"Hmm, maybe I should send Dancer Girl out on an errand. Yeah, go kill all the church knights besieging the castle, go into town with Stalker Lady, and hunt down all the Inquisitors there."

Freeing up the old dude to liberate the capital, y'know?

"The girls'll probably go into battle this morning. Could you get everything ready to meet them? I dropped something in the Cathedral; I gotta go back and grab it. Don't worry. I'll be fine. All the trouble tonight was 'cause I didn't know where to go. But now I do. So it's a-okay?"

I had stuff to grab. Questions to answer. Things to learn, places to find. Places that were best found without Dancer Girl around... *I think. Don't quote me on that one.*

Miss Armor Rep and Slimey ceded the position of Haruka Chaperone to Dancer Girl for a reason—to meet Sleeping Beauty.
The past, see—it's nothing more than what's brought us to where we are today. Forget the past. All that matters is what we do with the time we've got now.

DAY 115

EARLY MORNING

Is that sugar I smell, or is it trouble? Either way, the girls must be back!

AT THE GATES OF THE HOLY CITY IN THE THEOCRACY

WE LIBERATED ONE TOWN after another, our eyes constantly trained on what lay ahead. We freed every town on our list, rescued every village that begged for our aid. We wiped out the last pockets of the church armies scattered across the countryside. And then there it was, just visible off in the distance—the capital of the country, the holy city, the metropolis. Aryuca. At a word from General Shalliceres, Arianna-san dispatched orders to our army. She had come into her own as commanded.

"Aryuca is within our sights! All companies are to disperse and reform in battle lines. You will follow my signals. One drum beat means echelon formation. Two drumbeats, V formation. Three, wedge formation. I expect every one of you to mind your positions at all times!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

"See to your equipment, soldiers. This is it—the final battle. You must be ready for anything!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

We had decimated the church's eastern armies, leaving only the western forces and those stationed in the capital to resist us. Despite that, the lighthearted mood we had enjoyed throughout our march began to wane. Shalliceres-san barked orders at us, and we complied, intent on carrying out Arianna-san's plans perfectly. We were no longer facing ragtag troops scattered pell-mell across the countryside. This, we realized, was a battle against a real army. We hadn't suffered any major losses thus far, but that was about to change. Casualties were inevitable now. Here was where the real fight began.

"The Third Church Knight Regiment has taken the field, ma'am!"

“Seventh and Eighth Regiments as well, ma’am. That’s three regiments in total.”

“The Third Regiment is the bulk of their strength. Tell me their position, now!”

The linchpins of the church’s army were the First and Third Knight Regiments. The church had ten knight regiments in total, but only eight consisted of combatants—the Ninth was a training force; the Tenth, a logistics and guard force; the Second, a special operations defense force. The rest of the army were regional troops, and of those, the bulk had defected to us or were now under siege at the royal palace as enemies of both the state and the church. That left only a few regiments to guard the pope—just the personal armies of him and his cronies.

“The Third Regiment is the rearmost of the three, ma’am! The Seventh Regiment holds the right wing; the Eighth, the left. It’s a reverse triangle formation.”

Using the Seventh and Eighth Regiments like walls, the real threat—the Third Regiment—waited in reserve to strike back at us. But if we were to draw them forward, we could circle around and prick their flanks before running back to safety.

“We have an update from the scouts, ma’am! The Order of the Scriptures have left the city gates! Our scouts estimate they number five hundred knights.”

That was bad news. The Order of the Scriptures—the knights Leticia-san belonged to—were the most skilled fighters in the country. Their numbers may have been few, but every one of them was worth a hundred lesser knights. Their equipment was just as powerful. Their training, their levels—all were far more advanced than other church knights. These were real foes. We had assumed they weren’t allied with the pope—and yet, here they were, taking the field to face us. We were going to be in for a tough fight. *Best we girls handle it, then.*

“Wait! Ma’am, there are…further developments. How odd…”

“Don’t stand there mumbling. Tell me!”

Oh no, what else had happened? Did the Order have, what, some powerful magical artifact at their disposal? If so, then that

changed everything. Unless we girls bore down on them and crushed them quick, our main army would fold against the Order's might.

Even Diorelle's most elite soldiers, Shalliceres-san and her division, could not have defeated the Order without high-speed cavalry charges armed with special Haruka-kun-made shock weapons. And most of our army was nowhere near that level! We were a motley collection of Theocracy citizens and soldiers, and fighting the Order was too big of an ask for most of our troops. The portion of the Order allied with the pope had been destroyed in the Diorelle-Aryucan war, which should have meant the rest opposed the pope. The Order shouldn't have joined this battle. We had counted on that! But we had been naive to not factor them into our plans at all.

"Yes, ma'am. The Order are reportedly...licking their swords, ma'am."

"...I see. Change of plans! We shall charge straight in an oblique line to attack the Seventh and Eighth Regiments. Ignore the Third. Form up in echelon formation, break though the enemy's left line, and destroy the Seventh Regiment. The other end of the line, you are to take the right! Once the Eighth is accounted for, trap the Third Regiment in front of the city walls!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

Smiles broke out across all of our faces. We all understood immediately what this meant, Shalliceres-san and Arianna-san included. There could only be one thing that would make soldiers lick their swords—brainwashing and ego death thanks to Sgt. Hartman Haruka-kun. Therefore, we would perform a pincer movement, rout the Seventh Regiment, and trap the Eighth and Third Regiments. It was going to be a rout.

"We'll take the rearguard. If anyone tries to take the army in the rear, we'll descend on them and give them more than they bargained for!"

"Ja!"

A cloud of dust rose behind us, the dirt particles glinting in the rising run. The earth trembled under the pounding feet of two armies on the march. We would charge forward to make our

enemies think we would smash into their lines head-on—but that was only a feint. Instead, we would march at an angle such that our left would clip their right wing first. Then we would turn on their flanks, cut through the Seventh and Eighth Regiments in turn, and pincer the Third Regiment between ourselves and the Order. Routed, the Eighth would dissolve; cut off from the rest of the battle, the Seventh would sputter out. Finally, were the Third Regiment to advance before we trapped them in the pincer, then the Order would descend on them from behind. At this point, the battle was a contest of speed.

General Shalliceres, the Sword of Diorelle, was a tactical genius. She knew how to read a battlefield and make all the right decisions in the blink of an eye. She would go down in history, I was sure, as one of the greatest military minds to ever live. Her name would be known as the one who forever transformed the entire calculus of fantasy military thought. She and her knights led the assault on the left wing of our army—oh, and it would be remiss of me to not mention that all her knights were licking their swords too!

“Shields away now! We’re going to break through their lines. Put your back into it!”

“Ja!”

The air on the plains was thick with hoofbeats, and the tension of an army just paces away from their foe. In that muddy slurry, a drumbeat sounded—the signal for the battle to begin.

Our battle lines surged forward. The church armies, interpreting this as a head-on charge, were unprepared for our left to shoot forward and run past their columns. They hesitated, unsure how to handle the numbers of Shalliceres-san’s cavalry van. Before they could make up their minds about what to do next, the cavalry wheeled about and tore through the church infantry. From there, it was a bloodbath.

“Take out the mages and bowmen in the rear!”

“Ja!”

The church infantry carried their weapons in their right hands and their shields in their left, which left them vulnerable on their right. We took advantage of this with quick, maneuverable forces slicing through their densely packed troops.

“It’s working! It’s super effective.”

“According to military history, this tactic was born at the Battle of Leuctra as the brainchild of General Epaminondas of Thebes. It was further refined by other great military minds until it reached Philip II of Macedon. Philip used this tactic to great effect in the Battle of Chaeronea, winning it handily. His son, Alexander the Great, incorporated cavalry units into this strategical framework, thus conquering all the lands from Persia to India and forever altering the course of history. Now it has passed down to us to use it in a fantasy world!”

“Hooray for cheat knowledge.”

Ignoring the relative disconnect between our two timelines—wasn’t this world modeled after the European Middle Ages? Shouldn’t they have already learned Alexander’s hammer-and-anvil tactics?—we had likely just advanced this world’s military knowledge by several years with this single battle. As a result, neither our routed enemies nor the allies under our command understood how, exactly, we had just destroyed a third of the church’s army.

“You wouldn’t think it possible when they’re better armed than us, right?”

“Well, they’d have to be. They’re heavy infantry. It’s standard practice to pack them close together and whittle them down one by one with other infantry.”

“I don’t remember *that* coming up in world history class…”

In this world, close formations—called phalanxes—of heavy infantry armed with longspears and enormous shields dominated the realm of military theory. But against those of us who knew their history, these infantry phalanxes were in for a sore defeat. No head-on infantry clashes for us! No, we knew a counterstrategy that the inhabitants of this world had never heard of, much less considered their own counters for. *That’s right! With a little knowledge, we have an OP cheat on our hands.*

“Wheel about!”

“Men! Do not break rank! In your formations, on the double!”

“Charge!”

Behold the echelon formation, the phalanx's natural predator. Echelon formations positioned units along diagonal lines. Here, this diagonal formation effectively shaved off the entire right wing of the church's army.

"Fire! Fiiiire!"

"Sir, our front lines are broken!"

"Another charge! Smash them!"

"Yes, ma'am! I'll cover you!"

"Ma'am! Strong enemies on the left!"

"Let me handle them. Take control of the center in my absence."

"Ja!"

Their battle lines were chaos; their formations, a shambles. As Shalliceres-san's unit wheeled about, the Third Regiment came bearing down on them, ready to exploit their moment of vulnerability—but then the Third Regiment came to a confused halt.

For at the decisive moment, the Knights of the Scriptures descended on them with battle cries of "Hiiiiyah!" We joined in with a "Hiiiyah!" of our own. The flag of the Rightful, Orthodox, Legit AF Army of the Church unfurled overhead, and we all came together to swarm the Third Regiment with "Hiiiyah!s" on all sides. *Ugh, who was it again that picked that awful name?*

Yes, the battlefield was ringed with *Hiiiyah!*s. Answering *Hiiiyah!*s spread like a wave, and in that great glorious *Hiiiyah!-athon*, we destroyed the phalanxes.

"Um, I was hoping to teach them echelon formations... Not... this..."

"Yeah, this is a legacy we could have done without..."

"Right? I feel like we're the villains now."

"Hiiiyah!"

Here a hiiiyah, there a hiiiyah, everywhere a hiiiyah. The battle quickly became a massacre. Our side shouted "Hiiiyah!" after the scattering soldiers. Soon, the battlefield was nothing but the site of slaughter that rang with screams of the dying and *Hiiiyah!*s of the killing.

“Did the church not send out their mage squads?”

“Nope. Which is funny, ’cause it would’ve been a smart tactic. Tactics are king in warfare.”

“Yup. Tactics can make all the difference for inexperienced soldiers. Whoever gets the initiative wins a huge advantage.”

The originators of this *Hiiiyah!* hullabaloo—Haruka-kun’s poor victims, all of them—were in total murder mode without any attempts from us to raise morale. Fundamentally, they weren’t like us girls. They had a drive, a passion, an inner fire unlike ours. Oh, we could lose ourselves when the bloodlust came upon us. We could let ourselves be swept away by the energy and terror of the battlefield. But the *Hiiiyah!*-ing soldiers were a different thing altogether.

“Hiiiyah!”

“Find the mage squads and destroy them!”

“Ja!”

The soldiers’ madness could not be fully explained by the insanity of battle. Their ruthlessness could not be chalked up to the excitement of the fight. As for fear—what fear? They were killers who knew no fear. They caught up *others* in their frenzy, terrorizing their foes and transforming the battlefield into a butcher yard. This was a bloodbath of men whose terror had been overwritten by bloodthirsty derangement, an army of heartless Hartmen. Turning to face us, they held their blood-streaked swords aloft and bent them in salute. Suddenly, I understood how Haruka-kun always felt—I felt *my* sex appeal in danger!

“Evacuate the wounded. Bring them to the medics, now!”

“If any church soldiers try to run, let them. Chase the others back into the city.”

“Hunt down any who try to flee anywhere else! We mustn’t let any of the nearby villages come to harm.”

With the victory ours, a knight on horseback rode out from the Knights of the Scriptures. In a big, booming voice, he announced, “Vice-Captain of the Order, Jiwelyn, at your service! I come to seek an audience with the Princess Ariel.”

It was then that he laid eyes on Leticia-san. He and his fellow knights burst into tears, and she came forward to greet each of them with her head bowed. When “Ariel” (or Arianna-san, as we knew her) appeared on the scene, everyone kneeled before her. The vice-captain handed her a letter. Now that we knew he was an ally, we could get to the bottom of this knife-licking thing… Sure enough, Jiwelyn-san had a letter from Haruka-kun too.

“Ahem-hem. ‘Hey, so this is my scouting report? I scouted—okay, beat up—all the gatekeepers and soldiers in every town I passed, but needless to say, I didn’t do anything wrong? And on a related note, I gave your letters to the really old archbishop dude and the violent old guy? And made sure neither of them ate them before reading them? I mean, maybe they ate them afterwards; I dunno? I guess we still don’t know how good the letters taste? Y’know? You’d have to ask them yourself? Anyhoo, I’m currently scoping out the Cathedral? Turns out there’s an ultimate dungeon underneath it? Oh, and the Cathedral itself is also kinda a dungeon? Or at least one hell of a maze? It’s kind of driving me up the wall? P.S. I’m sending an item bag of goodies with this letter, but if you eat too much, don’t go blaming it on me? It’s not my fault? I tried to be a good boy. I made castella cake for the first time? It turned out super amazing and stuff? Don’t forget your one more sets? Signed, Goodie Boy?’”

“Wait. Did he say castella?!”

“Oh, mighty castella! How long have we awaited thee!”

I couldn’t shake the feeling Haruka-kun had casually dumped some very important info in there… But castella cake! Beautiful, round castella sponge cake! Wait. Why wasn’t it in squares?

“Round castella cake?”

“He probably made it in a frying pan.”

Each of us girls received a cake larger than any one of our round shields. We held them in both hands and began devouring them. My heart swelled. This was Haruka-kun’s way of rewarding us for coming so far and winning all these battles. Funny, since we were the ones who wanted to reward *him*. He just had a way of springing presents on us when we least expected them.

“Mmm, yum yum yum!”

“Superb! Stupendous! It melts in my mouth! Bravo, Haruka-kun!”

Truth be told, all we wanted was to tell Haruka-kun thank you. That was our one heartfelt wish—yet he always managed to give us the slip. For all of our efforts these past three months, not a one of us had been successful. Well, except Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san. Maybe Slimey too.

I knew that even if I marched up to Haruka-kun ready to thank him once for and all, he would switch topics with the speed of a particle accelerator and sidestep my thank you with an ultrarapid stream of babbled nonlogic. For some reason, the simple words “thank you” always ended up turning into a lecture. That, or me getting my mouth stuffed with a tasty treat.

Indeed, there was only one example of a successful way to express one’s gratitude to Haruka-kun. Nothing else seemed to work. No matter what you tried talking to him about, every conversation inevitably devolved into giving him a piece of your mind. Or, as I mentioned, getting distracted with yummy goodies like one of the orphan kiddos.

“Ohh, it’s so good!” one of my friends whimpered. “And so big! I just can’t stop eating.”

“Ahh… The sweet bliss of an endless supply of cake… Oh god, I can feel the one more sets coming on.”

“Yeah, so? Tasty food is most important!”

The biggest issue with life in this world was the food. Back home, no matter how drool-worthy the food was, we couldn’t pig out with reckless abandon. There always came a point when we felt full or even sick. Here, though, we could eat and eat and EAT. Worse, there never came a point when the food stopped being finger-licking good. My poor waistline!

“Ahhhh, it’s so good…” someone sniffled.

“I’m in heaven…” another sobbed.

We just couldn’t stop ourselves, and without that self-control, the eating never ended. We kept munching and masticating until the food ran out. Here, we chewed our way through a caravan of

cakes, long past the point where the human body could properly store the excess calories.

But who could have blamed me? I had never tasted cake so flavorful, so rich. This was a marriage of fantasy ingredients and magical cooking methods at the hands of our very best freelance chef. It was a dream team, with every element fighting to outdo the others.

“So…are we sieging the Holy City now?”

“I guess.”

We looked out over the closed gates and the city walls off in the distance, an angry glare arising from above our cake-crumb-covered cheeks. As Haruka-kun’s final weapon, the delectable scent of grilled eel wafted on the wind toward the Holy City.

“Noo! My stomach is so full it hurts, but that eel smells amazing!”

“No kidding! Waaaah!”

Thank god we weren’t the ones under siege, because we would’ve been unable to resist a weapon this wonderful. Heck, we would have surrendered in seconds! Things could only have been worse in the Holy City, which had been suffering food shortages for days now. The rumble in those empty tummies must have been so loud it made a chorus. Even our castella-cake-crammed craws were watering at the tantalizing aromas!

“It smells so gooood.”

“I bet it tastes even better.”

“…Oh, what the hell? I give up! Give me eel!”

“I suppose I’ll partake… After all, Diorelle’s royal capital once fell to this very same ruse, so surely there is no shame if its princess does the same.”

It was the worst trick in the book. The smell of grilled eel—the ultimate weapon to end all weapons!

DAY 115

EARLY MORNING

According to the theory of gravity, a sufficiently large mass pulls loot toward itself and triggers a little victory "ding." So pull the other one; it's got bells on—!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

HERE IN THE CATHEDRAL, it never rained, but it poured. The first to fail were the regenerative powers that made us impervious within its walls. Then our knights were routed quickly. It was alarming. A single saboteur had brought our impervious Cathedral to its knees!

The Cathedral's Blessings lent strength to our allies' limbs, keeping up a steady stream of Revival and Regeneration. The Cathedral had other secrets as well—its greatest being a compulsive force that ensured the elimination of our foes. The building was supposed to be impervious! *So then how… How…*

"How could any of this have happened? It is inconceivable!"

The Cathedral placed penalties on interlopers' levels and make their skills run haywire, rendering even the finest of warriors helpless. Against those weakened foes stood us, invincible with our buffed skills and unlimited healing. If that was not enough, the interior of the Cathedral was a trap-studded maze. Its labyrinthine design warped all senses of distance and direction, trapping victims in terrifying illusions. How, then, did our intruder blow past all of that so easily?!

"Lord Consul, I bring dreadful news."

"Of course! When was news ever good? Come, what is it this time?"

I imagined briefly that the messenger had come to inform me that the pope had gone mad. Alas, that was not news at all. We had all known for some time that His Eminence was not in his right mind. My only option now was to batten the hatches—no, bargain for my escape in exchange for the pope's head. How quickly had I

fallen so low! *Now tell me, messenger, how could things* possibly *get any worse?*

"Virtually all the Cathedral's powers have stalled, Lord Consul. Blessing, Regeneration, and Revival have ceased to function. Those who have noticed are in a state of complete panic. My lord, what are your orders for us?"

We couldn't wait out a siege under these conditions! Nor were we in any state to bargain for our freedom. Our faith in the Cathedral had been—prior to this—unshakable. We had no reason to think we could ever die here, which was precisely why my fellow lord councilors (and myself) simpered for the pope in the hope of receiving the Cathedral's Blessing. Without the Blessing, how many of our men would follow our orders to march into battle? How many would lay down their lives for us?

"Seal off the stairs. Inform the soldiers that the infidels are attacking. This is a crusade, and death to any man who dares flee! Someone send word to the convocation of elders. We must hear what they make of this."

"The door to their inner sanctum is closed tight, Lord Consul. Your loyal servants are begging for entry as we speak."

Damn those decrepit, blasted dotards. The elders were a family that had safeguarded and governed the Cathedral for generations on end. Figures of mystery. Why, they did not even belong to the Church!

"Traitors! Traitors, all of them! They swore to offer us safe harbor so long as we filled *their* Cathedral with spellstones and soldiers aplenty!"

No, they were not traitors, in truth. They could not betray what they had never obeyed—for the elders cared naught for anything but the Cathedral. That, however, was what gave me pause. Why should they fail to protect the halls they revered so deeply?

Suddenly, silence fell over our council chambers—the messaging system had broken. I could no longer receive information from my loyal servants. Within the pope's audience chamber at the far end of the room, I heard him ranting and raving like a maddened beast, but I didn't give a fig about His Eminence any longer. Once the intruder was dead, we would have much

reconstruction work ahead of us, and time was of the essence. However, with no information coming in, there was naught we could do but sit and let the minutes tick past.

“Alack! It was foolish of us to divide our forces and send half of them to the walls.”

If not for the mad ape and his cockamamie plans, we would not have had such chaos. This discord would never have been sown if not for our greedy seizure of power. All we had left were the Cathedral and the Holy City themselves. What good were they? We should have burned the Holy City to the ground and prayed the enemy burned with it.

“The transmission on the intruder has been snuffed out.”

“My, my. The monstrous rabbit woman might well’ve proven useful.”

A monster she may have been, but a useful creature all the same. Dimwitted beasts were all the easier to trick for their lack of intelligence. Had she and the intruder destroyed one another, perhaps that filthy creature had some place in God’s plan after all.

“The city gates have opened for the enemy!”

“The commonfolk are rioting in the streets. They have stormed the gates to receive the enemy’s handouts of foodstuffs.”

Then even the knights we stationed outside the Cathedral can do nothing to stay our demise… Yet so long as the Cathedral still stood, our fate was not decided.

“The Order of the Scriptures have defected to Princess Ariel. The commonfolk welcome her arrival with open arms.”

“We are rapidly losing contact with the knights posted on the outer walls.”

Traffic in and out of the east had long since ceased. Many shipments from Northern and Southern Aryuca were woefully late, and the city’s food shortages soon grew dire. It was little wonder the commonfolk went hungry. We silenced past riots with force, but with that same force rapidly dwindling, we now lacked any means to prevent our starving citizenry from stampeding out of the city in search of food.

“Princess Ariel proclaimed she came with enormous quantities of foodstuffs to save her people. The smallfolk formed a mob, stormed the gates, and opened them from the inside.”

“Damn every last one of them.”

By the time the news reached us, it was too late for action. Truth be told, I doubted any of the gate guards would have resisted even had we ordered them to hold their posts.

“There is fighting at the castle. The national army has routed our army. We hear the national army was equipped with powerful trait-imbued swords and shields, Lord Consul.”

“Parish after parish has bent the knee to the princess.”

The royal family had taken the stage—oh, and how! We ought to have seized the national army and beheaded the monarchs long ago. Why, the mad ape had been right all along. What a joke! What a farce! Leaving the princess under house arrest until her marriage to His Eminence to silence claims of usurpation had only served to stab us in the back. His attempts to make just cause for his seizure of power had backfired. His efforts to claim goodwill had doomed us all.

“Traitors and backstabbers at every turn! Does not one of you have any good news to bring me?”

“Lord Consul, we await your orders…”

“If you want orders, ask that gibbering ape! I don’t care a whit!”

The messengers brought me nothing but ill tidings. Nothing! I had no idea what was going on, so how the blazes was I supposed to give *orders*? Our last hopes were being slaughtered systematically before we had any chance to retaliate. With no recourse, no idea of what was going on, nothing—we were crumbling away into so much sand.

“Lord Consul, the main body of the Knights of the Scriptures have turned on us!”

“The catacombs under the Cathedral have been sealed off. We are rapidly losing contact with our spies in the city!”

Hellfire and brimstone! The city was our hostage! Ours! Only by holding its citizenry and the knights’ families captive had we

menaced the Knights of the Scriptures into accepting our yoke. Once the city was lost, so too was our hold on them. And now our own paltry forces, halved to begin with, were thinning further by the moment… What timing for all the Scriptures' might, all their valor, to become our enemy!

"The bell! Ring the demon bell, you fool!"

"L-Lord Consul, we daren't do such a thing…"

Aye, ring the bells we must—as was proscribed in the ancient Cathedral lore:

When hope is lost and creatures fell

Come pouring from the depths of hell,

Toll the bell, Cathedral keeper.

Loose ye the almighty reaper.

What this riddle meant, none could say. It was such a secret that, for many generations, only the pope and archbishops knew of its existence. Now, with the entire city turned against us, I cared little and less about what grave fate the poem portended. This was the only option left to me if I wished to retain my head.

Only the pope and the convocation of elders held the keys for the most ancient relics. Thus I pacified the bawling pope, swiped his key, and climbed the steps to the tallest tower of the Cathedral. The forbidden tower. The threshold none dared cross. I threw open the door, and lo! The bell of legend was…gone?

"Oh! And then the bell… Hey, don't look at me! I got here first! Finders, keepers; losers, weepers! Gotta follow the rules; it's first come, first serve. Gotta maintain order around here. Early bird gets the worm, y'know? So it's mine? I mean, it was just sitting there. No one was using it."

"K-kill him!"

I knew not who this boy was; nor did I need to know. All that mattered was that the intruder had wormed his way into the heart of the Cathedral, and the bell was gone. Gone! A bell so enormous it could be seen clear across the city. My only recourse to find it would be to seize the boy and put him to the question. Or wait—if this boy had found a way *in*, then surely he knew of some bolt-hole to get *out*.

“Wait! Do not kill him. Take him ali—egads!”

Though I had a retinue of heavily armed knights with us, I was driven back to the stairs. I had nowhere to run, nowhere but the narrow staircase I had just ascended. Under the intruder’s black hood lurked a child’s face, just visible in the shadows…and his eyes. His *dark* eyes.

“I-it’s the infidel! The enemy of God! Kill him! Kill him now!”

“As you command, Lord Consul!”

To Hell with taking him alive. This boy was the black-haired jester we had sought—the boy we labeled an affront to God to frighten Diorelle into doing our bidding. The boy himself—why, he was but a sniveling stripling. A powerless crook. A swindler.

“I mean, I guess I’m an enemy of god? But I didn’t choose that name for myself? It sorta got foisted upon me? Hey, aren’t you guys the foisters? I guess you have a point; I’m not down to clown with that old god dude. Normal teenage boys don’t have old god fetishes, y’know? It’s perfectly natural to not have a thing for old farts, be they divine or otherwise? I don’t know why I’m being called the weirdo when y’all’re the ones foisting your sexual deviancies on *me*! I’m just a perfectly normal, upstanding, pure-of-heart teenage boy. I’ll worship at the feet of beautiful women before I get down on my knees for any old men! Anyone who demands otherwise is in for a thrashing!”

I broke free from the knights and ran for my life. There, a door! I slammed it shut behind me, locked it tight, and finally breathed a sigh of relief.

By God, what was that? What was that *demon*? I couldn’t believe my own eyes. The boy we scapegoated for our political aims was nothing but a pathetic little dribbler, was he not? Not that…that *thing.* Not that abomination with snakes sprouting from his flesh and some grotesque—God, I lacked words to describe it—monstrosity nesting on his shoulders. Falling soldiers; men screaming bloody murder; others, turned to immobile stone like so many statues, knocked over and shattered.

“From what circle of Hell did we summon a real affront to God? A real abomination?! What sick nightmare am I dreaming?”

All eyes turned to me, but my voice died in my throat before I could speak. My head spun. How could I have begun to explain what had happened to me? Had I reported what I saw, the others would have thought me mad. Goodness gracious, *I* thought I had gone mad. There was no rational explanation for a person to be in the bell tower, much less an abomination against God and man.

Yet even so, the rumbling and thumping behind me was unmistakably *real*. Frantic fists pounded the door at my back. And then, when even that ceased, only a horrifying silence remained.

The other councilors stared at me with such concern I knew my face was frozen in some rictus of fear. Even the mad ape himself had gone silent as he looked at me. Ha! Now that old epithet was more appropriate for me.

“Wh-what was that?”

“What happened to those who went with you?”

The scene was still seared into the back of my eyelids. The boy—laughing, chuckling, giggling with every slow, deliberate step bringing him closer. Closer. Closer. To. Me. Nothing stopped his advance. Not the troop of knights in full sword and plate armor. Nothing. His smile was terror, but his eyes—oh, his eyes. His eyes were the black of the bubbling pits of hell. His eyes devoured everything in their path as he made his move.

“Wghhh! Nnrggh! G-get off, you Hellspa—How dare you! How dare youuuu! I am the pope! I am the poooooooooooooopeeeeeeeeaaaaaaargh!”

Was I still trapped in my nightmare? Surely so—for a kaleidoscope of light and color rained down around me as the stained glass window overhead exploded. There, in the shower of twinkling shards of glass, stood the boy in black atop—atop—His Eminence! And the throne at the heart of the inner sanctum—the papal seat, the finest relic in all the world—from which the boy kicked the pope clear across the room.

“So this is where that bell falls, huh? And the Cathedral dumps all its magic right into this spot, which attracts the dungeon emperor? Dope. Does that make this throne magic loot? Don’t mind if I help myself! ’Kay, let’s see here... Were the giant bell to fall, it’d crush whatever’s in the chair to itty-bitty bits, smash up all the lower

floors with explosive sound waves, and seal the chair's pulverized occupant away deep underground… Wow. That just might kill a dungeon emperor—assuming the dungeon emperor falls for the trap. Provided that the dungeon emperor is just that uneducated and naive, they'd be in deep destructive doo-doo… Whoa, the Cathedral collapses on its own when something smashes into this exact spot? Now that's architectural genius! That means the dungeon emperor's lackeys get sucked down underground and buried in the rubble from the collapsing roof too. If all that and the sound waves don't polish 'em off, at least they're well and truly stuck under a thick layer of rock. Yeah, this is a masterpiece of building design! I love it! Oh—and this relic is prime loot, so it's mine now! Gimme, gimme!"

The boy backhanded the pope with his staff and snatched the crown from the pope's holy head. We could only watch in stunned silence as His Eminence was kicked to the ground, stripped of every garment and fine relic decorating his person until he lay in a miserable heap in his underclothes.

It was absurd. It was like something out of a child's play. A comedic act more like to summon sniggers of derision than looks of pity. And who should have been the object of our mirth but the spiritual leader of the continent? Who should have incited such glee but the ultimate authority of the Church?

We did not laugh at the jester. Now—now was the time for the boy we called clown to cackle. Now, he who was known as the black-haired commander traded in the role of pratfaller for playwright. Yes, the very boy we demanded Diorelle hand over to us—the origin of all this fine madness—in his dark eyes, he laughed. Oh, how he ridiculed. What had we been thinking, pinning our schemes on him? What fresh Hell had we summoned?

This jester, this creature who should have died in our dungeons on the torturer's rack as an example of what happened when one defied God, laughed at us—at us!—looked down his nose at us, and cackled with mocking mirth. He was to have been our scapegoat. He was to have been a pitiful wretch. He was to have been branded as an enemy of God and executed in full sight of the populace. But now, now… Now he kicked us across the stage of his making while he looked down on us and laughed.

This child, a lone child, stood far above us and looked at us with pure contempt. Sneered like he already reigned supreme over us. And then, wreathed in a black horror of God knew what, he turned to me.

Perhaps it was fate that I met my end at his hands. After all, was I not a servant of God, and had I not named him God’s enemy?

DAY 115

MORNING

ADDLE-BRAINED APE defeated! Dropped 1× THRONE!

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

THE CATHEDRAL WAS A PRODUCT of perfect architectural design, impregnable against attack from subterranean and earthbound forces alike. Not so much airbound ones, see. The dome atop the Cathedral was made to suck up and store power from all around the country, and while it was protected from magical attacks, it was perfectly vulnerable to the physical. Proof: me breaking in.

I summoned all my magical energies and unleashed them in one blast toward the stained-glass skylight. *Wow. I made a huge hole.*

Anyway, but before that (w)hole incident, I was Air Walking my way up the Cathedral to check out the belltower that had caught my eye earlier. Something about the bell was just so striking, y'know? It set off my loot spidey-senses!

"Yup, it's a magical artifact. Some kinda sonic weapon? Anything in the blast radius gets pulverized by the sound waves. Yee-owch! And as it's currently hanging from a rope, i.e., being held aloft by a tension force, viz being acted upon by gravity, which is, in the broadest sense, dropping, I guess it's a drop item? A good drop item at that. I could stuff the idiots inside and go to town banging out a sixteen-beat 'Carol of the Bells.' It'd smash 'em to bits and maybe clap some brains into them! I should give it a try. I even have the perfect banging apparatus right here—this crowbar-like instrument!"

I lowered the bell from its rope and set it on the ground. Ta-da, it had officially dropped. Now it was a drop item! Plus, five seconds had passed, so it was fine? Then some random people came up the stairs, so I kicked them back down?

"Excuse me? Stealing *my* stolen loot? The audacity! Finders, keepers! Even if I was hoping for something a little more valuable than a bell, it's still mine. I made sure to set it down before I refound it, too. By the Stolen Loot Protection Act, I'm considered the lawful finder and owner. So there!"

“Urk—gurk—agh!”

I looked down the stairwell past the tumbling old men. At the bottom was a door…leading to a room…and the center of that room was directly below that skylight…

“Oh! And then the bell… Hey, don’t look at me! I got here first! Finders, keepers; losers, weepers! Gotta follow the rules; it’s first come, first serve. Gotta maintain order around here. Early bird gets the worm, y’know? So it’s mine? I mean, it was just sitting there. No one was using it.”

“K-kill him!”

Before they could k-kill me, the hydra, chickenatrice, and lizardisk intervened with a potent poison and serious status ailment assault. The Cathedral had stopped granting its Blessing. Anyone stupid enough to order someone’s death must’ve had a death wish themself. Right?

“I-it’s the infidel! The enemy of God! Kill him! Kill him now!”

“As you command, Lord Consul!”

What was all this enemy of god business? I wasn’t a bad guy. All I did was slaughter, massacre, and generally spread devastation, y’know? If the church was to treat me like an enemy of god, the least god could do was come down to get massacred himself! Although I didn’t like that idea either, for reasons that would become apparent momentarily.

“I mean, I guess I’m an enemy of god? But I didn’t choose that name for myself? It sorta got foisted upon me? Hey, aren’t you guys the foisters? I guess you have a point; I’m not down to clown with that old god dude. Normal teenage boys don’t have old god fetishes, y’know? It’s perfectly natural to not have a thing for old farts, be they divine or otherwise? I don’t know why I’m being called the weirdo when y’all’re the ones foisting your sexual deviancies on *me*! I’m just a perfectly normal, upstanding, pure-of-heart teenage boy. I’ll worship at the feet of beautiful women before I get down on my knees for any old men! Anyone who demands otherwise is in for a thrashing!”

I punched and kicked my way through the screaming old dudes and made my way down the stairs—only for the door to slam

in my face. Um, rude?

“Closing your doors to me?! What do you take me for, a spokesman from the NEET Humanitarian Konsortium? Are those even a thing? Flying NHK guys?”

Not like the locked door mattered—I hadn’t planned on using the door from the start. My business was with the skylight above the Cathedral. It lined up almost dead center with the whole building, and the bell hung directly above that.

“All the magic the Cathedral vacuums up is channeled right into the skylight, which emits that concentrated flow of magic on whatever is below. That spot right underneath is where the concentration of magic is strongest. In other words, it’s a trap.”

Window smashing time! After all, smashing windows had been a noteworthy trait of teenage boys since time immemorial. So was running off with stolen horses, apparently. I wouldn’t have wanted to be around in time immemorial; those teenage boys sounded like a nasty piece of work.

“Wghhh! Nnrggh! G-get off, you Hellspa—How dare you! How dare *youuuu!* I am the pope! I am the Poooooooooooooopeeeeeeeeaaaaaaargh!”

Huh? Did I step on something? Yuck, gross! I kicked it away and only then looked to see what nasty thing had gotten on my shoe. It was…some ugly toad with a face like an ape? No doubt a new type of monster. Whatever it was, it was a screeching, ugly thing, so I kicked it across the room.

Anyway, so about this throne…

It clicked, then—the throne and the bell were two halves of the same weapon. Their task was to destroy and seal the enemy.

“So the bell up *there* falls down *here*…”

Whenever a monster reached the throne, lured by the powerful magic it exuded, the bell fell from the tower, and the bell-throne combo effectively trapped and sealed the monster. Because the bell’s interior was inlaid with destructive sonic magic, a monster standing on the throne would be stuck in a sort of sound prison, blasted by soundwave after soundwave until it was dead. From there, the bell’s crushing weight would drag it down to the bottom

floor of the dungeon. The Cathedral would collapse over it and bury it in the rubble, sealing it in its grave. That's what this entire building was—a tomb. The Cathedral was constructed to *be* a ruin, a monument of a battle with an ultimate dungeon. A shield against the horrors within.

"So, did you wanna protect her or kill her? Yeesh! Make up your mind!"

"Gwwagh!"

Upon closer inspection, I realized the ape-toad had a cool magic item in its possession. *Must be a rare monster.*

"I kicked the monster off its throne, sooo…that's dropping *some* vertical distance, right? Doesn't that count? Gimme gimme? The loot is mine!"

"Nyaaargh!"

HARUKA obtained DROP ITEM ×1! Oh, and then Haruka painted the walls red with blood. See, no one this deep in the Cathedral could be a good guy. Being evil was a prerequisite for being here, and I had no mercy for them. Besides, they were just old men, so, y'know…I beat 'em up?

"Kill him! Kill him now!"

"There's only one of him, you fools!"

"I don't care if it's suicide; I want him dead! Now!"

"Can't you tell this is an emergency?! Do whatever it takes. If His Eminence is caught in the crossfire, so be it. You shan't be punished."

"Wait, I beg! Don't shoot! I don't want to di—yeeeek!"

The sanctity was tainted; the walls were painted; the ape-toad fainted.

"Just as every ogre needs a club, every teenage boy needs a crowbar-like instrument! Oh, and speaking of dangerous combinations, can we outlaw morning stars for teenage girls? Yeah, there's such a thing as too much danger! If the government has the time to crack down on every gun, knife, and dagger to the point you can't sharpen a damn pencil, then they should do something about this serious morning star epidemic!"

A teenage girl with a big, spiky bashing implement, or some rando with a widdle 5.5 cm knife? *Yeah, I think we all know which one is worse!*

"The philosopher's stone issue aside, turns out there's nothing better for beating old men than a crowbar-like instrument."

It packed a punch. It snapped swords; it caved armor. Crowbars were truly the ultimate utilitarian devices even in fantasy applications. With mine, I decimated the local old man population, whisked all their equipment off them, dropped the loot on the floor to mark them as drop items, and scooped them up to line my pockets. Finally, I used Entanglement on the lizardisk's Poison to turn the old men into stiff corpses.

"Yup. These are the big bads. Gotta turn 'em in to Sister Girl."

In religion, blame was a collective thing. Mass religion was basically organized crime anyway; if a religious organization refused to acknowledge the wrongdoings its clergy orchestrated, the world was better off without the whole group. When criminal clergy weren't stripped of their responsibility—when the church used fancy words to sweep the problems under the rug—they became con men using the word of god to swindle the people.

"What happens when god gets tired of 'em using his name for evil, huh?"

Anyway, I tied up all the old men. Not my idea of a good time, for the record! No sexy scenes with old dudes for me! Some of them kept complaining until I shushed them with a gentle tap of my crowbar-like instrument. Why were old men such disagreeable and whiny creatures to begin with? Couldn't they all learn to shut up?

That was when the questioning began, if by questioning, I meant beating the pulp out of old men. *Where's the real brains behind this operation, 'cause they ain't here? But I know they're here somewhere. Where can I find this convocation of elders? I wanna see who's been calling the shots and playing puppet with the pope for generations. 'Cause I have a whole hell of a lotta questions for them.*

"Ew. Why is it so dark and cramped in here? This isn't what I pictured! I thought it'd be crawling with shiny treasure and tittering slave girls! Forget the girls; this place is deserted... It makes me look like some poor, friendless loner talking to himself! Ahh! It's a

psychological damage trap! And it's super effective! Curse you, convocation of elders trap!"

No response. I walked down a poorly lit passageway. Its walls were plain, unadorned stone—as bare bones as a corridor could get. It was simple, if not minimalist; austere, if not friggin' empty. It felt like an abandoned warehouse. I figured the inner workings of the church would've been armed to the teeth in gold 'n glitter, y'know? But this was, like, penny-pinchingly poor. Miserably miserly modest. They were so thrifty they couldn't even give the place proper lighting! The magic lanterns were spaced so far apart that most of the walk was in pitch blackness.

Apart from that psychological-damage-inducing trap just now, there weren't any traps along the way. No guards, either. It made for a long, boring walk to a pair of doors at the end. While I was still debating between the tantalizing choices of opening them or blowing them off their hinges, the doors opened for me. I steadied my breathing, enhanced my qi, and stepped forward. The doors creaked open further...

There was no one there in the room beyond the door. Was it a trap? Well, I did sense something. Not a *one*. A *thing*. A whisp of life force, so faint it was like a candle on the verge of snuffing out into nothingness. Something as quiet and still as an enormous, ancient tree. That was the only live occupant in this room—that, and the silence of the tomb.

Yes indeed, this room was replete with the hush of those going gently into the good night. Of everything I had expected, everything I had surmised, every possibility and potentiality I had conjured—this was not one of them. These people had nothing to do with the church, let alone religion or god or any of that crap. Who were they, you ask? Why, they were *dusty.*

Although too few remained to be called a convocation. Only one of them had enough life left in his limbs to speak. The rest were withered, skeletal cadavers and a handful waiting to join their desiccated brethren. The ultimate dungeon's regenerative powers had ceased to function. At last, these senescent souls would meet their all-too-timely ends.

I couldn't even imagine how long they had waited in this dark, empty room. They could have tried to eke out a few more years of existence by stealing the Cathedral's magic for themselves, but I saw no sign that any of them had desired that. In fact, there was something like a smile of relief on the face of the least-desiccated elder.

"Welcome, oh ye mighty. Long have we waited for you. We are called the elders, the keepers of the seal that your people now call the Cathedral. The philosopher Zaasimov built this temple of the seal and left it in our care. We were to wait, we were told, until the mighty one would appear, he whose destruction would reach even these hallowed halls. We were to wait, yea, and deliver this message."

Zaasimov the philosopher dude? Wait, was that—

"The message is thus: 'Oh ye mighty, ye who have broken the seal and sundered the temple, I beg of you to save St. Faleria the Holy and St. Nefertiri the Heretic.' Long, long have we waited to deliver these words. It is a blessing, yea, that you have reached us before the Cathedral faded into obscurity. And with this…my duty is done… Master Zaasimov…I go to you…now…"

The desiccated mummy of a man's head fell against his chest. He and his fellow elders crumbled to dust and blew away into the wind. Never to be seen again.

Anyway, the dude who made this big magic seal Cathedral thingymaboby was named Zaasimov! *I knew that name!*

"He's the author of *How to Magic Item*! And he sure made one heck of a huge magic item with this Cathedral! Even death couldn't stop him from fighting the ultimate dungeons…"

His book ended up banned by the same people he fought to protect. *Ain't that ironic? Well, I dunno what he expected, with a title like that…*

Interestingly, while he worked as hard as he did to protect the little guy, his only wish was that someone save a pair of saints—one of whom was Dancer Girl!

"Wait. So you're telling me you built a whole honkin' Cathedral, set it to repairing itself for centuries, put a buncha undead old men

inside to pass along your message, only to let said old men turn to ash with big ol' smirks on their faces? Leaving all the real work to *me*?!"

Did Zaasimov just not have a way to defeat the ultimate dungeon? Or maybe he didn't know how to rescue the saints himself? So instead, he sealed the dungeon and siphoned away its magic power. If the day came when he could no longer hold the dungeon at bay and the girls still weren't saved—then that was where the Cathedral came in. To put a clean end to it all. Zaasimov never let go of his hope even after death claimed him. He placed his hopes in the far, far future...me! He left me to do his dirty work!

"I mean... I met Dancer Girl long before coming here. And I've definitely worked very hard to help her...out of her clothes!"

I still had plenty of complaints about his dreadful titling abilities, but I had to hand it to Zaasimov—his *How To!* series had bailed me out of plenty of scrapes.

"Friggin' old men giving me work to do without asking first... Friggin' old men dying with evil smirks without saying please or thank you!"

I excelled in the fine art of breaking promises and dodging responsibilities, but even so...it was kinda hard to break a pact when the other half of the pact had up and died, y'know? The nerve of these people!

"Old men these days! Back in my day, elders knew the meaning of respect!"

I think we all assumed the elders were some buncha chumps pulling the church's sinister strings. But they were warriors, actually. Folks who kept the ultimate dungeon's monsters at bay and girded their loins for the inevitable dungeon deluge. Then eons passed, and they wasted away. When they could no longer fight, their Cathedral was subsumed by the church.

It wasn't like they could leave, of course. Take one step out the Cathedral's front door and poof! They'd all turn to dust. They had a promise to uphold, so in the Cathedral they waited a batshit bonkers long time, becoming more and more ancient as the years went by. That was before the Cathedral ran out of regenerative power, that is. Yet even after the building met its untimely demise,

the elders continued to wait for me—to deliver their final message. Self-satisfied smiles and all!

“They refused death for centuries, buoyed by nothing more than their sense of duty. Then, their mission complete, they passed away in peace…with proud smiles on their faces in their final moments… Proud smirks, more like!”

Now that they had passed on after centuries of waiting, who was I to renege on this promise? The old men lived with honor, allowing them to die at the height of smugness. Yes, they were oh-so pleased to pass on a message, instantly killing themselves… Never waiting for a response… The cheek!

“I mean, I felt bad refusing when I went and destroyed their Cathedral… Even if I had pulled a Rohan Kishibe and went ‘But I refuse!’ they still woulda smirked, poofed into dust, and blown outta here, y’know? Old men, I swear. Always hasty! Always selfish! Never listen to the youth. Tsk, tsk.”

Zaasimov had wanted to save the saints, but in the end, he couldn’t. Instead, he sealed them up and selfishly decided they would die with the Cathedral if they couldn’t be rescued in time. Well, maybe not so selfishly. He must have wanted to grant the saints a peaceful death before they were taken captive and manipulated into killing people. Or, maybe, he couldn’t make the decision right up to his death—kill the dungeon emperors, or free them?

Well, anyway, this room was deserted now, save for a series of old, weathered murals on the wall. Time had ravaged them worse than the old men. Jupiter Eye could barely make out the ancient legend inscribed on the first.

“Long, long ago, the Elder God created the World. Many ages passed, and the World’s time was at its end. The Elder God, not to be dismayed, called for a new God—a God who would save all the world’s creatures. The new God transformed the darkness subsuming the world into what we know as ‘magic.’ And so God granted us magic with which to fight the darkness.”

This was the foundational legend of the church. The primal story of god. A chronicle of the alpha and the omega whose lore had long since been lost in the Kingdom and the Beast Kingdom. I

was the only one who'd read it in both countries—it was the oldest of all entries in Villager A's diary. It spoke of an age before magic, before stats, and the end of such an age. It told of the dawning of this world of sword and sorcery.

"Funny, though. Magic was supposed to save the world, but it's magic that makes the monsters. Now the monsters threaten to destroy the world. Sounds like the goddess of beginnings got off to a bad start!"

The next mural along told the story of the goddess of war. Hers was a tragic one. She was once a brilliant, sainted mortal who drove out the monsters ravaging the frontier. Unfortunately, for her pains, she was cast into the bottom of a deep, dark dungeon by her people.

Other stories followed this one in Villager A's diary—legends of the frontier and the Kingdom. Elf Girl and the lorekeepers in the Beast Kingdom knew these tales too. This was the dawn of recorded history, and then... Well, and then Villager A's diary ended.

On the third and final mural was an image of the two saints the mummy man had mentioned—a shaman of the elder god and a shaman of the new. If this was more than just a legend, then this depicted Dancer Girl and Sleeping Beauty's backstory.

Naturally, I used the Universe-Staff-slash-crowbar-like-instrument to smash the mural to stony bits. Why keep around a hunk of rock that dredged up such painful memories, y'know?

"I bet I know what happened next. Dancer Girl and Sleeping Beauty joined forces to save the Goddess of War or something, right? Then got betrayed themselves. They eventually turned into dungeon emperors and wound up dying on each other's swords—or some other stupid ending. You know what I say about that? 'But I refuse!'"

The church, serving the new god, called Dancer Girl a heretic for serving the elder god. They tricked her and cast her down into a dungeon. Yup. Just like they did for the goddess of war. Once Sleeping Beauty heard the news, she tried to reach the bottom of Dancer Girl's dungeon all by herself. Unfortunately, her strength failed, and the darkness at the very bottom of the dungeon took her captive. The End. Nobody lived happily ever after.

But to hell with that. I couldn't accept such an awful ending!

"You underestimate the modern teenage boy. This world has no books, and when I finally come across a nice wall mural, it doesn't have a happy ending! No, sir! I full-on Rohan Refuse to accept that. Where's the fun in a story with a sad ending? I don't wanna *see* a sad ending; I don't wanna *read* a sad ending; I'm not gonna *accept* a sad ending. I'll rewrite this ending myself if I have to. Sad endings just don't sell these days, y'know? I'm going to the bottom floor of that dungeon and giving the author of this world's story a piece of my mind. Yeah! I'm mad! I'm fuming and huffing and puffing!"

The secret prime mover from way, way back in antiquity was the faction of the new god's followers. God gave these people powers, thus making them his descendants or so-called children of god. These "children" named themselves the guides to reaching god and seized the production of magical items. That's why their shabby sweatshops only produced those lame magical lanterns and other junk. The church wasn't being manipulated by the elders or anything—but there *was* a puppet master pulling the strings, the one I couldn't find in the Cathedral but knew had to have been somewhere. Now I finally knew who they were.

"The faction that knows just how dangerous the Cathedral is. The ones who commute to the Cathedral daily but don't live here. Is this all some master plan they cooked up? Maybe. I'm not sure yet. But I bet *they* know."

Not the pope—the pope was part of a royal branch family; a follower of a newer sect. Someone as far removed from the popes of old as was papally possible. *Intentionally* far removed.

"Not to mention, someone's been stealing magic from the Cathedral… No wonder its regenerative abilities have stopped."

The author of *How to Magic Item!* would surely have designed his Cathedral to run for all eternity. He didn't want his reverse Tower of Babel to fall into disrepair before the ultimate dungeon underneath died. Not before the saint could be saved.

"But because some *have* to ruin everything, all of Zaasimov's plans went awry. Now we have this terrible, horrible, no-good, very

bad ending. It's time to put an end to them—show this story who's boss!"

Them being the faction that made enemies of the two saints. *Yeah, let's kill 'em.* They were the guys I'd been looking for all along, y'know?

Oh, and before I left, I had loot to pick up. The guardians of the Cathedral's relics—the convocation of elders—were dead and gone, so it was simply *irresponsible* to leave such dangerous relics lying around where anyone could find them and pick them up. Right? Right.

"Whoa! Check it out—*ehT Collector's Complete Besst of Magic Itembs*! Man, with a title like that, I can see why people enjoy burning banned books... The content is as amazing as ever, though. Whoa, here's the original prototype for those magic lanterns! I'm shocked the church kept the same basic shape after cutting every other corner available to them."

Zaasimov was a sage, artisan, and scientist on top of being a philosopher. His designs were made with the user in mind; his records were a testament to his successful pursuits of robustness and efficiency. This book was jam-packed with tiny details and endless variations discovered during his research. He even left detailed notes about every one of his product trials. Every part of the book was designed to be a helpful resource for a future reader—well, except for that god-awful title.

"Of all the gifts he could have imparted on society, this would've been my top choice...not those stupid lights! Those are just embarrassments. A mistake from his blunder years better left forgotten. Good thing I nicked them all. I'll just destroy the evidence..."

Seeking profit and designing good products were two contradictory goals. People almost always did whatever was easiest, and thus the pursuit of money often beat out the pursuit of quality. I saw here a request from a fellow freelance grindset-mindset bro from long, long ago. I couldn't just let him down! I would spread his designs to workshops far and wide throughout the Kingdom. He must've written down the design for the lanterns in the hopes that they would someday shed light in places like the monster forest or

ultimate dungeons… Right? *Boy, I'm going to be* so *rich by the time I'm done…*

It was then that I looked out the window. Yes indeedy, I looked down on, sneered at, scorned, and even stared with contempt at the figures standing below.

"Found ya!"

See, this Cathedral was more than a seal-slash-reverse-Tower-of-Babel. It was a hideout for the faction of the church that had sided with the pope and the Empire, the same faction that had held nefarious sway over the Theocracy since long ago. This domed diaconate domicile was a fortress. It was much sturdier than any normal Cathedral had a right to be. Worse, it was a den of self-important, fanatical, racist, intolerant zealots. The church was a cancer, and brother, it looked like we had to operate. *Yup. Time to cut 'n slice 'n burn this pestilence away. Let's go scorched earth and destroy every priest among them. It's only the kind thing to do.*

"I would knock and introduce myself, but why not skip that and go straight to the Meteor part? Nice to meet ya, and buh-bye."

I used Air Walk to fly high up into the air. *Target spotted.* A target I'd been hunting for a very, very long time. The resultant beat-down was too long in coming.

DAY 115

MORNING

I love when my loot delivers itself to me. Yeah, call that a Loot Crate?

THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

WELCOME TO THE HOLY CITY. First stop? The Cathedral.

A woman from the Shino clan noticed us amid a throng of Theocracy soldiers and Knights of the Scriptures. She opened a hole in the press and guided us through the city streets to the Cathedral.

It had lost its pure, holy brilliance that once made it shine like a star. Now, it looked like a ruin that could collapse at any moment.

“Is that…the Cathedral?”

“That crumbling ruin?”

“P-preposterous…”

A crowd of civilians stared at the Cathedral from a careful distance. A mix of warring emotions played across their faces as they watched the symbol of the church’s authority decay before their eyes. We couldn’t linger here, though. Our fight was elsewhere—in the dome that had tumbled from the Cathedral’s roof. The church’s last bastion… A bastion being bombarded by boulders! In the eye of that rocky rainfall, we spotted a shadowy figure. There! There was our target!

“Um…can someone explain what the hell is going on here?!”

“What? I’m just announcing myself before I come inside? Knock-knock with a rock-rock?”

So this was…a knock on the door. Uh-huh.

The boulder fusillade reached a fever pitch. The dome’s doors spilled open, and a swarm of church knights flew out like bees ready to defend an attacked hive. They didn’t get far, though. Nefertiri-san saw to that.

“We’ll help!”

“No! I need you guys to use your skills to find the enemy.”

“Got it!”

Our skills pinged when they picked up a group of people oozing murderous malice. This bunch of evildoers dotted the crowd of ordinary civilians still standing around the Cathedral. They looked like regular Theocracy civilians, but the evil twinkles in their eyes showed they were anything but. Really, they were almost too easy to pick out of the crowd.

Between the knights streaming out of the Cathedral, the skulking figures creeping up on us out of the crowd, and the...the column of golems marching out of the dome (???), chaos erupted in the streets. The pandemonium was a boon to our opponents; the townsfolk became their weapon. The biggest threats—the most treacherous fanatics—hid themselves in the stampeding mob and tried to slip under our noses.

"Tee-hee! Not on my watch!" *Smaaaash!*

Fanatics were fanatics. You know—not all there upstairs. Using reason on them was of no use. We also feared upsetting them and making them go berserk. Above all else, we could not let them get near Haruka-kun. No ifs, ands, or buts. If there was one thing we hated, it was religious fanatics!

"Destroy those statues, girls!"

"*Ja!* With pleasure!"

"Y-you insolent wenches! What do you think you're doing?"

"What devilry is this?!"

First goal: single out the fanatics from the common people. Second goal: keep them far away from Haruka-kun so they couldn't ruin his plans.

"Heretics! Heathens, all of you!"

"Devil take you, you filthy, black-haired demons!"

"To Hell with all of you!"

"Curses! A thousand curses upon you!"

With every expensive statue we destroyed—oh yes, did I mention we were smashing statues?—we flushed a fresh mob of screaming idiots out of hiding. They didn't even have the sense to band together to fight us. They simply threw themselves at us in their anger. We picked them off from a distance with ease.

The fanatics were a threat only when they grouped themselves with civilians because we didn't dare attack innocents. When they swarmed us, spittle flying from their mouths in a mad froth, they were easy picking. Cowards who couldn't put up a good fight. Terrorists.

"Onto the next! A-one, a-two, a-threee!" *Kraaaaash!*

"Stop! Stop, damn you!"

If you care more about these statues than human lives, then take your precious statues and piss off into the wilderness! At least that way, the fanatics couldn't hurt anyone. And, yes, no one would bother seeking out and destroying their statues out there. But these wannabe Pygmalions were already a lost cause. Once a statue outweighed a human life…that was no longer religion. Heck, that wasn't even fanaticism any longer. That was full-blown insanity.

"Third time's the charm!" *Booooom!*

"Kill them! Kill them all! God, strike down those infidels!"

Bow-n'-Arrow Girl fired a line of sniper shots, and when they met their targets, the fanatics exploded in a wreath of black flame. *They're suicide bombers*, I realized. These churchmen were crazed enough to blow themselves up. No wonder Haruka-kun told us they were dangerous. They had bombs strapped to their bodies! These bombs went off whenever the cultists were pierced by sword or arrow. Which, well—we had ways around that.

"Morning stars at the ready, girls! Let's put our daily Haruka-kun bashing training to good use!"

"*Ja!* Morning stars equipped, ma'am!"

We girls could fight at midrange just as well as from afar. Besides, we had the numerical and equipment advantage—not to mention levels. With Haruka-kun's constant help and protection, we were all well over level 100. Armed in his carefully constructed and painstakingly researched armor, nothing and no one was going to kill us. No, nothing was going to get past our custom-made armor Haruka-kun had tailored for fighters of our considerable caliber. And when we'd all been trained by and received recognition from dungeon emperors? Pish. What were a couple of suicide bombers?

Nothing that would hurt Haruka-kun on our watch, that was for sure!

"All units, morning stars at the ready! And…attack!"

"*Ja!* We'll lecture—er, pummel—like our lives depend on it!"

Bodies exploded. Flames mounted; bits of flesh flew every which way. Blood splattered. The battle was a confusing and horrifying mess. The fanatics couldn't get anywhere near us. The moment they charged, they met their demise on the end of a spiky iron ball long before they could detonate themselves. The dead fanatics flew back and exploded on impact with their fellow cultists, setting off chain reactions that took out whole swathes of the horde at once.

No wonder Haruka had struggled against them in the battle for the frontier. For us, though? Killing cultists was like swatting flies. Like taking out the trash. These were the same people who had hurt and burned Haruka-kun while he had tried so valiantly to protect the frontier. This same pack of fools died simply because their church told them to.

They couldn't even fight well! All they knew how to do was kill themselves. And they thought that entitled them to hurt and burn Haruka-kun while he tried as hard as he could to keep the frontier safe!

"How dare they hurt Haruka-kun like that! It's time for them to die!"

"Nefertiri-san said Haruka-kun looked like a walking corpse when she first saw him… Die! Die, die, die!"

"She said she couldn't fathom how he was still walking, let alone breathing. These contemptible curs!"

These exploding church soldiers were Haruka-kun's biggest obstacle in the war with Diorelle. He pulled out every trick in the book to defeat them. And we tore through these same soldiers like they were nothing. It was no surprise that he had struggled against them—not when he had to conserve his MP during the fight.

But that wasn't all, I knew. Something else had stayed Haruka-kun's hand. He must have been wracking his brains, thinking of some way to save them all. Maybe these soldiers were threatened

into becoming suicide bombers, he thought. Maybe they were coerced. *Oh, Haruka-kun.* No wonder he struggled to fight them. Of course Haruka-kun's heart would go out to them.

Not like it made any difference to the fanatics. No, they kept igniting him with their flames. Stabbing him. Snapping his bones. Pulverizing his organs. Slicing him to ribbons. Destroying him in body and soul a thousand times. *If you're so eager to martyr yourselves, go do it on your own! Don't drag other people into it! Run off and reunite with your oh-so-precious god!* We girls would never forgive them for what they had done. From the moment we heard about that battle, the flames of hatred had burned bright in all of us. A hundred years could have passed, and we still would have all our righteous fury to vent!

"C'mere, hot stuff! Or else your precious widdle god statue will meet the business end of my hammer... Whee!" *Krrraaaaaaashhh!*

"Stooooooop!"

More zealots charged us, foam-flecked and bloodshot. *Yeesh, they even* look *rabid! Now they're just asking to get buried in statue rubble...*

"Ooh, this is such a nice one! Aaand, there it goes." *Baaash!*

"Oopsies! I accidentally knocked its arm and head off. Clumsy me!"

"C-curse youuu!"

Dust and smoke billowed from the explosions. Haruka-kun was somewhere on the other side of that thick wall of black smoke. *Finally.* We'd made it.

"Target—Haruka-kun—spotted. Destroy any remaining enemies! Scatter them to the four corners of the winds!"

"Ja!"

We found him—too exhausted to fight—and Nefertiri-san in the middle of a ring of golems. The golems glittered in the sunlight. There were too many of them to count. But Haruka-kun, oh Haruka-kun... He was in a terrible state. Great chunks of flesh had been torn out of his body. He looked like he was on death's doorstep. And still the fight continued; ever eager to rend another strip off flesh off

the opponent, face warped in a diabolic grin was...Haruka-kun. Who else?

You see, his opponents were mithril golems. Haruka-kun wasn't about to pass those up. So, with an evil leer, he slaughtered the teeming hordes of golems. He used Alchemy to melt down their mithril corpses, strip-mining them for resources in a truly ghastly massacre.

"Uh... Aren't those supposed to be the strongest golems there are? The ones resistant to both magical and physical damage?"

"Looks like they've met their maker..."

"Good for Haruka-kun. He's having the time of his life."

The carnage was so brutal I felt bad calling it a battle. Some golems crumbled under the weight of their own bodies. Others were crushed by the sweeping blows of their golem cousins. These massive killing machines were steadily being disassembled to their core components in an Alchemical assault. Each behemoth beast shrunk before our eyes, the other golems falling around them until their might was no more. Golems couldn't show emotion on their faces, but even then, I could have sworn their mithril mugs were frozen in horror.

"Nothing can escape the law of gravity! All apples must drop! All items must be drop items!"

"Last I checked, that's not how gravity works!"

So much for the most fearsome of all golems. The last of the mithril golems dwindled and vanished, turned into so much pure mithril for Haruka-kun. All that was left were the creatures' cores and spellstones. For a moment, everything stood still. There was silence. But this was immediately shattered by Haruka-kun, grinning from ear to ear at his massive windfall. (Behind him, Nefertiri-san facepalmed.)

"Whoa! A bunch of mud golems burbled up out of the swamp behind them, but Nefertiri-san just blasted them to bits...while *still* facepalming! Now that's a secret art."

"The one the legends speak of?!"

"So on one hand, we have the comedy of the mud golems blasting off into the sunset... And on the other, the tragedy of

Haruka-kun strip-mining the mithril golems' corpses. What genre is this again?"

Well, this was why I'd mustered my courage and determination. This was why I'd fought. A series of conflicting emotions fought for dominance inside of me. I'd made it. I'd found Haruka-kun at long last. And now I was such a mess of emotions and impulses that I had no idea what to feel first!

"You'd think fighting off a horde of enemies before reuniting with your long-lost companions would be a bit more touching…"

"Yeah, you'd think…but watching Haruka-kun strip mithril off golems and kick spellstones around is kind of a downer."

"It's like Alchemy mixed all my feelings and sublimated them into pity for those poor golems."

Just looking at their broken mithril bodies brought a tear to my eye. Those pitiful golems never deserved this cruel fate.

Meanwhile, Haruka-kun—completely shameless—touched his hand to a wall of the dome. And just like that, it was all over. The walls were too thick to be destroyed by any physical means; the fortress too impregnable to be harmed by… Actually, I didn't think I could finish that sentence. It turned out it was all too easy for Haruka-kun to strip the sepulchre for scrap. Boulders and golems were Haruka-kun's bread and butter.

"Gosh, we sure are knee-deep in golem cores…"

But not for long. The strong walls of the temple shuddered and warped. Before our eyes, the dome itself began shapeshifting into golems, each finished golem peeling itself off the remains of the wall one by one. The new stone golems marched over to the mud golems still spawning out of the swamp's waters, smashed them to bits of dirt, pulled out their cores, and brought them back to Haruka-kun.

"Thus restarting the process!"

"It's the Ring of the Golem Crafter at work."

"Wait, but isn't that needed in the pseudo-dungeon?"

"Omui and Diorelle aren't at war any longer. Besides, Omui Castle is armed to the teeth. Do we really need the pseudo-dungeon anymore?"

“I heard Haruka-kun stole Diorelle’s Eternal Trap from their castle. Now he’s converted the pseudo-dungeon into a trap maze for adventures to challenge. Business is booming.”

“That is *so* extra.”

“The popularity surge is helping the souvenir shop’s sales too. We’re sold out of almost everything.”

“Except for those awful mushroom-shaped pennants…”

“How many of those darn things do we have anyway?!”

The fortress’s walls crumbled as Haruka-kun made stone golem after stone golem. The destruction was helped along by some of the golems, formerly part of that very same wall, tearing down chunks with their mighty arms. Not surprisingly, the wall soon caved in.

“Just goes to show—never pin your hopes on your walls or dungeons.”

“Yeah. You’d think they’d realize, a master builder is just as good at demolishing.”

Hiding inside a fortress was a silly idea. An absurdity, really. This fortress—which had withstood even Haruka-kun’s unique way of announcing his presence via meteor showers—collapsed in on itself the moment its main structural components were morphed into golems. Wizened old men skittered out of the wreckage. They looked so old and frail they could turn to dust with as little as a poke. Of course, none of us went to their rescue. None of us could forgive them for what they’d done.

I heard a quiet chuckle behind me and turned to look. Haruka-kun may have sounded gleeful, but his eyes teemed with fury. There was only one thing that could have enraged him that badly. These men, I knew, were the ones who had locked away Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san in their dungeons. The ones who had rewarded our friends’ good deeds with such an injustice.

See, Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san had hearts of gold. Their kindness made them go to extremes to keep people safe. It compelled them to fight through pain, through horror—to fight and fight and fight. To protect and protect and protect. To combat tragedy in all its forms.

These old men had made our friends suffer. They belittled their sacrifices and turned their hatred of the dungeon emperors into a religion. They had lived an eternity preaching their deceit as the truth.

And now they screeched, “Help us! Deliver us from this demon, oh ye who have strayed from God’s path!”

“Fight in the name of God, heathens! Ye who do naught but sully God’s name!”

“Kill them! Kill them now!”

“Devil take all of ye!”

Help them? Helping was reserved for those who spent their lives doing good. If they wanted help, they shouldn’t have tricked people. They shouldn’t have backstabbed and bribed their way through life. Now…now when they tried to appeal to our senses of pity, I had no mercy for any of them. I would never have mercy, not if they died in front of my very eyes. I would never forgive, not after eons passed and their graves were long forgotten.

“Tee-hee. You mad?”

“Why should we listen to what you say when you’ve never atoned for your sins?”

“You’re this old, and you’re *still* set in your evil ways? That just makes it worse!”

Didn’t they have any inkling how long Angelica-san was alone, deep down in the dark depths of her ultimate dungeon? Didn’t they understand how long Nefertiri-san had fought against the darkness, what lengths of agony she endured, all to keep the world safe? In their eternal solitude, they could only wait in the vain hope that someone would someday come and slay them. For that—that perfidy, I could never forgive these old men. Not these aged and wizened figures, not these bruised and battered elders, not men soon to be cold and rotting in their graves. Now these men, these same men, dared look to me for help. Oh, I would grind them into the dust under my heels. I could never, ever forgive them for what they’d done. Death was not enough to redeem them, but by god was it better than leaving them alive!

“We are messengers of the Lord! Why do you not aid us?”

“Heretics! Kill the boy and his demon wench or else face the Inquisition!”

“Insolence! Know ye this—ours is the only truth. The oldest and only truth!”

In the end, though, it didn’t matter how much these old men made our blood boil. Ours was only petty anger. If they wanted to learn the meaning of real rage, why, they only had to look behind them to the boy looming there with his quiet chuckle.

“Ooh, he’s pissed…”

“And terrifying!”

Heavy fear settled upon the men like dust. It made them tremble, and none had the courage to look back into the face of their doom. The old men struggled to crawl to safety. Arm bones snapped. Fingernails ripped away in their mad scrabbling. On they clawed, fueled by desperation—even as the torsos trailing behind them were shredded to mincemeat, even as the flesh was scoured off their bones. No, they couldn’t look behind them at all. They were too afraid.

Because, see, the old men couldn’t die as long as they had Revival. Out of their fear of death, they’d made their living stealing other people’s happiness, and now it was too late to change their minds and say they’d prefer death’s comforting embrace after all. Death was right behind them. *He* was right behind them. So close. So very, very close.

These men of the church had always taken care to dress themselves in the finest of threads. They made sure their speech telegraphed just how very important they were. Now, too, they screamed in agony and begged for mercy in the finest of fancy manners. But that faux respectability would earn no mercy from us. Not when they had betrayed the most truly respectable people in the world and spat on their unused graves. No, there was not a drop of kindness in our hearts for any of these sinners. Because there were some indignities that no one, *no one*, ever deserved to endure!

And then…

They turned…

To look.

“YAAAAGHHHHhh… Y-ye… AAGHHH…”

“Curse yeaaarrghhhHHHHH!!!”

The terror was too much to be borne, and the old men turned despite themselves. They turned, and looking into Haruka-kun’s dark eyes was like falling into the depths of their soul’s perdition. In his eyes was a bubbling cauldron of molten darkness; the abyss of Hades; a road winding through Hell for eternity.

“What? Weren’t y’all ever taught to make eye contact when you talk to people?”

See, the thing about Spell Eye was that it wasn’t hypnosis. It wasn’t suggestion or imprinting or anything. It was the blackest magic, the evil eye, staring *straight* into your soul.

From the moment the church men locked eyes with Haruka-kun, they were trapped in their own mental hell. Fear carved its lines upon their faces, and their broken bodies spasmed violently. I felt like I was watching demons drag these pitiful souls into an endless, terrible nightmare.

But we girls? Well, we knew what kindness called those evil eyes home. We knew how Haruka-kun kept a watchful eye on the orphan children at play; kept a kind eye out for all of us. Of course his eyes held no fear for us. Of course we never felt afraid of Haruka-kun.

“Wow, it’s like watching Munch’s *The Scream* in real-time.”

“Talk about déjà vu.”

And so sweet revenge was served. It was too late for the papal priests to pay amends. Repentance meant nothing at this stage. We didn’t want their attempts to atone—all we wanted was for them to understand the gravity of their sin and die in horrid agony and fear. I mean, hadn’t I been saying it all along? Even their deaths couldn’t buy forgiveness.

DAY 115

MORNING

Girls! Go bust ghosts somewhere else! Not in the middle of our festival haunted house!

THE RUINS OF THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

SLIMEY AND MISS ARMOR REP were back! Miss Armor Rep hurried over, and Slimey bounced into my arms for a hug. I patted the former on the head as a thank you while the rest of the girls came over...morning stars in hand! The circle of contentious classmates closed around me. Seeing them and their entourage of fully equipped Knights of the Scriptures, the twins ran over too.

“I just *knew* he was picking up more girls!”

“Beastfolk girls to boot.”

Well, this is a problem. I had hoped to ask the girls for advice about the sticky, tricky dungeon emperor backstory sitchy. Fat chance of that now; the girls were armed and morning-star murderous. Teenage boys weren’t the best equipped to understand teenage-girl feelings, much less why morning stars should be so essential. Regardless of the answer, I was terrified of them! *Let’s get outta here!*

“Why are you running?”

“A guilty conscience, eh?”

I whipped out my newest trick, one I’d perfected with the sponge cake—Eat My Suspiciously Rod-Shaped Castella Cake Supreme! As a welcome back gift, I ran from girl to girl, plugging every open mouth I saw. Then, while they were busy chewing, I delivered the report of my flawlessly executed scouting mission. Finally, I scampered back to the ruins of the Cathedral and smashed open the altar in its chapel.

Because that was the entrance to the Cathedral’s ultimate dungeon all along, y’know? The dungeon hadn’t flooded yet, but mana was mounting inside of it. Now that the seal was broken, it was only a matter of time before a stampede broke out. I certainly wasn’t making a clean getaway from those terrifying morning stars!

Why, I wasn't frightened at all! Clearly! Oh, and I left the twins in Class Rep's custody in my absence. Many puzzling problems could be resolved with the same approach—make it Wisdom's or Class Rep's problem. Let *them* figure it out.

"Thanks, Your Repness!"

I mean, I had a job to do, y'know? And Sleeping Beauty was Dancer Girl's friend. Practically speaking, I had next to zero chances of rescuing her. Once the darkness took hold of someone, they were goners. It was miracle enough that Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep weren't possessed by it completely.

Still, even if I couldn't save Sleeping Beauty from the darkness, I could at least give her peace. I could set her free, free of the horrors she'd endured to buy Dancer Girl's safety. I could end the eternal suffering of that saint trapped in the darkness. Besides, if the darkness eventually took over her body and began puppeting her around, it would force her to attack the very same girl she had once sacrificed herself to save. Wasn't that just evil? So, hell. Maybe this was my final mission. And if this was to be my grave...then I was gonna take Dancer Girl with me.

In the story drawn on the mural, this ultimate dungeon had two emperors. One of them was Dancer Girl; the other was still trapped down there. St. Whatever the Holy. The other girl the author of the books with those awful titles wanted to save.

"It's been a while since I've had to say this, but not to be a broken record, and not to beat a dead horse, and not to retread the same ground, and not to belabor the point... Leave some monsters for me?"

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. Bobble bobble.

The usual trio of responses. Felt like a while since I'd seen all three, huh? Anyway... High-speed acceleration, go! Using the undead hellhound's drop item, the Dash Anklet, I zoomed to even faster, speedier, and quicker speeds than ever before! Wheeeee!

"I know you all too well! I know *nod nod*, *rattle rattle*, and *bobble bobble* don't count for nothin'. Based on a wealth of past evidence, I can draw a very reasonable conclusion—it'll be same as it ever was! Monsters will be first come; first served!"

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle. Boing boing*.

A group of ghosts converged in front of us in an attempt to block the path. I blasted right through them, never slowing a moment, and exorcised the place with a few swipes of my crowbar-like instrument. Then I was off again. New floor; new monster mob. I dispatched these with a nice big bonfire, and on I zoomed.

"I finally have the speed to keep up with the dungeon emperors. Problem is, it only works in a straight line. Courses with lots of twists and turns are tough on this ol' racecar of mine!"

My feet barely touched the ground thanks to the fine grip of the "Adhesive Boots: Allows the user to stand on walls and ceilings." I liked the cushioning, too; the Adhesive Boots felt just like a nice pair of sneakers. Their trait was perhaps not the most exciting in the world, but it worked well with the rest of my equipment. I also had plenty of their lesser effective cousins, the Adhesion Boots I won off the various salamanders—I think they were called Inquisitors?—crawling the walls and ceilings of the Cathedral. With a few tune-ups, I could put them on the market for my classmates.

"That was fast! Miss Armor Rep, you've already mastered the art of tongbei sword? It's supposed to be an ancient art developed over hundreds of years… What a shame you discovered its secrets in seconds…"

I blew through the first thirty-six floors without slowing down once. Reason was, I didn't have to waste any time thinning out the monster hordes. The monsters were weak enough that the resident teenage killing machines could handle them without breaking a sweat. I knew the girls well—they had probably trained in our brief time apart to keep me from worrying about them. Well, I did worry, but not about *them*. If they ever returned to Earth, would everyone *else* be okay?

"Hey! Cutting a new racetrack with your sword is cheating! Oh, are you kidding me—is that a tongbei jiggle?! You're not even using it to send enemies flying! Well, you are—but you're launching yourself forward at the same time! And at max velocity, too!"

Honestly, the monsters were weak enough that the combo of Universe Staff and the crowbar-like instrument was a waste of my MP. But I couldn't afford to discard an opportunity to practice my

skills before reaching the bottom dungeon. I knew for certain I'd find the darkness on the lowest floor.

Besides, if I didn't use every trait at my disposal, I was going to be left in the dust! This was our first dungeon in days, but the others didn't cut me any slack. I was so busy running I didn't get to pop any cool poses anywhere past the 1st floor!

"Go, tongbei crowbar-like instrument! Fight, tongbei crowbar-like instrument! Get 'em, tongbei crowbar-like inst—okay, this is a mouthful. Can I just call it a crowbar now? I feel like I don't need to stress that it's not technically a crowbar every time I mention it."

Jiggle jiggle?

Now that I was in a dungeon for realsies, I got to stress test the "Demon Robe: All stats +30%. Complete Strengthening. Magic Control (ultra). MP Flow Rectification. MP Cycle Multiplication. Trait Synergy Adjustment." It buffed Entanglement but didn't make me lose control entirely. I even felt like it was easier to fine-tune my inner workings than normal. It would've been nice if the buffs' stabilization features balanced out the buffs' self-destructive side effect, but we couldn't have everything in life. As ever, the Demon Robe contributed to the overall destructive mess that was my body.

"Hey, Dancer Girl? If you teach all the others your new trick, I won't be able to keep up with you gu—what the?! Did you just tongbei triangle kick yourself into going even faster?! Can someone remind me what tongbeiquan is supposed to be? At this point, I've completely lost track!"

Miss Armor Rep dashed. Slimey surged. Dancer Girl scampered (and smirked at me, darn her). Gah! Most of the monsters in my path turned into spellstones long before they met the business end of my crowbar-like instrument. It was extremely tricky getting a leg up over these three dungeon-emperor companions. If I paused to make a cool pose for even a millisecond, they performed a mass extinction event on the local monster population!

"It's kinda hard to look cool with a crowbar-like instrument, come to think it... Yeah, I just kinda look like a construction worker?"

Wiggle wiggle.

Eh, whatever. I did get to slaughter my way through an entire church of old dudes. Without any recent revenge sessions, the empresses must have had a lot of steam to let off. That, and they were enamored with tongbeiquan.

“Okay, tongbei bobble is broken-level strong. I didn’t even know you could tongbei blast a ghost!”

Bob…ble…bob…ble!

The dungeon emperors were so fast because they leaped from target to target instantaneously, choosing the shortest possible route every time. They smashed headfirst into enemies at their ridiculous velocities, killing foes in the same breath as the initial encounter. This technique was only made possible by the extermination squad—ahem, the girls—following behind us. Thanks to Martial Qi Wizardry, our bodies were trained to perform at maximum efficiency. Every move was perfectly rational; no motion lacked purpose. This was what made it possible to battle at supersonic speeds. *Growth spurts are something else!*

“We knocked out fifty floors in no time flat. Hey, our first dungeon boss! It’s been too lo—oh, you just did a hit and run on it, huh… It really *has* been too long; I’ve forgotten how this works. So did the dungeon boss. Didn’t anyone ever teach it not to stand in the middle of the road? Er, dungeon path?”

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Jiggle jiggle*.

I didn’t even know what the boss was. Had been. Whatever. By the time we came to a screeching halt, the four of us had tongbei flattened it, leaving it to go down in history as an unknown boss. At least it left a spellstone.

“It was probably just another ghost, anyway. This dungeon is ghost central.”

Wiggle wiggle.

The boss had popped out of the ground as we barreled into the 50th floor, and the momentum had carried us right on through it. Maybe it had wanted to return to its ghostly roots and jump scare us like something out of a horror movie. Still, it should have known better than to stand in the way of dungeon divers leaping stairs five at a time with Super-Speed.

“Dungeon boss drop items! Aww, sweet nostalgia… Although I don’t remember the actual fight? Eh, who cares! It’s good to be dungeon diving with the gang again.”

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Jiggle jiggle*.

During our final days on the frontier, I had solo’d several dungeons to finish fine-tuning the command of my skills. Slimey and Stalker Girl had come along to chaperone me. Before long, I grew used to fighting alongside a cheery crew of companions. I even kind of missed getting the gang together and taking on dungeons. *Ahh, there’s nothing so nostalgic as the daily routine of the dungeon emperors swiping the monster kills out from under my nose!*

If I wasn’t careful, they would have wiped this place clean before I got my crowbar-like instrument on a single monster. Outside of the couple of ghosts I ran over and the golems I beaned outside, I netted barely any kills. Sure, there were the old dudes I set on fire, but apart from those…the dungeon emperors stole all the kills!

“But at least I can keep up, thanks to Ultra Super-Speed! Provided I don’t do any poses, that is.”

I fell behind the dungeon emperors whenever I entered an encounter thanks to a few slightly—triflingly, really—unnecessary movements. But for the most part, I could easily slaughter every monster as I ran. That was a huge improvement! One small step for Haruka, one fatal leap for monster-kind! *I feel kinda bad for killing them all by running them over…*

“Let’s see now… This boss dropped a pair of ‘Spiked Boots: Power, Speed, Dexterity +30%. Acceleration +30%. Sudden Super-Speed. Sudden Braking. Suction. Wall + Ceiling Walking.’ Whoa! If I wear these, maybe I can stop myself without skidding all over the place. Too bad this dropped *after* I ran the boss over… Bit late, don’tcha think? Anybody want these?”

Shake shake. *Nuh-uh*. *Quiver quiver*.

“C’mon, guys! Use your words. Dancer Girl, you were a regular chatterbox just yesterday! Fine. I’ll keep the boots for myself. You guys can have a snack instead. Happy?”

Nod nod! Rattle rattle! Jiggle jiggle!

The castella cake was a hit. That was one perk of cultural exchange—fantastic desserts. *Thank you, Portugal!*

"Feels like forever since we've had dungeon snack time… although it was snack time left and right in the Cathedral."

I fed Slimey slice after slice of castella and patted his fine curves. He was just so delightfully wiggly-jiggly! I would have loved to caress the fine curves of Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl too, but those could wait. I couldn't afford to get distracted when there was an unsealed ultimate dungeon in the middle of a city. Even if I'd wanted to sneak in a quick squeeze, I couldn't. It never ended at just a squeeze!

"Problem is, I dunno what to switch out for these new boots. They do the job of the Adhesive Boots, but what about my lovely grip and cushioning?"

However, when I slipped them on anyway, I found that the Spiked Boots were a noticeable upgrade in both departments. They were perfectly non-slippy. The grip was so strong that a sudden stop made me lose my balance and nearly fall until I got more practice. I realized that I could control the grip mentally, and when I turned it down a notch, the opposite happened—I was slipping and sliding all over the place! There was so much slippage, I started to worry. What if my grades slipped when I was in this critical period right before college entrance exams?! I felt like I was skating on ice!

"If I keep slipping up, I'll slide my way right into the principal's office!"

I needed some serious fine-tuning to master the art of the grip. I only wanted just as much grip as was needed to stop myself, and that required delicate maneuvering. *If I can pull this off, this solves my high-speed battle problems. Let's give it some practice. Wisdom, take control and do your worst!*

My feet suctioned themselves to the ground. They stuck fast for a millisecond even at those supersonic seeds, sending me flying forward with an even bigger push each time. Too big of a push! I kept falling down, but I got up again—*ain't never gonna keep me down! Or stop me from crashing into walls! Or having high-speed monster collisions!* Well, at least I was fast. I even crashed and burned at super high speed!

I used Gravity magic to make myself lighter and Martial Qi Wizardry to speed myself up further. I filled my meridians with *qingqi*—light qi—and used Super-Speed. Once I added Air Walking to the mix, I had a complex 3D locomotion technique to zip and zoom my way through the dungeon.

"...That is, do my best pinball impression by smashing into every wall, floor, and ceiling in my way... But at least I'm fast!"

Among the wisdom of the sages who attained divinity through mastery of qi, qingqi activation was one of the coolest techniques. Also called *qinggong*, this technique allowed a person to make themselves lighter and sprint several times faster than their regular speed. They could even run across water or up walls at that brisk clip. Hell, in the right mindset, a sage could run through the air or springboard off the leaves falling from a tree. These sages could perform all sorts of superhuman feats with the right techniques. I wasn't sure how qinggong differed from Air Walking, but...who cared?

"It leaves me vulnerable to wind, though. Every time a dungeon emperor passes me, the *whoosh* blows me off course! I'll have to be real careful if I use this outside. One stiff breeze, and I'm bobbing like laundry on a line!"

Combined with Air Walking, I could fly for real. However, I'd only gained a new cause of untimely crashes—the wind. That, and my lack of reliable landing method. I wound up crashing with no wind at all!

...At least I was fast!

I surged through a herd of dull metallic golems. Dodging each swing of their mighty arms like a martial arts master pinging off of falling leaves, I wove and slashed my way through the mob. My body was so light it could be buffeted by the wind—and there was plenty of wind generated by those titanic arms! I fluttered on the gusts, pushed along and out of harm's way.

Then I killed my consciousness. Mentally, I was nothing. None. As close as humanly possible to nirvana. In this state, every attack glanced off me like water. Even the impacts left no mark on me. *Talk about a cheat skill!* But pulling it off properly like a sage of legend was definitely a chore.

“Hey, Dancer Girl? Could you please stop randomly fanning me with the Dancer’s Mirage Fan? A few minutes ago, I had the oddest sensation that something was wrecking my control, and when I look up, what do I find? You fanning me like your life depends on it! Man, this would be a bad skill to combine with sudden updrafts…”

I ran. I dashed. I slid and scooted, pulverizing monsters in my wake. *Three cheers for the spikes!*

Evil spirits dropped down from the ceiling with no warning, blocking the path ahead. *You know what that means—high-speed tongbei double dropkick! Outta the way!*

To perform pseudo-qinggong, I needed to power my attacks with either qi or magic. See, the lighter I made myself, the faster I became—but the less destructive, due to my lowered weight. Hence the need for tongbei qi activation attacks.

“Honestly, ghosts are feeling kinda overused? It’s killing the horror vibes of this dungeon. Also, it’s just sort of a pain at this point?”

I mean, speaking as a high school boy, I was always happy for a timely ghost appearance causing a hot young thing to scream “EEEEEEEEK!” and grab onto me, hard. In fact, I made a “hot young things welcome” sign for that exact purpose!

“Where are you, scaredy-cat girls? All the girls I know just go after ghosts with swords… Modern-day girls are liable to slash ghosts as soon as they see them. They’re killing the horror industry! Next thing you know, they’ll attack their classmates at school festival haunted houses and get banned from the event!”

Right now, I could control myself when I used 50 percent or less of my power. Really, I could hardly feel the self-destruction at all. *Time to ratchet it up to 60 percent on the 60th floor.* With solid strategies like these, it was a mystery that no one ever trusted me with their money.

DAY 115

MORNING

Hey! Why is my bullying radar pinging? I'm not even there! What are you saying about me up there?!

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY

"HE GAVE US A TASK, girls, and if we let him down now, we'll disgrace the good name of us girls!"

"Ready for orders, ma'am!"

I had a million things I wanted to say to Haruka-kun, only beaten out by the billion questions I had for him. But now wasn't the time. Haruka-kun had given us all a job to do, and by god were we going to do it. He'd also given us castella cake—and that was too tasty! I would have to be content with that for now. If I couldn't perform the task Haruka-kun left for me, then what had I been training for all this time?

We walked past the twitching, groaning old mummy men without sparing a backward glance. Haruka-kun saw us—and our morning stars—and jumped in fear. He quickly declared he had urgent business elsewhere, and he and the dungeon emperors scuttled off to the entrance of the underground dungeon.

"So much plundering and pulverizing to do, and so little time! Farewell, girls! I'm off to make my dungeon comeback and exact revenge for the awful time I had in that first ultimate dungeon all those weeks ago!"

"Okay!" I said. "We'll be ready to come help at any time. Just say the word."

Our two newest members turned to me. "Thank you for having us."

They were the two beastfolk girls Haruka-kun had picked up. He asked me to keep an eye on them, and they joined the rest of our little pod. Nefertiri-san vouched for their fighting skills too. I decided I'd put them through their paces on the upper floors, learn their fighting styles, and eventually fold them into the rest of the

group's formations on the mid-floors. Safety first, after all. These girls were not going to get hurt on my watch, not after Haruka-kun had saved them. After all, Haruka-kun had saved all of us too!

"You can call me, uh, Class Rep," I said. "What do you want us to call you?"

"Yes, what are your names?" Vice Rep A clarified.

"Ooh, are you twins?" asked Vice Rep B.

The girls were the picture of politeness but never introduced themselves... I had the sneaking suspicion I knew exactly what was going on...

"O-oh? Do humans call one another by their names too?"

"Mr. Haruka never asked us for our names once. I thought humans kept their names a secret, perhaps... Is that not the case, Miss Class Rep?"

I hate it when I'm right. Surprise, surprise—Haruka-kun had struck again. At least Nefertiri-san could have asked for their names! She was right there the whole time! But no. Now the sisters thought humans simply didn't use names at all. Haruka-kun managed to deal damage to the reputation of the entire human race just by existing.

"Um, well... Mr. Haruka calls me Bunny Girl, but my real name is Sasha. I'm a beastfolk girl of the bunny tribe, and this is my twin sister. I'm grateful to be here, Miss Class Rep."

"My father was part of the wolf tribe, you see. That's why Mr. Haruka calls me Wolf Girl. Oh, and my name is Nesha! Neshy for short."

Wow, introductions with names? That was new. I knew we'd all be referring to them by their nicknames in—oh, give it three days—but it was nice to hear a real name again for a change. I hadn't heard most of my classmates' names in months... I supposed it was because it was easier to go with the flow and accept the nickname brain rot. It was, admittedly, a little sad whenever someone called me by name, and it took me a second to react. *Maybe I should make us all name tags...*

"All right. Are we ready, girls? Let's roll out!"

"Ja!"

So, beastfolk twins in tow, we set off. Or I should say—Bunny Girl and Wolf Girl in tow. *Thank god Haruka-kun didn't call them something stupid like Bunbalina or Wolfette…*

"We're off! Sasha-san and Nesha-san, I want you to rotate around each party and provide backup where needed. Your job is to learn all our fighting styles as best you can. Got it?"

"Ja!"

The twins were still only around level 70, but they were plucky young things. They had speed, precision, and the power to pack a punch. Their senses rivaled the jocks', but unlike our resident athlete squad, they had basic common sense and the ability to follow orders. Beastfolk were the best of all the near-human races at close-quarters combat, and of all beastfolk, these girls far outstripped the rest. They were natural fighters.

"They're fast *and* fluid. D'you think they could make good mobile units?"

"Nesha-san could do hit-and-run attacks, while Sasha-san could handle direct assaults. How does that sound?"

"Seconded. I think they'd do best without shields. Shields would only slow them down."

"Sure. I'm just amazed how they can be both fast and strong."

"Yeah! They must have trained so hard."

They each fought in a completely different way, but their styles meshed beautifully. Each had her own favorite techniques that she melded with the unique capabilities of her racial abilities. The twins glided from foe to foe, killing monsters with deceptive ease. Even now, on the 7th floor, I felt like I wasn't seeing anywhere near their true capability. The monsters were just too easy for them.

"Is it just me, or are there tons of ghosts in here? Not to mention golems…"

"Since when was our first reaction to ghosts to punch and slash the heck out of them? Have we been brainwashed?"

"You're right! Whipping out my sword is second nature now."

"Hey, guys? You know we literally have Purification spells, right?"

The 10th floor marked a sizable increase in the number of monster mobs, but it was no sweat for us. We weren't the same girls who had struggled on the 10th floor of the first ultimate dungeon months and months ago. If we saw a Sphinx now, we'd run immediately. Our first encounter with the Sphinx ended poorly because we were so scared and tetchy about Haruka-kun. I had tried to push everyone on, even the boys, but I hadn't been in my right mind then. I would never make such a bad decision again. It was my duty as the class's commander to lead them well… Right, what was a Class Rep supposed to be again?

"Circle formation! Lure the monsters in!"

"Ja!"

Vice Rep B took Sasha-san under her wing. Vice Rep A did the same with Nesha-san. Leticia-san, the girl Haruka-kun had dubbed Caretaker Knight Girl was learning the ins and outs of fighting in parties from Arianna-san and Vice Rep C. There sure were a lot of us now. I felt a little weird saying it, but I couldn't help but notice—we were all quite attractive young women. Haruka-kun called us the Teenage Knights of the Round Table—which was fine—but also sometimes the Round Teenage Knights of the Table—which was not! I clearly needed to give him a lesson on femininity. Or a knuckle sandwich. Whichever came first!

"We're falling so far behind Haruka-kun."

"That's because the dungeon emperors are with him."

"Oh, true. They must be racing again."

Our role was to follow behind and mop up any straggling enemies. We could not let monsters slip past us and loose into the city. The Knights of the Scriptures were stationed at the entrance in case our dragnet failed, so that was some comfort. Besides, I think any monster that managed to get that far would've been terrified to be set upon by a squad of sword-licking weirdos.

"I sense enemies—level 10 spear spirits. They have Illusion and Phantom."

"All right, draw them in. The moment they reach us, exterminate them."

"Ja!"

There was no hurry. Now was a good time to practice fighting party fighting. I mean, we girls weren't going all the way to the bottom. There was a freaking dungeon emperor down there! What could we be expected to do against an enemy even more powerful than Angelica-san or Nefertiri-san? Our strength was in numbers, and that was where we were most helpful. Wiping out all the monsters in a dungeon was a tedious, time-consuming task. We could split up and take care of it for Haruka-kun while he took care of the dungeon emperor for us.

"I thought ultimate dungeons would have a lot more floor bosses than we're seeing."

"Like a floor boss stands a chance stopping Haruka-kun and the dungeon emperors…"

"Yeah, that's fair. Poor dungeon."

"Girls, stay in your circle formations, but spread out. I want you to kill every monster you see! Arts club girls, you're on cleanup duty. Mop up the rest of the monsters in front of the stairs."

"Ja!"

We parried the spear spirits and hacked them to ribbons on the counterattack. A hundred spears met their end on a hundred swords. Our worth was in our numbers, our tenacity, and our assistance. And that was fine with me! I was happy to rout these phantom pikestaffs and send them back to the beyond where they belonged. We didn't even get hurt in the process.

"Haruka-kun's group is a murder machine! OP, high-damage, super-fast butt-kicking champions, all of them."

"We're spending more time picking up spellstones than fighting monsters!"

If you wanted to reach the bottom floor of a dungeon quickly, you couldn't go wrong with sending Haruka-kun's high-speed assassin force to blast through the upper floors. Handling the cleanup and letting them do their work was a worthwhile endeavor, to my mind. It beat sitting around being miserable and feeling like we had no purpose.

"That's the last of them! All spirit spears defeated."

“Do we have any equipment that would help us fight all these ghosts?”

“I’m not sure. Let’s stay with our usual gear. The last thing we want is to embarrass ourselves and slow down Haruka-kun by making him have to come rescue us.”

Ultimate dungeons had more high-level monsters than regular dungeons. We couldn’t afford to take any chances.

The frontier’s ultimate dungeon was a hell zone of poison and other status ailments. Here, psychic attacks were all the rage. Our armor protected us from status ailments, letting us push ahead with sheer numbers and force. We didn’t need any flashy strategies or brilliant tricks. Just good ol’ monster-exterminating elbow grease. Our role was to handle all the drudgery so Haruka-kun could save time and MP. It may not have been the most glamorous work, but it was teamwork. And that counted. It felt good to finally be working alongside Haruka-kun. Now was our chance to show him just how well we could perform our roles!

“Oh, yes! He said we had to go undercover, but I just didn’t understand why. I’ve never seen a less priestly priest than Mr. Haruka! The moment we walked into town, he began wreaking havoc.”

“Mm-hmm. He went from storehouse to storehouse, said, ‘Ooh, loot!’ and pilfered everything in sight. Everything! Weapons, armor, food…anything and everything!”

Sasha-san and Nesha-san’s detailed stories gave me a good idea of what exactly had happened. Sure enough, Haruka-kun had stumbled across them in the middle of his spy-slash-rampage mission. He rescued them, their mother, and scores of other beastfolk the church had enslaved.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that’s all it was. For a minute, I was worried he had actually pulled off being sneaky…”

“Blowing up church buildings, mauling soldiers, and pillaging storehouses is much more on brand for Haruka-kun.”

“He destroyed all those key military bases so we could liberate the cities more easily.”

See, we had been worried when Haruka-kun reported encountering no enemies on his search-n'-destroy-n'-pillage-n'-slash-n'-burn mission. Turns out, he meant there were no enemies *left* after he was done with them.

"I sure felt bad for the church army by the time we came across them. No food, no weapons… Some army!"

"Right? Without their weapons and armor, they weren't looting towns. The townsfolk were beating them!"

"Maybe we should have called Haruka-kun's job a sabotage mission."

"Yeah, recon shouldn't render the enemy helpless. That's next-level scary recon!"

Only the walking calamity himself would have classified his efforts as sneaky. He even provided me a report of his findings later—never mind that I insisted I didn't need one. I didn't need to read it, either. I already knew what it said: All hostile forces were neutralized.

"He gave free clubs and food to the townsfolk too."

"Mm-hmm. To Haruka-kun, the product of people's toil and labor isn't the same thing as loot."

"All the townsfolk were quite grateful for his kindness… although absolutely none of them believed it made him a priest."

"Yes, Mr. Haruka made a very conspicuous figure, what with all the climbing up walls and peeping around corners."

"Yeah, that's…that's Haruka-kun in a nutshell."

Nefertiri-san submitted a sizable report of her own. Once this dungeon crisis was settled, we girls needed to hold an emergency meeting. Perhaps even a mission debriefing (read: a nice, friendly chat) complete with morning stars and lectures.

That aside, the important part of Haruka-kun's report detailed Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san's backstories. This was the part he wanted to ask us for help with. Likewise, he also mentioned that Nefertiri-san's friend was likely the emperor of this dungeon. His chances were slim, he said, but he wanted to rescue her from her cruel fate. Failing that, he wanted to end her pained existence and deliver her into the gentle sleep of death. That was bound to be

hard on Nefertiri-san. He was worried about how she would take it. Furthermore, if Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san regained their memories, he said they might choose to leave us and go their own separate ways.

"...Haruka-kun is, like, completely clueless."

"Jupiter Eye can see everything, but it doesn't give him one bit of insight into girls' feelings."

"Right? Why would knowledge of Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san's pasts make any difference to them?"

They were so happy with us. Every day brought them such satisfaction and joy. Why would remembering their backstories change anything? Hadn't they been saying since, like, forever just how much they valued the present? Admittedly, they did spend a lot of time dwelling on the *recent* past...by which I meant the escapades of the previous night.

"Wisdom may know everything, and Jupiter Eye may see everything, but Haruka-kun is still the biggest, dumbest doofus we know!"

"Right? It's not just Angelica-san and Nefertiri-san. We feel the same way ourselves."

"For someone so sensitive in bed, he's completely insensitive in the *head*... How can he always have sex on the brain and fail to understand the opposite sex?"

As much as I wanted to ask our dungeon emperor friends about their pasts, I imagined, to them, those were nothing more than some old, forgotten stories. The events transpired so long ago it probably felt like they had happened to someone else. By now, their current happiness was far more important than dusty tales of betrayals that happened centuries before.

Why worry about a past that was long gone? Why not enjoy the moment and live in happiness?

DAY 115

MIDMORNING

Excuse me, I'd like to speak to the manager of the universe. Could you stop sending cringe equipment my way?!

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 60TH FLOOR

LEGEND CLAIMED A FLOOR BOSS once haunted the hallowed halls of the 60th floor. Or rather, it still did? Kinda? In spellstone form? Now this dungeon's denizens were the smirking trio of Miss Armor Rep, Dancer Girl, and Slimey.

"Oh, the humiliation! Canossa has nothing on me! No shame exists like that of a disgraced teenage boy!"

I had been in the lead just moments ago! Moments!!! Just as I shot ahead of the pack, I spied a sharp S-curve in the road ahead. Next thing I knew, I slammed into it, ricocheted off the walls in a way that would've made any pinball proud, and by the time I rolled to a stop, the boss battle was over. I hadn't outpaced the dungeon emperors. They'd just slowed down!

"Who's in charge here? The dungeon emperor? They oughta put a sign up: Slow—Sharp Turn Ahead! This is a hazard for all the unwary interlopers among us!"

Smirkity smirk.

The spellstone was a little on the larger side. It was also translucent and seemed to be almost pure magic. This had been a boss of some weight, then. Pity I didn't know its name or, hell, what it even was. Probably a ghost. Good thing ghosts were used to dying, because getting squashed by a trio of dungeon emperors was a particularly uncomfortable sendoff.

"This whole dungeon is nothing but ghosts and golems. Outside of the usual bats and scorpions and whatnot. Really feeling the 'g' theme, aren't we? What's next? Goya melons?"

Nod nod? Rattle rattle? Wiggle wiggle?

Based on their confusion, maybe goya melons didn't exist in this world. Too bad. That meant less goya stirfry for me.

Man, had it been too long since I'd seen a pair of hot bods packed into too-tight armor. The sexy nun habits were undoubtedly hotter, but the novelty of seeing such beautifully defined bodylines was too much to pass up.

"Let's wrap this up quick and hoof it on back to the inn! A world of adventures and dreams awaits! As the poets say, 'tis distance lends enchantment to the view and girds the loins in valor true. My loins have a lot of valor built up and are ready to let loose!"

Time to wrap this up pronto! Onto the 70th floor! Between the ricocheting tongbei bobble fiend and the pinballing teenage me, it was a dead heat! And as I once again enjoyed a fine sample of the girls glaring at me from the rear, I sped up again. Wait, now I couldn't stop! Between my new gear and my new braking ability, my traits and skills were clashing, rebounding, and playing off each other for a complete and total uncontrollable mess!

Bit by bit, I managed to get the hang of it. Sorta. As I smacked into and bounced off every wall in sight, I dispatched ghosts with mighty swings of my Universe-Crowbar-like instrument. The momentum of the swings spun me around further, and I tumbled into more walls, ricocheted off those, and hurtled away at even faster speeds.

I was as light as a feather, and my qinggong was almost impossible to control. It felt weird—I didn't recognize this sensation at all. I didn't know how to visualize what was going on. It also didn't help that Dancer Girl kept fanning me!

"Miss Armor Rep, don't you start too! Blowing on me isn't going to help! I mean, I'm always down for blowing on my earlobe to fan the flames of passion…but that can wait until we've cleared this dungeon! We can't stop now for a hanky-panky break. What if the girls caught up and caught us in the act? They have preteens with them, y'know? I don't want them getting an eyeful of me getting a handful… I can see it now! Age-rating violations left, right, and center!"

Slippin' 'n slidin' as I went, I snagged a mysterious scrap of cloth off the floor and used Appraisal in and around collisions with the nearby landscape. It was the drop item of that anonymous boss—a cloak called "Black Demon's Bladed Wings: All stats +30%.

Slashing Boost (hyper). Flight Boost (large). Sword Feather Spawning."

"Huh. The anonymous boss musta been a black demon of some kind. Probably flew around and had swords for wings. Too bad it had an untimely crash before it ever took off."

The traffic problem in this world was really getting out of hand. It was like collisions followed me everywhere I went! Especially in dungeons!

"In a world where people can use Ground Shrink, Blinding Step, and Flight, you'd think they'd have traffic schools or flight classes for repeat offenders. I can't believe there aren't even any overworld traffic regulations! That's just asking for trouble. And you know what's worse? People get mad at me whenever I fly inside that one town with no name and no signboards. It's ridiculous! I'm a victim of this traffic chaos. A victim, I tell you!"

Jiggle jiggle.

Just as I said that, a group of phantoms materialized out of a wall at one end of the hall. Others oozed up from the floor or dripped down from the ceiling. They just kept coming, eventually blanketing the path. It was dramatic, almost overwhelming. Like, I could applaud the effort, but it wasn't spooky? Because Jupiter Eye saw them before they materialized?

"Also, we kinda crossed through the hall while you were still popping out of the wall? And now that you're done, we have no need to walk back through? Y'know? We're moving too fast; no time to stop and chat!"

We zoomed through so quickly we confused the slowpoke ghosts. They floated over to the doorway and looked around in confusion. I used that opportunity to snipe them in the back with a blast of Holy magic before I carried on my way. I still had no idea what Holy magic did when it wasn't utilized in a sneaky ninja way, but... Oh well! I couldn't stop to find out, or else I'd lose out to the dungeon emperors!

While I struggled with the control issues caused by my new cloak, I stumbled upon a mob of level 69 magma golems. Heat radiated off them, and goopy, gloppy bits of magma oozed from their clastic carapaces. That meant the floor boss was up next! If

monsters signaled the presence of a boss, maybe they were the next best thing to an org chart…

“Go, tongbei water! No, not *bay water*—not even water from a nice lagoon! I said tongbei water! Here, I’ll explain. Tongbei water is based on the ancient teachings of a certain individual who said, ‘If monsters are molten lead, douse them with a lake!’ Basically, take your magma golems, add water to taste, and serve chilled. Nothing to do with tongbeiquan, y’know? Wait, why am I getting glared at?”

The world will never know…

Anyway, the magma golems were now decidedly past tense. The water turned into steam immediately, causing a massive explosion. The golems themselves cooled rapidly, shrinking and hardening until they became cracking, puny versions of regular stone golems.

“Remember, if the water in your vacation destination is not safe to drink, come prepared! Always bring a massive quantity of distilled frontier water and magma golems with you everywhere you go in case of emergencies. Then you’ll never have to worry about the water not agreeing with you! Although it didn’t seem to agree with the magma golems…”

Luckily, the flood of water that went roaring down the stairs also nearly snuffed out the level 70 Flare Ghost on the floor below! I rushed in as fast as I could and tried to beat out the flames with my crowbar-like instrument. Alas, I was unsuccessful. The poor creature passed away under my ministrations.

Come to think of it, why did I need to rescue a ghost, anyway? It probably would have died no matter what—either bludgeoning or beating out the flames would have done in any Flare Ghost. *Guess it was fate!*

“What was a Flare Ghost doing downstream, anyway? My feverish attempts to quell the flames backfired; alas, both the flares and the Flare Ghost succumbed together. I mean, it was dead anyway. ’Cause it was a ghost?”

Bobble bobble.

Now the floor was soaked, making it even easier to slip. I wanted to register a complaint with the resident dungeon emperor

about the lack of appropriate drainage, but I kept my mouth shut. My experiences with the dungeon emperors standing right behind me warned me not to open my trap. I could already feel them glaring from here. *Ahh, dungeon emperor glares are truly glares like no other. No, thank* you *for the glares.*

"What's the new drop item? I have a bad feeling whatever it is will help with some of the flight control but also speed me up further... Kind of like the Black Demon's Bladed Wings. Conclusion: I'm doomed to smack into walls at high velocity forever."

But if I slammed into monsters, bladed wings first, maybe the monsters could act as cushions and give me a chance to slow down. I took off my dear Invisibility Cloak that I'd once bought from a shifty merchant in town and combined it with the Black Demon's Bladed Wings. Most of my gear was stealth-related, come to think of it. Why, then, did I never get the sense that I was all that stealthy? Hm. *I dunno. Must be my imagination.* At any rate, I popped the cloak off and used Appraisal. It read: "Invisibility Cloak: Undetectability Bonus (miniscule)." Well, that was helpful...not!

"By the way, has Appraisal's level gone up yet? I've never checked. It's such a pain that I can't use it on any items currently equipped."

Still, the Invisibility Cloak had saved me from all kinds of scrapes. It was part of my starting kit, and a valuable part at that. It was time to retire it with honor, fold it up neatly, and sell it to the highest bidder at the next available opportunity. If I put a sign on it that said, "Unused Cloak, Refurbished for Teenage Girl Use" surely one of the girls would snap it up in a heartbeat.

Anyhoo, I pictured the Black Demon's Bladed Wings turning into sorta sleek wing thingies during flight. The wings were enormous, and each feather turned into a sword in use. I was drawn to it—no doubt due to my angelic disposition and saintly lifestyle. *Just...ignore that it's black.*

"I'm a saint, after all! Why should I care if my angel wings are pitch black? Honestly, I'm more concerned that this looks like something I would have drawn back when I was in eighth grade... Yeah, it's kinda cringe."

Dash time. I used the wings to catch the air and steer myself. Now I could finally control myself even at supersonic speeds! I could dash around like I was flying. The best part was that it made me immune to Dancer Girl's fan attack! It was also easy to use. It was basically a wing version of Magic Hands, just with swords already in those hands. It worked well with the rest of my kit. I tried turning a Magic Hand feather into a tentacle, just to see what would happen. The verdict: Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep hugged each other and backed away trembling. *Hey, can I join in?*

Wiggle wiggle!

Slimey was a fan of my experiment, at least. I put the cloak on his head and let him take it for a high-speed test spin. He loved it, and all the monsters he passed along the way were slashed into bits midflight. It was perfect! High speed, crowd control, ease of use—what more was there to ask for?

"It does make the self-destruction a bit worse, but at least I'm not slamming into walls anymore. I think that balances it out, don't you? Yeah, it's just a speed-buffing and cringe-buffing bit of kit."

Jiggle jiggle.

Gliding was easy enough, but proper flying used a ridiculous amount of MP. These wings seemed best suited as support items for Sprint and Air Walking. Not like I had any complaints! It already was a huge help in turning crash landings into smooth glides.

I tested it out on a mob of level 71 ghost gladiators alongside qinggong, trying a few 3D midair maneuvers. It worked great! I swooped through the air, pirouetting and wheeling this way and that, slicing through everything in my path. If I kicked off midair, I could zigzag my way along with Super-Speed. I stabbed, lunged, and swooped away. I let the wind generated by the gladiators' swords carry me higher, dodged the weapons themselves, and let my dual-wielding sword wings do their worst… All that spinning made my dizzy! Urp! Constantly controlling all this 3D motion and calculating my trajectory required huge sums of complex calculations. Good thing Wisdom was up for the task. *I think? Uh, good luck?*

"Okay, but it really guzzles MP. I could use this in dungeons and the frontier, but I'll need to swap it out when I go somewhere

with less ambient mana. Maybe I can find some info on MP optimization techniques in *ehT Collector's Complete Besst of Magic Itembs*…if I can get over that awful title. Look, it's wrong from start to finish. What the hell is 'ehT'? There's 'The' or even 'Teh' if you come from a certain corner of teh interwebz, but 'ehT' doesn't work! That is the one unacceptable option!"

Wiggle wiggle.

"Yes, I suppose wretched misspellings are not a cardinal sin, but seriously? What was that guy on when he wrote that title? And how come only the title is messed up? The books themselves are perfectly fine; you just gotta get past the cover. It's really obnoxious! No wonder all his books are burned or banned!"

Jiggle jiggle.

"Just put some thought into your book titles, okay, people? If I saw this volume on a bookstore shelf back in my world, I would've pulled out the matches in two seconds flat."

As Slimey and I engaged in highbrow dialectic on the future of technology and the relevance or lack thereof of certain titles, I slammed my supersonic crowbar-like instrument into the side of a golem, shattering the creature instantly and spraying bits of rock everywhere.

"Oh, shoot! That was a steel golem. I should've been more careful and melted it down for scrap."

Oh well; it was just steel. I could always mine iron and corundum later as needed. I just felt bad about letting good metal go to waste. Also, my hands were numb from the impact? Ow?

"Next up is the 73rd floor. I'm going to take this one slow because we're starting to run into more difficult monsters. Also, we've only found two hidden rooms so far. I hope they'll start popping up more often from here on out."

I mean, only two hidden rooms and we were in the 70s? What was the world coming to?

Anyway, the steel golems dropped a "Gluttony Greatshield: All stats +30%. Reflection. Gnawing Hunger. +DEF." I liked the traits, but I wasn't sure how I felt about the set of jaws painted on it. Those

slavering maws could've given the Tiny Tanuki a run for her money. *Actually, I think I'm starting to like this shield…*

"I guess I'll sell it to the girls based on whoever needs it most."

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Bobble bobble*.

"I appreciate their effort, but no one likes a try-hard, y'know? Teenage girls are supposed to be all flirty and flighty, not hurty and fighty. At least the nerds and idiots are suitably dweeby and dopey."

There was also a "Smiling Death Mask: Slots three items. Mental Manipulation Perfect Resistance. Perfect Presence Concealment." For the face of a dead guy, it had an awfully big smile. Yeah, that was one creepy-ass smiley face.

That said, it was a great piece of kit. The Perfect Presence Concealment was top-notch, but it radiated so much cringe even an emo junior high schooler would modestly avert their eyes. It was about as bad as the "Nightmare Eyepatch: Resistance, Intelligence +50%. Spell Eye Strengthening. Sorcery. Hypnosis. Mesmerize. Puppetry. Memory Modification. Consciousness Control. Spirit Pollution." Deep, deeeeep into storage it went.

How come Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep tried to make me wear all the cringey stuff? Was this bullying? Were they bullying me for being cringe but free?!

DAY 115

MIDMORNING

Jokes in this dungeon are done to death… No wonder it's full of ghosts!

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 73RD FLOOR

I DECIDED TO GIVE my new drop items a shot. I equipped the "Malice Mashing Mallet: Intelligence +20%. Mental Abnormality Resistance (hyper). Spirit Exorcism."—oh yeah, did I mention I got one of those?—the "Gluttony Greatshield: All stats +30%. Reflection. Gnawing Hunger. +DEF" and the "Smiling Death Mask: Slots three items. Mental Manipulation Perfect Resistance. Perfect Presence Concealment." before charging headlong into a mob of level 73 fear spirits.

These monsters had the Terror, Alarm, Derangement, and Swooning mental abnormality skills. Such a lineup of spooky spirits was…terrified of me? Yeah, they were quaking in their bogey boots?

"Why are you scared of me? What did I do?! I know fear spirits are good at scaring other people despite being 'fraidy cats themselves, but…surely the average teenage boy isn't *that* scary."

Although I guess an average teenage boy in a creepy smiley-face mask armed with a fanged shield and enormous hammer was kinda unsettling. Especially if said boy popped outta nowhere with the intention of ghostbusting a ghoul or two. Still, the fear spirits coulda showed a little more backbone. Such wicked wraiths had no business freaking out over a random teenager.

"Turns out, the Malice Mashing Mallet is surprisingly effective as a ghostbusting device. One swing, and those frightened phantasms go poof! Actually, there wasn't any *poof* at all, which is the weird part. You'd think there'd be some kinda woo-woo exorcism mumbo-jumbo right at the point of clobbering, y'know? There was just a big, physical *thunk*. Nothing really exorcisey about it."

Wriggle wriggle.

"Uh, rude? You two have no right to facepalm at me! I was just doing an equipment test run. This dungeon is full of ghosts and

other psychic phenomena. Isn't it important for me to test special ghostbusting gear?"

Evidently not, as Miss Dancer Rep and Dancer Girl kept slashing their way through the spirits without any special gear at all. They didn't even let all that facepalming slow them down. Still, it never hurt to be cautious.

"All teenage boys like trying new equipment, right? And I've been stuck wearing Villager A's kit since day one. Granted, he's the weirdest Villager A that's ever existed in fantasy. But still."

On we went to the 74th floor, munching rice balls for lunch on the descent down. They hadn't stinted on the horror theme down here. An ominous black patch materialized on the ceiling above us, which dripped down in the form of level 74 darkness phantoms. They didn't get far, though, before my Godly Aegis Bladed Shoulder Shields shot them to death. See, my hands were kinda occupied with rice balls, fried chicken, grilled yakitori chicken skewers, and cups of miso soup?

"It's hard enough enjoying a meal on the go. Stay outta my way, would you? I even have salads and everything. Mushroom salad—a fan favorite!"

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Jubble jubble*.

The darkness phantoms were high level and plentiful, but they were still kinda weak? Like, none of their psychic attacks worked on me at all. They were technically immune to physical attacks, but my physical attack stats were so OP I bypassed that completely. One hit, and they went down in smoke. *See what I mean? Weak.*

"I mean, I guess this is a horror trope too, but... I kinda kill every ghost right as it appears? So they show up dead? Problem is, they only pop out one at a time? And since there's so many of them, I have to sit around and wait for all of 'em to show up? Y'know?"

Boing boing.

Meanwhile, the dungeon emperors demanded soup refills.

"Boy, it sure has been ages since all four of us went dungeon diving together. If this wasn't such a dark, dank, and dismal dungeon, we could've put down a blanket and had ourselves a nice

little picnic. Too bad these halls are too narrow to really spread out. Plus, the view's nothing to write home about."

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Jiggle jiggle.*

The darkness phantoms' fatal flaws aside, there sure were a lot of them. Being the 74th floor, they were pretty powerful to boot. They didn't go down with a single slash of the funnel swords, even. The phantom vs funnel dogfight raged just above my head while me 'n the gang enjoyed a nice cup of tea.

Sip sip sip. Ahhhh.

Oh good, the funnels were finally done. From here on out, we would face floor bosses every five floors until we reached the 100th floor—assuming this ultimate dungeon followed the layout of the other one. The bosses would all be equivalent in strength to dungeon kings. Meanwhile, my local collection of dungeon emperors finished their meal and began a game of tongbei keep-away with the boss on the 75th floor. Yeah...the dungeon-king-level monster.

"I guess you guys wanted to test your tongbei chops on a real threat, huh? The golems shattered too easily to be any fun. By the way—is that level 100 Nightmare Tapir supposed to *give* you nightmares or *eat* nightmares? It needs to make up its mind!"

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Wobble wobble*.

Yup. The boss on this floor was a tapir, which ate people's dreams in some mythologies. But this one just brought nightmares? I guess?

"I thought nightmares were supposed to be represented in mythology with a black horse, y'know? How come we got a tapir instead? It even looks like your basic black-and-white Malayan tapir! Can't we get something a little more legendary around here?"

The very-not-legendary tapir sailed through the air, the ball in this game of tongbei catch. It desperately emitted a puff of ashy gray smoke, which I assumed was a nightmare. Not that it did the tapir any good.

"First off, the cloud of nightmare smoke is going nowhere near the dungeon emperors. Second, a bog-standard tapir isn't enough to give the emperors nightmares. Those guys spent centuries in

solitude in the depths of deep, dark dungeons. Two of them were held captive by the darkness and battled against it for eons. The other was trapped in the cruel hell known as eternal hunger. These guys *know* what it means to experience infinite torment. What could be a worse nightmare than that?"

The tapir regained its footing long enough to try ramming into one of the dungeon emperors with its stout body. That, too, was foiled with a tongbei punch. Its psychic attacks fared no better. No matter what it did, it was kicked around like a tongbei football. At the same time, I had to be impressed. Its Vitality and HP stats must have been sky-high to take so many hits from the dungeon emperors. It just had no way of fighting back.

"And what is a gentle semi-aquatic herbivore doing as a dungeon boss, anyway?"

With no other option left to it, the tapir finally keeled over and turned into a spellstone.

"Good job, team. You know the old saying: Hit the showers, it brings May flowers—wait, did you even work up a sweat? Yeah, yeah, I know you wanted to keep playing with the tapir. I'm glad you like tongbeiquan so much, but I'm kinda worried you've, uh, deviated from real tongbeiquan in pretty much every possible way? I mean, if you believe the nerds, you guys are right on the money. But the tongbeiquan I know doesn't send giant monsters bowling through the air. I'm not sure why Wisdom adopted the nerds' take on it, but that explains why everything went wrong when I taught it to you. Once I saw it in action, I had this little voice in the back of my head going 'Hmm, that's not right…' Welp. Who cares so long as you're having fun, am I right?"

Jiggle jiggle.

I originally took up kung fu for two reasons: to balance out my lack of self-control with kung fu moves and to teach the others how to use tongbeiquan. Even with their OP skills, the dungeon emperors were still susceptible to dying through sheer numbers. The chaotic tidal force of a wave of foes washing over them was, in fact, a dungeon emperor's biggest weakness. So I put my thinking cap on. I considered theories, systematized them, and turned them into the real, actionable technique of tongbeiquan. Sure, it might've

been a little different from the real deal, but that was exactly why I wanted to pass it along to the dungeon emperors.

"'Cause if you can send enemies flying, you can counter overwhelming hordes of foes. The only question is if that counts as real tongbeiquan anymore."

Jubble jubble?

Chances were, the dungeon emperors were immortal. I wanted them to live happy lives long after I was dead and buried, and for that, I had to teach them all my tricks and load them up with yummy food while I still could. I wanted them to have the chance to smile, even if that chance lasted only for the present. If I could, I wanted them to have that chance of happiness for longer. There was really only so much an NPC like me could do, but hey. The dungeon emperors were always there for me. They rescued me from trouble more times than I could count. It was the least I could do to give a little back, y'know? *Sorry, tapir, but you're gonna be a casualty for that cause. Even if it hurts my eyes watching that battle!*

Right now, I was operating at about an efficient 70% of my capacity, and due to all the nice new loot, my self-destruction was starting to creep up.

"Really? Am I in this bad shape at only 70%?"

New equipment always wrecked my control until I got the hang of it. Nothing I could do about that; it was a daily occurrence at this point. Hence why training in real battles was so important.

I could fight in midair and swoop around in any direction now. I also had perfect control over my dual Universe Staffs. I was the only one who could possibly fight the dungeon emperor in the darkness on the lowest floor, and none of my weapons were bound to be effective against it save for the Staff. If my intuition was right, the emperor was going to be another spirit. Not just any spirit, either. *Sleeping Beauty's soul.*

I wasn't about to walk into a battle with a ghost without being able to fly around myself. And without the right prep, I knew I would just be killed before I could get a single shot off. Back when Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep were prisoners of the darkness, they used everything in their power to resist it and maintain possession of their identity. As a result, they were so much weaker now—a couple

of percentage points of their former strength. Maybe only 1%, even. That just went to show how strong dungeon emperors were at full capacity!

If this dungeon emperor had already fully succumbed to the darkness, then I had no chance in hell of winning this battle. But no chance in hell meant a chance could still exist elsewhere, right? So long as there was *something*, I still had to try. I made every possible preparation I could, because I just had to.

"It's taken some time, but I think I've finally got my self-control and perception powers locked down. Yeah! It's not by much now, but my capacity is rising."

And naturally, just as I got used to my current setup, I stumbled upon a hidden room and the tapir boss's drop item. The latter was a pair of "Mindbreaker Gloves: Grip Augmentation (hyper, activates upon grabbing a head; super effective when bashing head into walls or floors)." I certainly didn't doubt its mind breaking abilities. If anything, I was concerned that putting that thing on would *literally* shatter my skull to bits! Meanwhile, the treasure chest in the hidden room provided a small bottle of "Exorcising Liquid Light: Pour on user. Grants major magic defense buff and glows with light."

"I may be a teenage boy with a healthy active imagination—some might say too active—but I have literally no idea what to do with this. The exorcism part, I get. What I don't get is why it glows. I suspect it's not worth my time to go down that rabbit hole, but boy, am I curious!"

I felt like this ultimate dungeon was testing my ability to mind my own business…

"Anyway, the Mindbreaker Gloves' Grip Augmentation is related to mental grip, right? Like when someone says I need to get a grip? What part of that is an attack?! I mean, sure—it's an effective attack if you grab someone's head and smash it against a wall…but that's not very mental! That's physically destroying the part where all the mental stuff happens!"

Boing boing!

Which, granted, destroyed the psyche as well. But could that *really* be called breaking someone's mind?

“Why not just call it a pair of cranium-crushing claws, y’know? Well, I s’pose if it had claws, I wouldn’t bother grabbing someone’s head and slamming it into the wall while…glowing… Gaaah, I’m dying to know what’s up with the glowing part! I can’t! I caaaan’t mind my own beeswax!”

This mind-breaking loot was giving *me* mental damage!

Oh, and by the way, there was this mass of human souls floating in midair on the 76th floor. Oddly, it was missing its spoOoOoOky organ music accompaniment. I slashed, sliced, stabbed, and severed the silent soul sphere, and…fell to the…wall…? Yeah, ’cause I kinda goofed up and mistook it for the floor?

“Gwuh!”

I could move about horizontally just fine. Really, it was no trouble for me at all. All I had to do was kick-off midair, flap my wings a bit, and use qinggong to flip and flutter through the air like a feather. I danced around the sphere, darting in and out to poke at it with my staff. That was, until I lost all sense of direction, got turned upside down, tried to land on the ceiling, forgot to activate the suction in my boots, and plummeted to the floor. See, the problem was qinggong. It made me so light I weighed practically nothing. Every time I attacked with my staff, I ended up pirouetting in midair. Every dodge made me double over; every blast caused a barrel roll. It’s no wonder I got discombobulated. Once the fight ended, I pretty much smashed into a wall or crashed onto the floor immediately. On the one hand, every battle played out like an epic 3D wire-fu movie scene. On the other hand, all my enemy encounters ended with an untimely crash landing.

“Oh come on, don’t glare at me. It’s harder than it looks! The whole dungeon is made of stone. How am I supposed to tell what I’m looking at? Also, ow?”

I still got glared at. The dungeon emperors had no sympathy for my 3D directional distress. Slimey bounced around all over the darn place, but I never saw *his* senses going all screwey-dewey on him. To be fair, I didn’t know which part of him was the top or bottom either, so it probably didn’t make a difference which way was up.

“I can lock on to enemies while they’re present, but once I’ve wiped them all out, I have nothing to base my position on, y’know? Then when I try to land and botch it, I end up taking a tumble? Yeah, if I don’t pay enough attention, both qinggong and Suction turn off?”

This dungeon was such a maze I didn’t know which way was which! *C’mon, would it have killed you to have paved the floor in something besides stone? I’m not asking for much!*

I carried on my merry, murdering way until, on the 79th floor, the merrily murdered monster dropped a “Punishing Pummeler: All stats +30%. Shock Penetration. Permeating Devastation. +ATT.” *Yeaaaah, we’re sealing you.*

“Huh? Why are you both holding out your hands and smiling at me like shoujo characters with big ol’ stars in your eyes? Oh, I know what lurks in the depths of those innocent, beguiling stares! You’re glowing with excitement at the thought of an endless loop of beating the ever-loving life out of me while I use Revival, is that it? Or just destroying me before my body can repair itself! You’re both sword mains. Why do you love morning stars so much? And you already have tons of them! You don’t need another one! What are you, morning star collector hobbyists? Ew! Get a better hobby!”

I was *not* handing it over to them! Even a slight bruising from that thing with its smashing and stabbing power was enough to kill me. But the tempting promises and assorted sweet nothings they whispered into each of my teenage boy ears just about overrode my sense of danger. No! They couldn’t trick me! I was not going to be fooled, darn it!

“Baaaath tiiiime. Lots of, buuuubbles. All of us, baaaathing. Soooo close, to, each oooother. Lots of…sliiippery loootion.”

Aghhhhhhhh! The thought of it alone wasted my willpower!

“Full body massaaaage. Rub you down with oooooil. Stiiiicky, sticky skiiiiiin. Take you to, paaaradise.”

Yaaaargh! There went my nose gushing a fountain of blood! I was woefully unprepared for this attack on my psyche. The emperors flanked me on either side. Each took an ear. I could feel their hot breath on my eardrums with every seductive whisper.

Their thighs rubbed together, suggesting illicit activities. Then, amid all those lovely, luscious sensations bombarding my ear cavities, their tongues slipped into my ears…

Long story short, I handed over the Punishing Pummeler. Oopsies.

I mean, how could I ever have resisted? I lacked the willpower to deny them their sweetly worded request! Even had I the ED (Emperors are Dangerous) skill, I would have been powerless against their efforts to wake my wee willy winky (in a teenage boy way), put me to beddy-bye (in a teenage boy way!), and rock-a-bye the girls to unconsciousness (also in a teenage boy way—look, can you blame me for giving in at this point)? Oh, my giggle berries were about to take a beating… *Help! I kind of need those?!*

DAY 115

MIDDAY

Turns out the real enemies are the friends we made along the way.

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 60TH FLOOR

I DEVELOPED AN INEXPLICABLE NOSEBLEED and took heavy damage just before reaching the boss on the 80th floor.

"I thought the dungeon's psychic attacks were the real threat, but it turns out I should have watched out for a deadly duo of dungeon emperors stroking and sucking and singing their siren song right into my eardrums! My own allies have it out for me!"

Boing boing.

Slimey consoled me with a few sympathetic *boing*s while we descended the stairs to the 80th floor. There, I vented my pent-up frustrations in a zealous fury of crowbar-like-instrument bashing. The ghostly knight did a lot of flashy thrusting and stabbing with its estoc, but I parried every stroke with the crowbar-like instrument and kept up an onslaught of my own.

Yeah, it was a flying ghost knight thing? A level 100 Restligeist Knight.

"Oh great, another weird name. 'Restligeist' is an English word, a portmanteau of two German loan words: 'restlich' (which is kinda like, uhhhhh, residuals? Stuff that's left behind or whatever) and 'geist' (like ghost). Boo! It's pronounced 'rest-lee-guyst,' like the German pronunciation of 'geist.' Which is sorta funny if you think about it, since it's used broadly in the Anglosphere, y'know? A true marriage of German and English… Anyway, TL;DR: it's a ghost that sticks around 'cause it's haunting a place."

The knight flitted through the air and kept stabbing at me like its life depended on it. It was fast, but compared to Bunny Girl and her well-trained, hyper-focused onslaughts, this knight's swordplay was sloppy at best. Its sword thrusts were too light, too slow.

"You should never underestimate the power of a crowbar-like instrument. In the modern world—a world far crueler than this

sheltered place—millennia of wars, centuries of history, have distilled the fighting art into the ultimate weapon: the crowbar-like instrument! The worst weapon modernity has to offer, only comparable to its sister product—the flower-vase-like ornament!"

Time stopped. The world slowed to a silent crawl. But in reality, it took less than a millisecond for my crowbar-like instrument to travel through the air and collide square with the back of the knight's skull—oh, maybe half a dozen times or so? That concentration of blows wouldn't have been possible for anyone outside my preternatural position. No, if not for my Super-Speed and High-Speed Thinking skills, this belligerent bludgeoning would be out of the cards.

Then time restarted. At that exact moment, a spurt of blood gushed from my face. My consciousness flickered as the sudden extreme anemia attack threatened to bring me to my knees. Blood dripped from the eye slits of my Smiling Death Mask.

"Well, whaddya know? Turns out, overdoing it in stopped time breaks the brain and does a number on the eyes too! Heh. And here I thought I was crying! Guess it was just blood."

"You are, banned! From doing that, ever again!"

"No, Haruka! No more!"

Within the span of an instant expanded to an eternity, I attacked in a superaccelerated blur. The strain it put on my mental processes was intense—too intense. My head ached so badly that I thought it was going to split open. My brain felt like it was on fire. But the attack worked. It may have been supremely, wretchedly, utterly painful, but it was a success. It was good to always have Life or Death as a back-up plan, even if it hurt like nobody's business. Because we were about to go up against the darkness, right? I needed to have a trick to buy time for the others to escape. If Miss Armor Rep, Nefertiri, and Slimey fell to the darkness's clutches, the world was doomed. And, more importantly than any of that, I didn't want them to have to suffer in the darkness any longer. They would have to bear silent, agonized witness when the darkness puppeted their bodies, making them slaughter the very same girls they'd befriended. And that? That was too cruel for my liking.

Before we reached the 100th floor, I needed to buy myself as many chances for success as possible. That was all I could reasonably hope for. Everything afterward was up to Wisdom—and any other issues, especially interpersonal problems, were up to Class Rep. Finally, when all hope was lost and defeat was at hand, it was all up to my super mega ultra maxed-out luck.

"Don't worry about me. I'm fine. This blood streaming down my face? Just a nosebleed. A side effect of youth and all the sexy thoughts that come with it!"

I just had to roll the dice, y'know? Roll them and pray they landed in my favor over and over again. It was gambling. So long as I had a chance, I could keep on rolling the dice ad nauseum. Why not toss the dice…right into the enemy's face, make 'em flinch, and use that opportunity to knock 'em dead? Time to roll the die, hope it was the enemy's turn to "die," and let luck handle the rest. *Good luck, luck!*

I got up off the floor where the untimely face bleed had plopped me down, washed the blood off, and felt right as rain. I gave Life or Death a test run, and it was successful. That was all that mattered right now. Data gained successfully! I set Wisdom on its way analyzing the testing data and used the Rod of Asclepius and the four Orbs to hide the extent to which the skill had ravaged my body.

The dungeon emperors looked worried, so I plied them with a couple of crepes. That made them all sunny smiles; forecasts called for clear skies and no lectures ahead. The trick was to stick treats under their noses before they could whip their notes out. Hooray for full mouths and munching! An occupied mouth spilled no secrets!

That was when a fight broke out. Suddenly, swords were swinging every which way, and a flock of level 81 screaming phantoms descended on us with earsplitting shrieks. Dancer Girl's chains ripped through them; whisps of phantoms flew everywhere; Slimey ricocheted in a feeding frenzy; it was a veritable hellscape. Those screams had Instant-Kill and status ailments! Yikes!

"Wait, but that's not a scream attack… That's just them screaming in horror! You've made the poor ghosties cry! Look at

them running away!"

Wriggle wriggle.

I didn't blame 'em either—the dungeon emperors terrified *me* when they blew up at me for blowing myself up with Life or Death. As I tried to explain, with utmost sincerity, that I had done nothing wrong, they shut me up real quick with the Punishing Pummeler. Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl were such good friends, they shared it between them! Which was heartwarming and horrifying alike! I became a level 26 screaming teenage boy myself!

From the 75th floor on, we switched into total extermination mode. The monsters down here were more deadly than their upper-floor counterparts. The girls, powerful as they were, weren't strong enough to clear these monsters without the chance of something going horribly wrong. I was especially worried about the twins, who weren't level 100 yet. Sister Girl and her posse were right around level 90 too. It was better to put these hazards out of reach of our precocious tykes—like in hell!

"Tough monsters are becoming a limited resource with these three runaway dungeon emperors tearing through them left and right. The monster shortage is growing dire! We reached out to one monster for comment… No response? Welp, let's move on to the next floor. And can I actually participate this time?"

Nuh-uh. *Shake shake!*

On the 82nd floor, a menace of monsters skulked in the shadows—but they didn't seem to like a shadowy crowbar-like instrument in their skulls?

"Hey, get back here! Don't run away the moment you lock eyes with me! You wanna see something scary? I'll show you scary! Go, my special new midrange attack, Crowbar-like Boomerang! Better yet, have two for the price of one! This special crowbar-like instrument is also perfectly suited for bludgeoning baddies to death at long distances. Don't miss out; try it now!"

The weapons sliced through the air, neatly slashed the level 82 evil assassins in two, and sailed back into my hands.

"Wait, which one is the Universe Staff and which one is the Replicant Sword? I lost track!"

Okay, so the term “boomerang” was kinda misleading. Crowbar-like instruments did not typically return to their owners’ hands once thrown, according to the laws of physics and also basic common sense. What gave these blades their boomerang effect was the Restligeist Knight’s drop item: “Summoning Ring: Dexterity +40%. Weapon Summoning Control. Attraction. Enticement.”

“If the weapon is too far away, summoning it back to my hand will probably use a ton of MP. I mean, it wasted tons of MP when the weapons were only a few meters away!”

But if it was part of a larger strategy, I didn’t mind the MP loss. I also tried using Enticement to bring demons closer to me, but as soon as they made eye contact, they turned tail and ran! It was probably the Death Mask’s fault. *Fine, you know what? If you run from looking at me, I’ll just revive you and kill you a hundred times each! Ha! How do you like them apples?*

Jiggle jiggle!

Ah, the dungeon emperors did not like those apples at all, apparently. I guess I shouldn’t have killed all the assassins? And stuff?

“I can’t help it! I just got a little upset, and next thing I know, I was bashing their brains out with a crowbar-like instrument. As one does when one is a teenage boy with a crowbar-like instrument, y’know? If there was a vase-like ornament as lethal as this crowbar-like instrument, this world would be done for. Everyone knows that’s the nemesis of the average homemaker. Yup, crowbar-like and vase-like objects are the two biggest killers in modern mystery cinema! That is, if we ignore trains. Hmm, but I suppose the Theocracy carriages do operate on timetables too…”

Bobble bobble?

Now there was only one thing we were missing—the classic mystery setting, a hot spring! But I hadn’t seen any hot springs here yet. This was a blessing in disguise, as the biggest danger at hot springs was the iron plate, as made popular by the classic “hot springs murder mystery wherein a beautiful hot springs inn hostess and a troop of beautiful high school girls in inn kimonos do battle (feat. copious wardrobe malfunctions) and there is much undoing of beautiful dungeon emperors’ kimono sashes and they’re all like

‘Ooh la la,’ and the male lead’s all like ‘C’mon, baby girl’ and right as they’re about to get into it, a beautiful inn worker stumbles across a dead body!!!” trope. You know, that oldie-but-goody. What I wouldn’t have given to see it play out! If there was one thing a healthy teenage boy like me couldn’t live without, it was his steamy and suspenseful bathing scenes! Especially the ones where the viewer curses the conveniently placed wisps of steam! But yeah, that wasn’t gonna be an option anytime soon ’cause I hadn’t found any hot springs in this world yet?

The stairs to the next floor down were so long I started wondering if the monsters were huge or something. But nah. The monsters were just a couple of level 83 javelin bats chillin’ up near the ceiling. I used Vibration magic to blast ’em out of the air, and after enough jittering and jostling, spellstones rained down into my lap. Also, glares.

“I was just trying to get them to fall out of the air! I didn’t think sound waves could kill them. I thought those bats could stand up to a little shaking, y’know? I plead force majeure! False accusations, your honor! I’m innocent! Yeah, I didn’t do anything wrong? Like, ever?”

My flawless defense did little to dissuade the opposing council from glaring at me.

So anyway, this room was laid out like a trap. The unwary would’ve been skewered on the doorstep when all the javelins on the high ceiling came shuddering down in one sudden drop. The javelin bats looked sorta like drills when they wrapped their dull metallic wings around their bodies. They also had Penetration and Physical Defense Nullification, making them an effective trap. Unfortunately, the blast of sound was such a shock it spooked them all to death. *Kinda jumpy for monsters, don’tcha think?*

“Look, I had to kill them all. We don’t want them Penetrating the girls’ shields. Penetration and Physical Defense Nullification on level 83 monsters are nothing to sneeze at. And besides, some of the hardier bats are still kicking—oh. Not anymore. Unless they’re kicking in Slimey’s stomach… Welp, that’s all of them, then!”

Jiggle jiggle!

A spear rain could have let me practice slow-mo dodging, and I would've had fun slashing them into strips of batty bacon. Besides, who didn't want to go "bang!" when they saw a bat? *Oh no, I didn't say anything. Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am.*

The 84th floor had much in store—glares galore and swords at war. Miss Armor Rep's slender silver blade flashed through the air; Dancer Girl's scimitars whirled and danced; the crowbar-like instrument went *ka-thunk* in monster heads, and Slimey bounced around gobbling up every ghost and ghoulie in sight. Just to see if it would work, I pulled out some salt and chucked it at the specters. It did! Unfortunately, my spooky salting won me more glares from the dungeon emperors, so I went back to my trusty bludgeoning weapon of choice.

"I know I need the training, but c'mon, I wanna experiment a little. What if salt water is effective on ghosts?"

These level 84 Cocyti froze anything they touched. They could even freeze the souls in living bodies. They surged at us like a tsunami, but they weren't fast enough for me to go all out—I just slowed time a little. My previous experience with slowing time taught me that I could fiddle with the slowage a bit; a painful but profitable endeavor.

"I bet throwing salt on an ice tsunami would turn it into a regular tsuna—nope, I didn't say anything!"

Cocytus was the name of a frozen circle of hell. These cocyti had the Flashfreezing skill—a useful ability. It activated upon touch, so the cocyti couldn't use it willy-nilly. There was nothing stopping me from rushing in and carving them into a nice, icy snow cone. *Just add syrup!* Slimey loved it. *Good thing I didn't put salt in it after all…*

"If I could've caught one and used Servitude on it, it would've made for a handy-dandy kitchen freezer! Although I probably shouldn't put level 84 Curse-laden freezers on the market. Unless I could convince old men to buy them… A little Curse never hurt anybody, right? Besides, aren't old men cursed to begin with? The curse of being old and crusty?"

Jiggle jiggle.

What was that, Slimey? You want lemon syrup this time? Make it a double? Sure thing, buddy boy. Eat up. Man, this dungeon diving was hard work. Mostly 'cause I was running out of syrup.

"I wonder if the girls have enough crepes and manju left in that big item bag I gave 'em. Knowing them, they probably overate and are trying to work it off with a one-more-set ghostbusting and fat-busting extravaganza... I give them a bag that's full to bursting every time, and every time they give it right back to me in two seconds flat? I never ask where the contents of those bags go..."

Because every time I tried, the look in their eyes scared the pants off me!

DAY 115

AFTERNOON

Can I appeal to put sex appeal on the list of obtainable skills?

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 85TH FLOOR

DANCING; DANCING; ever revolving in spirals, he moved—twisting; gyrating; swimming through the air with the ease of a fish; slashing and slicing, he advanced.

"Or in plain Japanese, your good pal Haruka has gotten himself twisted up in the air. Which way's the ground? I dunno! Can I land? Nope! Guess I'll keep twirling and hacking at things. At least it's effective."

Wriggle wriggle.

This floor was home to a special kind of vegetative vermin—a level 100 Nest Tree. Basically, the boss was an overgrown snag.

I performed a quick mental calculation to work that English name back into something a bit more my speed. "So, a nesting tree?"

It was an eerie tree, a snarl of dark, twisted branches. Its leaves and fruit were an unsettling color—a marriage of the grotesque and gargantuan extrema of the Plantae kingdom. I didn't dare set foot near that thing. Instead, I flitted into the air to get a better look at it, kept my distance, and slashed at it with my Black Demon's Bladed Wings. The moment my blades drew near, the tree roared to life. Its whole trunk twisted and thrashed, shooting leaves spinning into the sky.

"Yup, I was right about the name. This tree is a nesting tree for ghosts and ghoulies. Every leaf is some kind of spirit. Not the most obvious naming convention in the world, but oh well."

The air was choked with spirits, bogeys, and boggarts of every type. My vision turned black with a 360-degree coverage of swarming spirits all around me. It was like being trapped in a whirlpool of wraiths. I tried to cut a path through them and fly to safety, but there was nowhere to run. There were so many, I

couldn’t even dodge them all. *I guess I have no choice. Go, 360-degree salting!* The ghastly wails that followed were as scratchy and screechy as fingernails scrabbling on glass.

From there, I turned to the Nest Tree. It whipped its colossal trunk around and used its roots, the same ones anchoring it to the earth, like whips to crack at me. It didn’t get far, though. After a few practice bludgeons from the Punishing Pummeler, the tree looked more like a pile of kindling. As it flailed about in agony, I beat it a few extra times with my staff for good measure. Meanwhile, Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl took turns smashing the few remaining twigs.

The sprits that fell to the floor after that serious seasoning made a nice meal for Slimey. While he polished those off, I hunted down the remaining ghosts still miserably clinging to their floatie powers. They lashed out at me with claws or tried to bore into me with running spin attacks. I bobbed and swooped out of harm’s way before doubling back to hamstring them with an upswing. A few ghosts tried to nip at my heels, only to get a kick in the face with the Spiked Boots for their troubles. I used those kicks to swing myself higher into the air, where my weaponed wings unfurled and unleashed a blitz of blades. I retracted the wings, glided over a ghost, dove in for a killing blow, and swooped away again. The blades parried the attacks of the spectral swarm; the sword feathers chopped them into spooky slush.

Any ghosts that tried to back attack me were gobbled up by the lizardisk. Any aerial assailants met the business end of the chickenatrice’s beak. Those that got past my whirling weapons were skewered on my bladed wings, and when that failed, a hundred hydra heads were ready with plenty of fangs for everyone. And if that somehow *still* wasn’t enough, my infinite supply of tentacles was ready to come out and play. The savvy ghost would, at this point, turn and run—only to face my funnels! I packed so many tricks I was like a walking monster house. Yet it still wasn’t enough for my liking.

“By the way, you know most people cut up trees with axes or swords or stuff? Why are you practicing your lumberjack moves with a morning star?! The Nest Tree may be a malicious monster, but I

just feel bad for the poor thing. A plant monster getting its ass handed to it by girls with morning stars… Why do I feel déjà vu?"

The dungeon emperors beamed, satisfied with a job well done, as the giant tree crashed to the ground behind them. *Okay, now let's put the morning stars away…* Morning stars were dangerous when teenage boys like yours truly wanted to take advantage of their sunny moods and give their bums a quick squeeze—I had to top up my teenage boyness's HP bar, y'know? I feared that if I went in now to do a little maintenance work on the seat of their armor, they'd falsely accuse me of sexual harassment and put me in the morning star hot seat! *Yup, only the butt part needs maintenance?*

The monster house—a monster mob of monstrous proportions—was destroyed; the tree, lumberjacked. We ground it into a fine powder of wood pulp and sawdust, which swirled about in the wind around the spellstone and boss's drop item. As it turned out, a merciless mashing with an iron ball, along with pulverizing and pounding and punching, could whittle a tree away until there wasn't a twig left. Yeah, morning stars were scary!

Jiggle jiggle!

At least Slimey was happy about it. He had a bit of a brain freeze from his cocyti snow cone treat—although far be it for me to tell what part of him was his brain. Right now, he was rolling pell-mell all over the place. I patted him a couple of times. He sure *seemed* healthy enough. Evil spirits must not have been too bad on the digestion.

"Well, well, what do we have in here?"

I used Area Analyze and Presence Sensing to find a small hidden room and peeped inside. It contained a treasure chest and a level 100 Nest Grass—a sentient weed.

"I guess the next step up from a monster house is a monster… closet? Is that a step up? There's no step up from trees, so I guess they downgraded and went with grass."

At any rate, the Nest Grass filled that tiny monster alcove, so I lit a stick of Monstercide Incense that I bought in the Holy City, chucked it into the room, and shut the door.

“I don’t expect it to do much since they sold me it for cheap, but I’ve killed plenty of bug monsters with smoke. Who’s to say I can’t smoke out a spirit?”

In the meantime, we all enjoyed a nice tea break with chilly cups of mushroom tea. It was only slightly marred by the sounds of claws scratching at the door and the blood-chilling screams of monsters in their death throes.

“Wow, that’s super effective for something so cheap! Note to self: buy extra at the next available opportunity.”

Sip sip sip.

Later, I opened the door and beheld the pleasing sight of a pile of spellstones, a mountain of drop items, and a treasure chest. Between the spellstones and the loot, this floor was going to make me filthy, stinking rich! Yup, because all the drop items were pieces of “Yggdrasil Fruit: Acquire a skill of user’s choice.” The tree dropped three pieces; the grass, two.

“Finally! I learned about these things at the Adventurer’s Guild. Wow, five at once! Well, it’s obvious where the first four are going. But…I feel kind of awkward leaving her out…y’know?”

Yup, I once read all about the Yggdrasil Fruit in the dodgy hodgepodge of collective knowledge the Adventurer’s Guild saw fit to call a book. Ever since then, I’d been dedicated to finding one. *Why else did you think I was so fixated on all the plant monsters? Why else would I bother Appraising them with such detail?*

“I should’ve been looking for spirit monsters instead of plant monsters. Guess I was barking up the wrong tree! You shoulda written that down, Adventurer’s Guild!”

Technically speaking, there were five arts club girls in my class, but the Book Club President didn’t have any skills that needed a fruit, y’know?

“So I guess I could give these to the other four? You think they’d want ’em? These are super rare items ’cause you can earn any skill of your choice. If you have the right aptitude for ’em, that is.”

This could allow the arts club girls to overcome their job penalties and craft all the things they wanted. Heck, they could probably even make themselves magical artifacts and other useful

tools with the right skills. Up until now, their job debuffs had prevented them from pursuing any hobbies outside of fighting.

"Nah, Book Club President doesn't need one. What do you do in a book club, anyway? Read books? Maybe alphabetize 'em?"

Yeah, reading had nothing to do with crafting. What I wanted to do was give the girls back their talents for cooking, clothing design, sewing, and art. I mean, I could have eaten a fruit myself and gained a crafting skill—Cooking, maybe?—but I didn't have any job debuffs to un-debuff. Unemployed NEETs had no un-undebuffed-debuffs to undebuff because they had no job to debuff the un-debuffed stats? Obviously. And, alas, Yggdrasil Fruit only granted skills. A fruit could not get me a job!

Bitter tears of the unemployed. *Sympathetic bobble bobble*.

Oh, I was on the receiving end of a head pat for once. Nice.

Anyway, I made up my mind—the fruits would go to the arts club girls. Maybe this would result in them hanging up their careers as fighters, but we always needed good crafters. Besides, not being able to do your favorite things for months on end truly sucked. It was ridiculous that the girls were summoned to a fantasy world just to have their hobbies stripped away due to arbitrary job restrictions.

The question remained: what to do with the last piece of fruit?

"If all the girls get buffs in cooking, cleaning, and sewing, I think the world might explode from destructive femininity…"

Wobble wobble.

Not like the fruit was any help if someone had the wrong aptitude. That was, if they sucked at the craft to begin with, the skill wouldn't latch on. *Maybe I shouldn't mention I have a fifth one? I don't want to break any hearts…*

On the next floor down, I used Appraisal on the treasure chest item, ignoring the battle raging all around me. The monsters were nothing but pointy lumps of metal—level 86 spiked golems. At that high of a level, they were fast, tanky, and tough. Total powerhouses. *Welp, have fun with 'em, gang*.

"Your morning stars are powerless against spiked golems! Powerless, I tell y—Miss Armor Rep, since when have you known tongbei morning star?"

Morning stars whizzed; Slimey bounced like a sticky lump of goo possessed; golems died in droves. It made such a racket I could barely focus on my Appraisal results: “Many Magics Magewear: Contains 100 magic sigils, 3 of which may be activated at any given time. Intelligence +30%.” I didn’t quite know what this article of clothing was, so I used Jupiter Eye to examine the magic sigils inside it… Okay, I didn’t know what those were either. Definitely some high-level magic, though.

“I might want to hold onto this for myself. Hmmm…”

Sigils were an effective medium to channel magic. Unlike casting magic with skills, sigils didn’t require a specific level of self-control; they also consumed little MP and could be used whenever, wherever, provided they had a power source. They were the ultimate in low-cost, handy-dandy magic goods. However, each application of magic required its own dedicated sigil. This made it difficult to use sigils on the fly and less convenient than regular magic skills. Still, sigils could be a powerful asset on any piece of armor.

“A hundred sigils means a hundred applications of magic. Hey, this could be useful!”

This fine piece of cloth had all the benefits of sigils with none of the drawbacks. The user could activate any three sigils at the same time and switch which three with no lag—well, provided they had Alchemy.

The dungeon emperors showed no interest in having emperors’ new clothes, so I decided to keep them. Yeah, ’cause Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl had armor already? And Slimey was content in his birthday suit? I bartered a promise to make chicken katsu and cream stew for tonight’s dinner in exchange to be allowed to keep the magewear. I put it on over my current clothes and slotted it in.

“That’s all seven slots in the ‘Clothes Set?’, right? If I get more clothes, I’ll have to swap something out.”

Adamantine Clothing: Vitality Power-Up (large). Power +50%. Diamond Fist.

Legendary Beast Leather Armor: Speed +50%, Vitality +30%. Slashing Resistance. Magic Evasion. Physical Evasion. Skill.

Incarnation.

Warrior Scale: Vitality, Power, Speed +30%. Athletic Improvement (large). Armor Penetration.

Ogre Leather Armor: Power, Vitality +20%. Regeneration (large). Muscle Augmentation (large).

Magic Array Kimono: Physical and Magical Resistance (large). Magic Control (large).

Magic Leather Clothes Set: Vitality +20%, Herculean Strength.

Many Magics Magewear: Contains 100 magic sigils, 3 of which may be activated at any given time. Intelligence +30%.

The Many Magics Magewear filled the seventh slot nicely. Now the problem was, which three sigils to go with first?

“Tricky, tricky… Should I go for a specialized build or something more well-rounded? Decisions, decisions!”

My top two priorities were mitigating my self-destruction and boosting my fighting ability, so I chose Physical Ability Strength Boost for sigil *numero uno*. I had many, many candidates for the other two sigils. Magic Reflection or Magic Defense Boost would’ve been helpful in the upcoming boss fight against the dungeon emperor if it turned out to be a soul, but if it had, like, a physical body, Status Resistance Boost was the way to go.

“But Magic Absorption, Speed Spec Boost, and Instantaneous Physical Armoring all look fun too. Ooh, and I can’t forget Allurement Boost…Wait, I don’t want that! Mind control powers are a no-no. Yup, those are guaranteed to tank my sex appeal!”

I opened my Jupiter Eye wide and tried to see if I could find it—alas, my sex appeal was nowhere to be found. There *were* a few ghosts left on this floor—the 87th floor, that was—but I had to hurry and pick my sigils, because the dungeon emperors had almost gotten them all. Alas, my sex appeal was still even more subterranean than this… 100 sigils to choose from and all…

I ended up going with Physical Ability Strength Boost (mega), Fighting Form Control Boost (mega), and Status Resistance Boost (mega). Those three seemed like a safe bet. It was an attack-oriented build, which in turn sped up my self-destructing. That meant it was time to switch to my trump card.

Next up: the 88th floor. I used Entanglement up to 80% of my max power, made sure I had it under control and then slowed time by 30%. A ghostly arm wriggled up out of the floor; I hacked it off in one clean swipe. The arm belonged to one of many level 88 hand-draggin' haints, the kind of monsters that came out of the floor to play "gotcha" with people's ankles. Lopping off limbs as I went, I skidded across the floor, twirled, and launched into the air. It was haint-hunting homicide. Surprisingly, all the physical buffs made for quite an effective build against these little guys. Moving was a breeze; I barely self-destructed—honestly, I think I hit the jackpot on try one.

But considering that I now had (making) dinner plans, I wondered if I could have this wrapped up by nightfall. I mean, I hadn't slept since the day before. These had been two long, jam-packed days.

DAY 115

AFTERNOON

What the fork did you just forking spawn at me, you little bisque? I'll have you know I graduated top of my class in junior high!

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 89TH FLOOR

WHOOSHING THROUGH THE AIR, I landed a dropkick right on a 'normous noggin before launching myself back into flight. I parted the air with one lusty swing of my crowbar-like instrument of choice before unfurling my wings, swooping on the wind, and making the air tremble in the wake of my passage. That wasn't just metaphor, either—I could actually see the air molecules moving with Jupiter Eye.

The 89th floor had another trap room. The moment I walked in, a horde of iron golems spawned—well, I say that, but only one of them was the *real* monster. Only one had a core. I found it pretty quickly, thanks to Jupiter Eye, and from that moment on, it was game on. *Let's get ready to rumble!*

"Whoa! That golem is tougher than I thought. Is this a boss golem? I thought most hidden rooms had regular monsters. Can we not shake up the formula, please? Hello? Is anyone listening to m—"

Jiggle jiggle!

Did I just get punched?! Not to mention chewed out, but this latter was courtesy of the dungeon emperors. They also facepalmed, which was completely unnecessary.

"Don't you facepalm at me; I'm right! That mold-breaking, norm-deviating, trope-violating, convention-defying golem is the problem! Not me! I didn't do anything wr—"

Wriggle wriggle?

Apart from nearly dying right then, I guess? I hadn't paid enough attention. I had assumed that I could dodge anything with my qinggong, spikey, maneuverable wings, and the ability to make myself light as a feather, letting me bounce off of things without fear of injury. If this attack had come yesterday, I would have been

stone-cold dead. My lapse of attention was the natural consequence of going gaga over my new powers, getting cocky over my fresh kit, and, in general, losing my head.

Forgetting the basics was a no-no. No matter what cool equipment I found, no matter how many awesome techniques I perfected, getting a swelled head equaled death in this fantasy world. Simple as that. That's why I had to remember the basics.

"You have the guts to punch me, you gigantic heap o' granite? Here comes payback a hundred times over! Meteor, meteor, meteor, meteor, meteor, meteor, meatier—wait, what? Meteor, meteor, meteor, meteor, and a collector's edition used pair of me…te…*orrrr*… Girl's prototype undies? Wait, not that! The golem doesn't need to see *those*. Pretend you didn't see anything. Anyway, I'd keep slinging meteors, but I think all the golems are dead? So I guess it was only payback eleven times over? Now what do I do with these other eighty-nine meteors? Welp, I'd better sort my item bag to prevent mistakes like this from happening again, or else this'll be the end of me!"

Wobble wobble.

That took care of the golem who almost knocked me out of the land of the living. The other golems around it were likewise as still as statues. Crumbling statues.

"Tsk! Swift-moving golems are a violation of the tropes of fantasy. I didn't even see it coming! How dare it throw a quick right straight without any wind-up! What is this, a boxer golem? A boxer boss guarding a treasure box?"

"You, not careful. Let down your guard, one second, you dead… In theory."

"'In theory'?! What the hell do you think I am? I *wish* I was unkillable!"

I couldn't be too mad—I knew Miss Armor Rep was just worried about me. Right? Right…? She was crying after all! I patted her on the head to calm her down.

"No, don't…worry, about us. Be, yourself. You only live… How many lives, you have, again?"

“One! Your pep talk had a strong start, but what the hell was that question at the end? Are you just making fun of me?!”

No, Dancer Girl was just worried about me too. Right?! She may have done major damage to my sense of human dignity, but I gave my second tear-streaked companion a comforting pat on the head too. Of course I kept my hands to myself and didn’t pat anything lower (sadly).

After all, my close brush with death was my fault for a change. I normally would never have done anything so stupid. I mean, I did stupid things on the regular—in fact, I could fill a timetable with round-the-clock stupidity—but not this particular brand of idiocy! Really, I was careless. I was just *so* bad at thinking outside the box, just too oriented in conventional wisdom to ever consider unorthodox enemies. I, for once, deserved to think about what I’d done wrong!

“It’s really such a shame that I’m always so rational. Gosh, it sure is hard being a serious, sensible, honest, upright, considerate, and mild-mannered teenage boy. It’s high time I reform. As they say back in my old world, ‘If at first you don’t succeed, fry, fry again.’ Because once you burn all your failures to a crisp and succeed, no one will ever find out that you failed to begin with!”

Hey, don’t give me those deadpan looks!

I was just glad I picked up on the problem before I got too much further. Next up was a boss, and any boss on the 90th floor of an ultimate dungeon had to be a high-level dungeon king. Definitely not the kind of monster to get cocky around.

Once I got down there and saw it for myself, I thought, *No kidding*! I mean, I still won the fight, but it took a lot out of me. The boss was a level 100 Corrosion Wraith, a spirit that could rot people where they stood.

“Um, actually? The adjective form is Corrosive? Although that implies the wraith itself does the rotting… Don’t names like that just piss you off?”

Nod nod! Rattle rattle!

Questionable naming aside, the wraith had the killer combo of Magic Absorption, Rot, Equipment Fracture, and Rot upon Contact.

Trust me—losing equipment on the final floors of an ultimate dungeon was a bad idea. Okay, so in a personal sense, I wouldn't have minded watching the dungeon emperors duke it out in the nude, but that would've resulted in us ignoring the wraith and engaging in an endless, emotional, energized engagement the likes of which would drain my MP dry! The thought alone made all the blood drain from my face—to, ahem, collect in other places... In such a hypothetical scenario, I would've had no choice but to strip and fling myself into the fray too!

"'Cause if Miss Armor Rep and Dancer Girl are brawling in their birthday suits, I'm not about to be outdone. I'm shucking off my clothes and showing them what my teenage boy power is all about! Oh hey, Slimey, what's up?"

Wriggle wriggle!

YEEEEEEEEEaaaaaarrghh!

Slimey wanted to gobble up Rot upon Contact and Magic Absorption. No wonder the wraith squealed in terror.

Unless Slimey wanted to eat the monster very badly, I only let him Absorb monsters after defeating them. Whenever he used Gluttony on enemies in perfect health, he copied the monster's skills perfectly. The drawback was that doing so made him take damage. So, unless the skill was especially rare, I made sure the monsters were weakened before it was chow time.

Rot upon Contact was gonna be just brutal in Slimey's arsenal. He would corrode any equipment he touched unless it was turbocharged with mithril!

"Alas! I wanted to talent-scout that wraith for the pseudo-dungeon, but now it's wailing and screaming the whole way down Slimey's gullet. Well...on second thought, its corrosive powers extend to human flesh too. Maybe I don't want it after all. If it only corroded equipment? Score. Now that would have been a monster of epic teenage-boy fantasy."

Now Slimey had the skill anyway. It was bound to come in handy when a mob of monster girls spawned. *Yup, any day now!*

With such lovely visions on the brain and Slimey also on the brain—like literally; he sat on my head—I sallied forth for the 91st

floor. Slimey was in snooze mode, probably because either his binge or the subsequent digestion was tiring him out. Consuming an entire enemy at once was a double-edged sword. It recovered HP, but it also gave him the sleepies. *This'll have to be a special-occasion strat*, I thought as the slime on my head blobbed about cheerfully. Must've been a tasty feast.

Carefully, so as not to dislodge my slimy passenger, I skated across the floor and slashed my way through the next monster spawn. The "Spiked Boots: Power, Speed, Dexterity +30%. Acceleration +30%. Sudden Super-Speed. Sudden Braking. Suction. Wall + Ceiling Walking." worked just as beautifully for ground fighting as they did in aerial battles. Once I added the Many Magics Magewear's Physical Ability Strength Boost (mega) and Fighting Form Control Boost (mega) to the mix with Martial Qi Wizardry, I moved with the grace of an ice skater. I pirouetted and pranced through the naughty enemies trying to wake up the widdle sleeping slime, cutting all of them down before they could disrupt his slumber.

Glide like a dancer! Slice like an artist! That was the power of sword fighting with Martial Qi Wizardry.

"...Although it's hard not to get depressed when the people on either side of me are way, way, way more graceful. Try as I might, even the sublimity of Martial Qi Wizardry can't stack up against the divine sword dancing of these utter goddesses! I just look pathetic next to them. Wait! Don't bring a morning star to a sword fight!"

The dungeon emperors were so entrancing, I just had to take a look with Jupiter Eye. I ogled their footwork, their technique, the ease with which they executed their moves, and even the slightest variations in breathing. I couldn't hope to copy them, not even with Jupiter Eye on the job. Compared to them, me using Entanglement with all my latest adjustments and 90% of my full powers was...well, just an embarrassing mess. My self-destruction had gone haywire; my self-control, out to lunch. I mean, my bodily breakdowns weren't anything egregious, but they just kept happening. Every time something else snapped, I lost my balance, messed up my breathing, went down in a tangle of flailing legs... Sublimity had never felt farther away, with the obstacles between me and that end

goal growing larger by the day. Yup, adding those last drop items only exacerbated the problem.

"Stop adding them! We keep, telling you!"

Jiggle jiggle!

The wraith's drop item was a "Wraith's Shroud: All stats +30%. Magic Absorption (mega). Magic Reflection (mega). Magic Control (mega). MP Absorption. Trait Nullification upon Contact. Rot and Equipment Fracture upon Contact. +DEF" It was a perfect upgrade for the "Mirror Cloak: Reflects magic." Thing was, I was attached to the old cloak—it had saved my life on many an occasion. Back when me and whatever-his-name-was-kun had our death match, that Mirror Cloak had saved my sorry hide. Now, though, I couldn't be happy with its paltry Magic Reflection (miniscule)...but the (miniscule) did have its uses. It gave me a chance, no matter how slim, which was ultimately a lifesaver. So I made up my mind—sell the Mirror Cloak for lots and lots of money!

My current build prioritized OP equipment over self-preservation, but hey—it also provided awesome defense. Plus, I couldn't discount the Rot upon Contact bit. The Mirror Cloak paled in comparison to the allure of armor falling off a feminine form. *Remember, we're talking about a teenage boy here. Wardrobe malfunctions are everything to the adolescent mind! Especially ones initiated by contact with teenage girls!!!*

Slimey helmet equipped, I made myself heavier and stayed rooted firmly to the ground as Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep decimated the ghosts on the 91st floor, the spirits on the 92nd floor, the wraiths on the 93rd floor, and the specters on the 94th floor. Finally, when the 95th floor was up next, Slimey decided he had recovered and was ready to rejoin the fray.

"Actually, what's the difference between a ghost, spirit, wraith, and specter, anyway? Is there even some kind of classification method for them, or are these all just synonyms? What, can you guys tell 'em apart?"

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*. *Wriggle wriggle*.

"Wait, for real? You mean there's a difference between the shadow figures, the hazy human figures, the insubstantial outlines

of people, the immaterial people-shaped things, and the ominous black fog that has no relation to the other items on this list apart from the name? They look identical to me!"

Turned out, I was the sole sufferer of these supernatural specification struggles!

"Are you freaking kidding me? Be real. Where's the difference? What do you use to tell them apart? Gah, and I bet this is going to be on the test… Not like the rest of my classmates can tell either—well, maybe the idiots can. On sheer intuition. Now that's just galling!"

I was left behind! In the dust! Like I was a common nuisance! Wait, but weren't the dungeon emperors supposed to be guarding me? Could they really just leave me like that? The sense of déjà vu was practically lethal… Why did I feel like this always happened to me? My monster Servants were such creatures of mystery… Ones who didn't wait for me! Ever!!

Anyhoo, we made it to the boss on the 95th floor. Self-destruction be damned, it was crowbar-like instrument time. I intended to *smash* that monster! Ohh, how dare it exist! The instant I caught sight of that familiar form, I transformed the Universe Staff into its crowbar-like form; the moment its name entered my ocular sensors, I Entangled myself with my full strength and flew at the beast! Never mind my body wailing in agony! I passed through the abyss of the vacuum, flickering here, there, everywhere. The air positively exuded malice. Oh, here was a foul fiend with powerful magic…and I would lunge for it with all my might!

"Begone, foul spirit! The power of the crowbar-like instrument compels you! Quit ruining my teenage boy fantasieeeeees!"

Yes, for the black-cloaked figure hovering in midair was none other than a vampire—the bloodsucking beast of legend. The same one who got to sink his fangs in the necks of hot girls! The envy of teenage boys everywhere!

"Wait—that's not a vampire. That's just a level 100 Vampire Ghost! A bloodsucking bogey! How is it any different than a vampire bat? The thing even flies! No necking about at necks for nasty ghosts or old men. Only bloodsucking beautiful babes allowed!"

"Easy, there! Calm down. Is already dead."

“Yes, but…all ghosts, dead, Angie.”

Wriggle wriggle.

Man, f*ck this stupid fantasy world! What was the POINT of having a vampire if she wasn’t going to be a HOT! GIRL?! If vampires were going to be an ESTABLISHED THING, then why didn’t they come with TITTIES?!!! Who wanted to get nibbled on by a buncha bats or old men or mosquitos?! *Bro, are you f***ing stupid? Do you want to f***ing go? You wanna f***ing take this offline? Let’s go. I’ll 1v1 you IRL, bro. I’ll f***ing no-scope you. Yeah, you’re already f***ing dead, bro. I f***ing killed you, bro!*

“…Aw, crap. I was saving my MP for the final boss. This dungeon is wilier than it looks—it spawns monsters that bring out the worst in teenage boys.”

If dungeon diving wasn’t going to result in me being set upon by a sexy vampire lady with plenty of sucking and gasping and heaving, then what was I even fighting for? This world had no heart. No social skills! Couldn’t pick up the hints I was putting down!! For f***ing shame.

DAY 115

EVENING

Oh, so fighting fair and square's a bad thing now? Well, excuuuuuse me, princess.

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 96TH FLOOR

A THICK, HEAVY SILENCE blanketed the 96th floor. Slight tremors shook the stagnant air; magic came into being. The lids on the endless procession of coffins lining the walls of the grand hall shuddered, producing a jarring, grating noise.

"Come on, world! You know better. You betrayed my expectations once with your lack of sexy bloodsuckers, and it's time you made up for it. I demand these coffins crack open to reveal a horrible horde of giggling, flirting, feminine creatures open to sucking and getting sucked on! I demand clothes falling to the floor! I demand a teeming mass of vampires throwing themselves at me! Instead I guess I'll douse the room in oil? Then step back, cast a couple of fire balls, and slip into the shadows? Buh-bye?"

Pillars of flame shot up to the ceiling. A wave of scorching wind rolled through the room. The hall was now better compared to a fiery hell. The moisture-free mummies went up like kindling.

"At least give me some sexy Dancer Girls! And if there were hot vampire chicks…I would pass over no end of running water to get at sexy vampires. But an army of old-men mummies? Kill 'em with fire! The fires of my righteous rage!"

Speaking of Dancer Girl, she gave me a deadpan glare for that little speech.

Oh shoot. I had gone berserk on two floors in a row! She and Miss Armor Rep were starting to look seriously annoyed!

"Look, I can't help it. This was an atrocious assault on my teenage boy psyche. The poor, gentle flower of my teenage boy heart has been trampled on and tarnished! What else was I supposed to do but throw a teenage temper tantrum? It was off the

cuff, that's sure enough, but I get gruff when things are tough! And stuff?"

Wobble wobble.

Say... What if I opened a souvenir shop in the Beast Kingdom? Even though it was just hours before dinner, I decided to do R&D for the inventory of my latest upcoming economic enterprise. Behold—a trial product of King Haighpbeest's Hype Beastfolk Manju. I shared it with the dungeon emperors. Their feedback? Lots of glares and even more munching. I was still feeling the beating I'd taken from the self-destruction sesh on the 95th floor, and the glares followed me all the way down to the next couple of floors.

I picked my way through the soot-stained hall, around the still-smoldering flames. The wood coffins went up faster than a box of matches, charring the level 96 reverse mummies half to death. All I had to do was finish the job and polish off the last of the mummies' lives. Yeah, seemed like each mummy was an undead conglomeration of multiple souls?

"'Cause every time they burn to death, they just revive again? Which drops a new spellstone? Now I'm swimming in spellstones?"

"Mummies had, Curse, Contagion, and Life Absorption skills. Fierce foes. Or...would have been, if not dead."

"Mummies grab you, steal HP, can't be killed... But none, those things, helped. Still died horrible fiery death."

Dang. From the sound of it, those were mighty monsters. Even the regular monster mobs on floors in the 90s were brutally strong. They had OP skills aplenty...which opened them up to even more weaknesses. Take the mummies. Even without their fancy skills, their stats registered all in the thousands. They wouldn't go down without a fight, basic mob or not. Could the girls beat 'em? Sure, but that was only because the girls were a fearsome mob in their own right. The girls' safety was not an absolute guarantee against these mummies, making the dungeon's lowest echelons a huge hazard. The girls always tried to brute force their opponents—beat them fair and square, y'know? This made foes with sneaky weaknesses all the more dangerous for the girls. Hence why I charbroiled the mummies in their coffins and beat them without breaking a sweat. It was just the kind thing to do.

Anyway, the dungeon emperors were still royally peeved with me, so I sat back and watched them from here on out. (I also kept Regenerating; I wasn't at full health yet.) The air was thick with magic this deep in this Ultimate Dungeon, speeding up my healing abilities. Shocker, right? Meanwhile, Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep cut up a cavalry unit of level 97 ghost chevaliers. Double shocker.

It was hard enough to lock swords with just one of the dungeon emperors. Two? Get real. Not to mention, Slimey was extra hard to deal with for armored opponents. He could make himself small, fast, and too difficult to track. His ricocheting off the walls and floor was too much for these chevaliers to handle.

"Why is this suddenly in French? Is English not cool enough anymore? And how dare they have such an epic name! Why am I the only one in this world without an awesome job?!"

Jiggle jiggle.

Because I had nothing better to do, I used Appraisal on the drop item from that no-good, terrible, rotten, horrible, fails-the-teenage-boy-test vampire: the "Carbuncle Crown: Uses unique Scarlet magic. MP, Intelligence +50%. Scarlet Shield. Scarlet Armor. Scarlet Eye." *Huh?! Why's it all scarlet?*

"Hmm... My Wisdom Crown can hold five other crowns. This would make number three, so I still have plenty of space left. My problem last time was not enough mithril. If I keep this up, the crown's capacity might increase to seven. I want that sweet, sweet MP and intelligence boost to get better control of myself. So...you're hired?"

"Stop! Adding! More! Equipment!"

Turned out, the bafflingly named Scarlet magic cloaked me in a scarlet suit of armor with matching shield. It also provided me with a set of magical weapons—arrows, daggers, even javelins—that could be fired at will. *Yeaaaaah...I'm not using any of this.* 'Cause it was all made of blood, y'know?

"Which I kinda need? If I use my own blood, I'll give myself anemia. And using the *blood of my enemies mwa ha ha* is just doing too much. It makes me seem like a villain. I don't want to tarnish my image as an innocent, cheerful teenage boy rejoicing in the pure, halcyon days of adolescence! No, I don't have the faintest idea why

Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep are giving me two big thumbs up. No, it doesn't suit me perfectly! It doesn't!"

Not like I could get much use out of it down here anyway. The monsters were all ghosts and golems. Even the mummies were shriveled and dry. The only thing that came close was the Scarlet Eye—I pictured a bloodshot eyeball, but it turned out to be a variant of Spell Eye. I also was not a fan of the Crown's many, many villainous traits—Allurement, Hypnosis, and Lascivious to name a few. Now *those* were designed to leave my sex appeal hemorrhaging! How was the poor thing still hanging in there?

Moving right along... The 98th floor had several Hypnos wraiths. The word itself meant "sleep" in Greek; likewise, Hypnos the deity personified slumber.

"I'm just glad we're not fighting Hypnos himself! Yeah, he shows his face from time to time, but he's still a figure of mystery to me. A riddle wrapped in an enigma? While we're on the topic, Hypnos is the son of Nyx, the goddess of night. His siblings include Thanatos, the god of death, and the Oneiroi, the personifications of dreams."

Boing boing.

The wraiths' attacks imparted strong status ailments like Hypnosis and Sleep. Falling asleep before one of them meant certain death. But I thought they were Hypnos wraiths? Not Thanatos wraiths?

"Ha! You are powerless before me! I, the teenage boy too busy giving his teenage best, have no time to sleep! Your puny *nap* powers mean nothing to me. Nay, we teenagers are untouchable. You know nothing, my dear Hypnos, until you've witnessed the soporific powers of the fiercest sleeping draughts back in our home world. Yes, the sleep-tempting sensation known as *going to class*! Now that'll knock you out in five minutes! I spent so much time dozing in class I don't even remember what classes I used to take..."

...

"Oh no! I'm starting to nod off just thinking about it!"

I turned on Entanglement and turned it riiiight back off. I essentially limited it to one brief instant, thus curtailing its self-

destructive capability. The trade-off? I was left in a defenseless state for way too long. Taking even the lightest of hits in that state was guaranteed lethal. For all its faults, this was a neat little stratagem, efficient on the MP and light on the self-destruction. I toggled Status Ailment Resistance on and off as needed—well, Wisdom did. Wisdom also piloted me around. All I had to do was add a little Martial Qi Wizardry, and voilà. Instant victory.

"I don't need no stinkin' protection against a buncha ghosts going *ooh, swirly swirly* in a lame attempt to hypnotize me. Y'know?"

In one limber lightning strike of a swing, sword one met with sword two and united into a single blade. I made myself lighter than air with qinggong and let the weight of my weapon pivot me about. Gravity gave me wings; centripetal force made me dance. I knew I could pull this off. I believed in myself. I was a *champion*—dare I say an expert; nay, a scholar; no, a gentleman and a sir—when it came to letting other things make my decisions for me!

"Huh. Is qinggong turning into a skill? Cool. Whatever makes me faster."

My afterimage hovered in the air behind me—the product of Incarnation. Leaving it in the dust, I slashed, my sword leaving a glowing line in its wake…for all the good that did. As it turned out, Incarnation and Illusion didn't work on wraiths.

"Lightning magic doesn't seem effective either, so that's out. Ditto for Heat magic and Vibration magic."

That left me with no choice but to slash and slice, turning the air into a canvas for sword trails. It would've been nice if the wraiths had some sort of elemental weakness, but we couldn't have everything in life. Most vaguely supernatural things, weaknesses or no, died when slashed by divine swords, so that's exactly what I used. I just had to hope the dungeon emperor's soul wasn't a vengeful spirit like these wraiths. If that came at me full force, the only thing I could do was laugh. Against something that strong, thinking I stood any chance was a presumptuous joke. Dungeon emperors were so very much stronger that they belonged on a whole other plane of existence. But if the dungeon emperor still retained a bit of her soul, just like Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep, and used it to Struggle against the darkness…well, then maybe I

could win after all. I could defeat the darkness with my divine sword.

Problem was, well—that would catch the soul in the crossfire.

“Welp! At first glance, I stand no chance, but if I advance and enhance my fighting stance and my sword dance…then maybe? Whatever. Off to the 99th floor we go.”

Nod nod. Rattle rattle. *Wriggle wriggle*.

The dungeon emperors looked worried—about the upcoming fight against the darkness, right? Huh? They were worried about my rapidly decaying wits? *Excuse me?!*

Okay but that aside—if this ultimate dungeon was anything like the one I found Miss Armor Rep in, then it had…*that*.

Onslaughts of blistering intensity. Flashing glaives, whirling scimitars. *Sturm und drang* made flesh, an army of monsters, lo—level 99 evil legions! Their speed, their strength, their skill—it was like a battalion of dungeon kings had come to do battle. My three dungeon-emperor-class allies stayed the tide, holding their own against the incessant waves of weaponry. Steel rang on armor, producing a ghastly knell as would be heard on the very battlefields of hell.

The monster knights swarmed closer, pressing ever in and threatening to overwhelm us with their sheer numbers. I lost track of how many swords I parried, how many shields caught my weapon, how many…jaws got to work? Yeah, there was a lot of munching and crunching action!

Not on me, though. The only ones screaming and sobbing as their faces got gnawed off were—you guessed it—the monsters!

“Yup. ’Cause it hurts like the dickens to have your head chewed off.”

See, I popped out the Gluttony Greatshield for a little practice. And boy did it live up to its name! It was more monstrous than all the monsters put together!

“And here I thought it was made for the Tiny Tanuki… Guess monster knights are notable nominees for noshing on too.”

While my shield snacked, I lifted my crowbar-like instrument and got to whack, whack, whacking. *Hiii-yah!* Hydra heads tore

monsters to ribbons with their teeth; the chickenatrice launched whizzing blow darts under helmets to plunge straight into eyeballs; the lizardisk lashed out with its mighty tail, snapping monster legs like toothpicks; the infinite tentacle swarm following me brandished an inexhaustible supply of swords, spears, and shields.

"Ha! I've got my own evil legion, suckahs! Behold...the Loner Legion! Oh, don't mind the water gushing from my eyes—it's just sweat."

The room rang with cries of agony. The evil legions fell back, terrified.

"Look at 'em. 'Fraidy cats!"

Nod nod. *Rattle rattle*.

When it came to the brute force approach, retreating meant defeat. Victory went to those who pushed on, particularly if they happened to have a hundred hydra heads and a thousand spears on them. The legions' formations dissolved around me. Their sheer numbers, coupled with their stellar formations and individual prowess, had given the dungeon emperors a run for their dungeon-emperor money. But against me, the evil legions ran for the hills. That's 'cause cracks appeared whenever their formations broke. The two lovely, armored goddesses of gruesome gore capitalized on every weakness—oh, and one cutey slimey boi too. From then on out, it was all terror, despair, and blood splatters. And hey—with all the blood flying around, that was my chance to use Scarlet magic and unleash a rain of ichor arrows!

"Holy smokes—Scarlet magic guzzles MP like a beast! Okay, nix the arrow rain."

And so the unfathomably brutal monster hordes were felled—with nothing more than sheer brutality. Teeming hordes were slaughtered. Howling faces disintegrated under the force of my crowbar-like instrument.

The minotaurs on the 99th floor of the frontier's ultimate dungeon were just as strong, albeit more susceptible to fall damage. I doubted that I could have accomplished much, if anything, had I tried to fight them way back when. Now, though, I managed just fine. In fact, the monsters were running from me in terror! Baffling, really. Couldn't have told you why. *Well, hell, look at*

me. I'm improving a lil at this whole fighting thing! Yeah, you know what? I can take that dungeon emperor, no problem.

"Of course a teenage boy can slaughter an entire monster horde. That's how these stories always go… Oh come on, what're you glaring at me for now?! I fought them *without* cheating for once in my life! Clean, upright, old-school isekai warfare! Oh, stop looking at me with pity. That hurts worse than the glares! Since when was this pat-Haruka-on-the-head—*there, there, Haruka*—time? I fought 'em fair and square! A proper fisticuffs fracas, it was! I did my teenage-boy best out there! Doesn't the noble-hearted teenage boy protagonist slay the monster armies in all these stories? Wha—why are you hiding your eyes? Are you *crying*?! This is psychological warfare, I tell you! It's doing damage to my sex appeal too! Can someone tell me why I feel like I've just taken a lethal blow? I played the tropes straight! I followed the rules! I fought fair, square, rectangle, rhombus—any quadrilateral I could get my hands on!"

For all my fairs, squares, and hairs, all I got were glares. And arresting psychological damage. *Screw it! I'm going to open this damn door and get out of here.*

Yes, to face the dungeon king on the 100th floor. 'Cause back when I met Miss Armor Rep, she was actually on the 101st floor. The Living Armor on the 100th floor perished in the same unfortunate falling accident that wiped out the minotaur, but no matter. Off to the 100th floor I went, opening the door and taking the first step down. There my final foe awaited me. The last guardian of the dungeon emperor. The dungeon king.

DAY 115

EVENING

Girl, are you a newspaper? Because I wanna make you black, white, and bred all over.

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 100TH FLOOR

OUR SWORDS SEEMED TO FLY at one another. *Clash!* I locked hilts with the boss—a knight dressed in armor of the darkest black. I countered the foe; the foe countered me right back. I swung again, but the knight heaved with all its might and knocked my weapon flying. At that point, I resorted to salt—but even the wondrous seasoning wrought no change. (That is, unless you count making the knight scowl.)

The black figure charged. Its sword darted in, threatening to cut me from groin to shoulder. I leaped up and out of the way, and before the knight could strike once more, I dove in for the kill. My sword caught against theirs. It caught my attack like it was nothing. Me, I was still in the air, but I was coming down fast—*straight into its sword*. Straight into my certain death.

"Except…why land if that'll get me killed?"

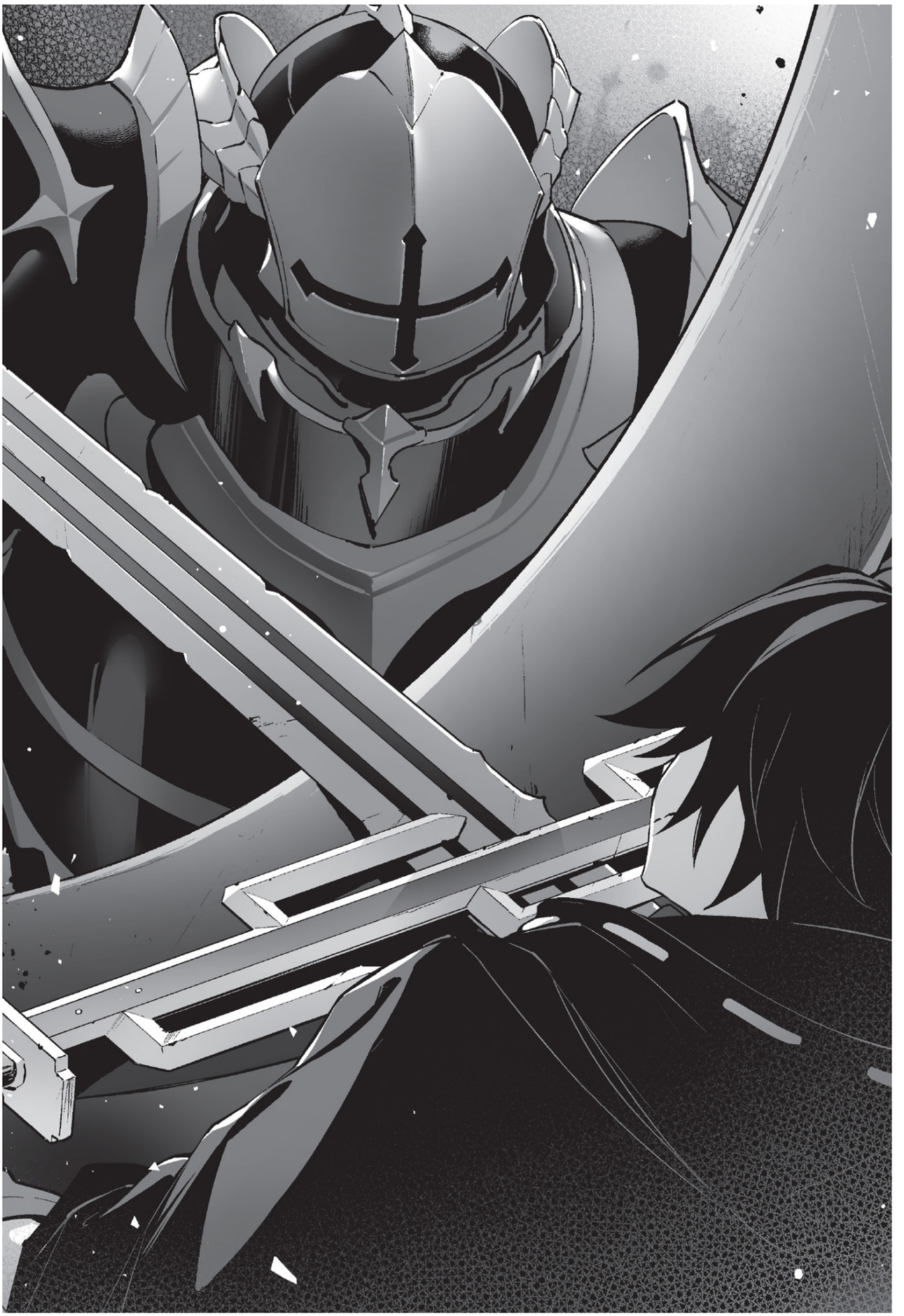
I kicked off in the air, backflipped, and stabbed at the knight's neck—well, I tried to, at any rate. Its mammoth black greatsword described a half-moon in the air and parried me handily. Sparks flew. Swords flashed. We traded blow after blow, and it gained more ground with every strike. Iron sizzled. Sparks peppered the ground. Our swords kissed, danced away, and drew together once more. The knight had a higher Power stat than me, but we were roughly equal in Speed and Dexterity. My base stats weren't anything to write home about, of course; I only kept up thanks to Entanglement. Unfortunately, even Entanglement couldn't give me an edge—not when the knight had Entanglement too! *That's not how it's supposed to go. That's cheating!* Yeah, we were Entanglement twinsies? The knight had the same self-destructive issues I had, felt the same pain as me, and was also fighting to protect what it cared

about most. That meant one thing: Now was not the time to hang back. I had to pull out all the stops, or else.

“Here goes… Entanglement at 110%! One hundred ten percent is where it stops being safe to use (by some definition of safe). Truth is, I have way more power at my disposal. I just never use it ’cause it’s too hard on my body. Oh well. Sky’s the limit!”

I was out of time—literally. If time hadn’t stopped outright, it might as well’ve, ’cause I couldn’t tell the difference. The black sparks off our clashing swords hovered in the air at a standstill, doomed to linger there for eternity—or until I turned off the temporal termination.

Time felt so *thick*, so *heavy*, the only way to move was at a dawdle. I piloted myself forward with incomprehensible celerity, and as my body fell to bits around me, I sliced with a flash of my sword. Our blades crossed for a millisecond. Once, twice, a thousand times per milli-instant, our swords met in a shower of sparks. They held a conversation writ in the crossing of countless strikes. Millions, billions of sparks filled my vision, and a black-armored knight and black-clad teenage boy danced a waltz of warfare within the stoppage of time. We went round and round in slow, perfect grace. Our swords rang in a capriccio of clanging within the abyss between two discrete units of time.



In a world with no time, we battered each other—*a capriccio*. In a world with no reason, we whirled around one another—*a capriccio*. In a world that defied thought, we became the other's dance partner—*a capriccio.* Capriccio—a tragedy so absurd; so foolish; so irrationally, senselessly preposterous, it transcended amusement and came out the other end. A comedy. Yes, that was all this was. A farce.

A meaninglessness, a senselessness beyond senseless, a vile cruelty of a comedy. And yet, for all this unfeeling madness, the dark knight was determined to fight with all its might until the last strength left its battered body. To prove that it hadn't gone down without a fight. To prove that it was strong. To prove—to prove—to prove…!

Hey. It's all right now.

"Because I'm gonna save her. Or, if it's too late—and there's nothing anyone can do for her any longer—I'll end it for her. You see that girl over there? That's Nefertiri-san. I saved her, and that's why she gets to spend her days laughing and smiling. And, I gotta admit, overeating—but she still maintains her waistline. Hell if I know how. Anyway, long story short, I'm going to the bottom floor of this dungeon. And then it's all gonna be okay, my friend. Thank you for your long, long service. I'll take it from here, so you go get yourself some rest… And while I have you, what is *up* with those awful titles? Huh? You insisted on them? Homie, your priorities! Look—I read every one of your books, and I'm planning on selling them on the frontier, but…can I puh-lease change the terrible titles? You're shitting me. I can't? Bummer… Welp! I'll still sell 'em, and I'll take care of the girl on the bottom floor. So—good night, sweet prince."

With the divine Heavenly Sword of Gathering Clouds—aka the Grass-Cutting Sword—in one hand and the divine Seven-Branched Sword in the other, I stabbed the knight twice over and cast Purification. Its cursed armor exploded in a shower of metal. Its skeletal eye sockets searched me balefully. *Hey now, don't worry. I promised. Pinky swear. Cross my heart and hope to die; stick a needle in my eye.*

And with that, the dungeon's final guardian—the level 100 Black Knight Guardian—dissolved into motes of light that soared, soared, soared, soared up into the heavens and disappeared. In the fading glow, Nefertiri-san—sublime Nefertiri-san, elegance itself—danced in mourning. A final send-off. So, too, did the eternity of stopped time come to an end.

"Man, this guy... He was a brilliant alchemist and philosopher, but all his wisdom didn't stop him from charging into the dungeon and making it to the 100th floor. He was so close to his goal. He was *nearly* there. But here was where his strength gave out. Still, for a guy sapped of strength, he sure had a lot of strength of will. In his desire to keep the saint safe, he used his alchemy to tether his soul to these haunted halls. Have you ever heard anything so stupid? For a wise philosopher, that was one heck of a dumb move! Well... Thank you for your service, you crazy bastard."

See, 'cause after Zaasimov the philosopher dude built the Cathedral, he came down here and got as far as the 100th floor. If he'd only made it one more floor, he could've seen the saint again. Alas, it was here that he fell, and here he became a guardian, watching and waiting for centuries until someone finally came to rescue his loved one.

"Which is why I had to put on a good show! Yeah, it maybe sorta almost killed me, but it would've been rude to hold back against a guy who never let death stop him. Y'know? Oh, and the Summoning Ring sure came in handy. 'Cause whenever my fingers blew off, they still came right back to me! Anyway, how about we take a quick break?"

It was a shame Zaasimov never made it to the saint, but in the end, maybe that was for the best. It wouldn't have been pretty. Zaasimov gathered every relic he could get his hands on, assembled his kit with every bit of wit and cunning in his arsenal, and surged into the dungeon. That was what got him here. To the 100th floor.

"But even that wasn't enough to reach the dungeon emperor."

Bits of ruined armor covered the floor around the site of our battle. With the darkness dissipated, none of that stalwart suit was necessary any longer. It had been charged with charms, packed with protections, jammed with jinxes, and glutted with every

gewgaw imaginable—a concentrated essence of the study of magic, the upper limits of the alchemical art form, the brainchild of a brilliant mind the likes of which the world would never see again. The philosopher himself had not been a fighter of any note. He built up the armor, piece by piece, in pursuit of a miracle. He transformed his life into strength. Destroyed his soul for a sword. Endured agony so that with his last cursed, dying breath, the armor would carry on fighting for him. *Automail.* And for all that—all that artifice, all that craftsmanship and cunning—he still couldn't reach the dungeon emperor. Dungeon emperors, see, were cut from a different cloth altogether. To fight one of them, one needed a whole other sort of strength—a brutal strength. A merciless strength. A strength that strained the limits of what it meant to be human.

"Damn shame!"

Only a single, solitary hope brought Sleeping Beauty and me together. If not for this farce, I would never have come into her life. Had the philosopher given up his own life for her, only to die at her hands…well, surely the grief would have consumed her. Surely she would have surrendered completely to the darkness. And if that had happened, she would have been beyond saving now. There would have been nothing for me to do but end her wretched existence. The only thing that prevented this cruelty of cruelties, the only thing that saved her, was a whim of chance—that Zaasimov never, ever reached her.

"…I really hate this world sometimes. Well…I guess this is goodbye for now, gang. Don't follow me, 'kay? If I tell you to run, I want you to find the girls and get them out of here. Use the bell and do what you gotta do. Okay? Promise me you will."

…Nod nod. …Rattle rattle. …Jiggle jiggle.

Aight. Let's end this thing. 'Cause if there's one thing I hate, it's a damn tragedy.

"Where's the good in tragedy? Why would I ever go out of my way to see one? Life's tragic enough as it is. Shit, man—what's so good about sadness that you gotta send me to another world to get more of it? Wasn't my old life hard enough? What do I need more stupid tragedy for? I've thought it through, and my answer is an absolute, definite, categorical no."

And besides, I made a promise.

Below me yawned the mouth of an unearthly, wailing abyss. Down there, trapped deep in the bowels of this dungeon, was a ghost. A soul. A prisoner to the darkness. I could feel a powerful magical force—a great swelling of mana—fused with the shadows below. A puppet of the darkness gone mad. A servant gone berserk.

The soul was a pale, translucent outline. Fingers of black twined about her legs and wreathed her arms. The stark contrast of ebon against pale alabaster... Oh, those tendrils of darkness crawling up that naked, lily-white form... *Hubba hubba!*

I stepped forward, cautious. I waited to see what it would do (and feasted my eyes—*you, ma'am, have won the internet*—on her delightful body). The darkness roared, making the very air tremble. Suddenly, that was all I could see—darkness. Darkness, pointed darkness, lunging toward me.

"Stabbing lances from wall to wall? No safe place to stand? Please—you don't need to handicap yourself. This isn't my first rodeo."

My two divine swords sundered the pitch-black air around me, and a great shiver went up in the writhing shadows. *Playtime's over, buttercup. Come join me when you're ready to be serious.*

"Yo, what's up, darkness? Even the old dudes upstairs had more life in 'em. Yeah, they fought like their lives were on the line. What's your excuse? You think you're hot stuff? You think you're so cool just 'cause you're the darkness? Yeah? Well, you can kiss my ass. Death, destruction, and the darkness of the abyss—I don't give a single crap about any of that. See, I come from one hell of a dark world myself. We have a saying there, y'know. 'It's always darkest before the dawn.' I've been there. I've seen that darkest darkness. What's a little shadow like you gonna do against that? Gonna swallow me up? Gonna destroy the world? Well, go on. Get to it. I'm waiting. If that's all you've got, then just do it. Kill me. Kill everyone. Kill yourself in the process—see if I care. It makes no gosh darn difference, so why don't you lie down and die now?"

I mean, come on. Attacking me with sharpened tendrils of darkness? *What is this, kindergarten?* Was I not the master of squirmy, writhing tendril attacks? From then on, everything was a

blur. I dodged and danced my way through the spears, slicing and hacking shadows to pieces. I dipped through the sky and gouged great holes in the murk. The darkness emanated endlessly from the soul, feasting on her explosive power banks of magic. Even now, when time was all but stopped, the darkness manifested too fast for my flying swords to keep up. I shaved my defenses down to their bare minimum, threw everything I had and then some into offense, and tried to force the shadows into submission with sheer firepower. Separating the darkness from its power supply was the only way to win this. Yeah, its source of strength—the soul. The point at which the shadows were densest.

I sliced shadows in twain, stabbed the endless gloom, hacked my way into the thick of the dark. For every time a shadow stabbed through my arm, I lopped off one inky tendril. For every time a dark lance gouged a hole in my leg, I stomped on it with the other foot and slammed my fist into a fresh mass of gloom. This wasn't pretty. There was nothing honorable about it. Just mutual mass destruction. And honestly, it was kind of freeing. It was vandalism, just base robbery, give-and-take destruction that would only end when one butcher finished slaughtering the other. Wisdom whirred to keep me moving faster than the speed of light. Time was a forgone conclusion. I Entangled Dimensional Slash with my swords and rendered the space in their paths meaningless. No time, no space—all that was left was a game of brutal, bloody murder. Victory went to the one who killed the other first.

It was all so fast—*bam, bam, bam.* Revival always kicked in just in the nick of time, yanking me out of death's jaws, in a continuous cycle of being healed and pulverized by turns. It was all I could do to keep up. The soul was too powerful. Even as I spoke, hordes of evil wraiths began to emanate from out of the darkness.

"Uh-oh! I know what this means—it's another monster house!"

I thrust out my hand and activated the "Necromancy Ring: Intelligence +40%. Sorcery Control Boost. Instant-Kill Resistance. Spirit Production and Spirit Control." I still had no idea what a wraith versus a spirit was, but it didn't matter anymore—I gathered them all together and destroyed them, along with a fresh patch of darkness, with one mighty Dimensional Slash. I spared a split-second glance with Jupiter Eye to check the aftermath—my plan

had worked! I had been reluctant to use the “Necromancy Ring” for its MP-guzzling and sex-appeal-tanking issues, but screw it—no one was watching here. The only thing around to witness my cringe was the darkness, and I was killing that anyway. No evidence would ever leave this room!

“Die, darkness, die! For my sex appeaaaaaal!”

Destruction, destruction, destruction. Destroying the enemy before it destroyed me first. Repaying all destruction inflicted with more destruction. If this was no more than butchery, then so be it. Really, it was so simple a child could have done it. Creation was an endlessly complex task, but destruction? Ah, that was simple. All I had to do was take one good look with Jupiter Eye and destroy whatever was in my sight. All there was to it—look, destroy. See, destroy. Examine, destroy. Glimpse, gaze, gander—destroy, destroy, destroy. Then sit back and watch the aftermath.

I struggled for breath. In and around gasps, I spat, “Come at me…tough guy… You think you’re so great? You some…super powerful, mega thick, uber-eternal darkness? I don’t care. I’ll…kill you either way. C’mere, darkness. Let’s dance.”

“Hey, loser. Guess who’s gonna destroy you? Yeah, that’s right. I’m still kicking. I may look half-dead, but hey. Here I am. Against all odds, I’m still alive.”

The trick, see, was having the right mindset. So long as I was determined not to die whenever it killed me, I turned out okay in the end. Funny thing, fighting the darkness. Stuff like logic, the laws of physics, and fantasy rules didn’t mean jack. The moment you spared a thought for those, boom. You lost. The darkness would destroy and destroy and destroy until there was nothing left, right? Combating something like that was patently absurd. It destroyed everything. The only logical, the only reasonable, the only predictable conclusion was the same: Death. Doornails. The end.

“Facing an opponent of mass destruction is a foregone conclusion. You’re gonna be destroyed. But here’s the trick—you just gotta destroy them first.”

’Cause whoever was the fastest to wreck their opponent’s shit was the winner. And really, at the end of all things, what was an all-consuming supernatural darkness against the battlefields of the

demons known as high school girls descending on a bargain sale? What was darkness but a little puddle of black anyway? What was a shadow but someone forgetting to turn on the lights?

"Until you've scaled the horrible heights of honkers-in-your-face hell, walked the perilous plains of p***y-pile purgatory, and threaded the hazardous headlands of haunches-heap heaven—no, until you've braved the tantalizing and so terribly, terrifically treacherous mental torture exacted upon your teenage boyness—until you've teetered on the brink, danced on the razor's edge, walked the very tightrope across the gaping gorge that is creaming your corduroys under a conglomeration of bargain-begging, bosom-bouncing busty babes, then you, my friend, know *nothing* about destructive power. Anyway, that's why I'm gonna destroy you. People tell me I'm good at that."

Mangling and mincing, slashing and slicing—and then all the shadows were gone, and all that remained was the chiaroscuro of Stygian tendrils upon a lone, white soul.

"Bro, that is *so* hot. Okay, I know I said that earlier. But it's true! She's so nice, I gotta say it twice! I'm serious, that soul is flamin' H-O-T!"

She was an inexhaustible supply of magic power, and so long as she and the darkness were entwined, there was nothing to stop the darkness from multiplying without end. All my hacking away at it did little. I needed to eradicate all of it—raze it to the ground—or else there was no end to this miserable battle. I could see in her eyes—oh, those lovely eyes in a wondrous (bangin', really) body—that she was begging for death. She was resisting the darkness with all her might, but she yearned to be put to the sword. She had no body. Just soul. Just darkness. And if she had her way, the two would descend into oblivion hand-in-hand…

By now, I was sick and tired of people in this dumb fantasy world being so goddamn selfish.

"Um, no? I refuse? I promised a bunch of old dudes I was gonna rescue you? Zaasimov the philosopher dude told me to save you? He came all the way from the surface just to get you—you know that, right? Teenage boys are all lies and excuses; it's true—but the old dudes died with smile on their faces, man? I can't break

my promise now? They're dead? All these *grumble grumble* geezers left me with a buncha *grumble grumble* problems and up and died on me? And stuff?"

All this selfishness was really starting to tick me off!

"You say you wanna die? I don't respect that. You know what happens when folks're on death's doorstep? Everyone gets together and prays for 'em. Wishes they'll get better soon. How're you gonna hear all *your* well-wishes unless you live, huh? Your old dudes foisted this job off on me. If I kill you now, who am I gonna foist that job onto next? Huh? Yeah, you're not dying on my watch. Hey, you know who's waiting for you upstairs? Nefertiri-san, that's who. She's upstairs. Right now. Waiting to see you. It's high time you... paaaaaasssed ooooooooonnn!"

Divine swords couldn't be used on spirits or souls. A single brush against a blade, and poof! No more spirit. However, only divine swords could banish the darkness. What other choice did I have but to turn upon the source of the darkness's power, that rapturous wraith whose exposed epidermis was choked in coiling tendrils that bit into her sweet, juicy, oh-so-bombastically bountiful flesh?!

Speaking of things that were dangerous to brush against... One accidental touch, and my teenage boyness threatened to break its lusty limits, awakening the ultimate power inside me that was a feverish churn of desire and thirst. Helpless? Harmless? No, she was anything butt! *Wait—drop that last letter.*

So I tossed one sword to the ground with a clatter. The other one followed. I shed my cloak, pulled off my gloves. Added my boots to the growing pile. My accessories followed, as did my und— Wait, no, that stayed on. Thank goodness there was no demand for teenage boys in skintight T-shirts and tighty-whities... *Or at least, there'd better not be!*

The damaged darkness stirred. See, it didn't dare get too close to me when I was wearing armor Entangled with *shenqi*—divine qi. But without my armor? I was defenseless. The darkness extended one trembling tendril and gingerly pressed against my side. Then, when it saw that nothing had happened, it surged forward to possess me.

I felt it begin to *eat my soul.*

"Ugh. Figures. Some of the darkness stayed put in Sleeping Beauty's soul. Well, at least most of it came over to me."

And right then and there, I pulled out the "Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water: Gets out the toughest darkness and the stubbornest stains. Best scrubbing and purifying power on the market! Call now and get a FREE limited-edition Darkness(?)-B-Gone (one-time-use) hankie!"

I stepped up to the drop-dead gorgeous girl, surprise writ large across her face.

"If there's one universal truth, it's this—when a teenage boy comes across a hot naked soul, he's gotta get his hands on it and purify it like his life depends on it!"

With one calm breath after another, I sent lianqi racing through my meridians, halting the darkness's spread. Unfortunately, there was little I could do to drive it out of my body. With Martial Qi Wizardry, I could raise my *neiqi*—inner qi—activation and challenge the darkness, but that wasn't enough on its own to stymie the shadows altogether. There was no resisting an all-encroaching, all-consuming, all-transforming power like the darkness. Right? Well, why the hell not? Was I not a teenage boy? Was there not a beautiful girl directly before me? A teenage boy's spirit could never die, for the teenage boy's ethos was built on the back of his horniness!

"Now, to just dab a bit of Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water on this special anti-darkness hankie and apply careful, rhythmic, *ooh*, massaging pressure…to remove the most stubborn darkness! Rub and squeeze like my life depends on it! Put in a little elbow grease! Fondle that beautiful naked body…soul…whatever it is…through wind, snow, and pouring rain, if I must! Scrub, scrub, scrub until all that weird black stuff covering the parts we're not allowed to show are gone!!!"

I took painstaking care to run my hands over every square centimeter of her slick flesh. There was so much *give* under my fingers I couldn't believe she was just a soul. No soul had any right to provide such a tactile experience. My fingertips lingered over every soft space, sunk into every squishy receptacle, slid across skin

like velvet, explored slick crevices, wandered into forgotten grottos… Lest one think my labors were informed by infatuation, I must insist that I was motivated by a sense of duty, driven by the pure heart of a teenage boy, inspired to plaster my hands all over every sculpted, spherical, spectacular—

And that was when my hand slipped.

Brother, I did not simply almost come in my undies. I just about *arrived*.

"WHOO, let's go! Teenage-boy Lovemaking at full throttle! *Vroom, vroom!* Or in simpler terms, a skin-to-sticky-skin, yin-yang-mixing, forced darkness exorcism! Y'know?"

Judging by the look of confusion on her face, she did not know.

See, Lovemaking or *fangzhongshu* was a healthy, wholesome art practiced between a man and a woman in the bedroom. It stimulated qi circulation through skin-to-skin contact. Sleeping Beauty's soul and I shared the magic and the qi pumping through our bodies, and the resulting lianqi flushed away the darkness, leaving us panting and heaving… Well, she was twitching from the aftershocks. Her unladylike shuddering—her bucking, shivering, and the assorted facial expressions associated with them were best not unveiled in polite company.

"Ha! Now the darkness can't corrode her any further. Its magic-stealing days are done! …Gosh, she sure is twitching and clutching her unmentionables a lot. Even the darkness would be kinda alarmed to see her in this state."

Twitch. Twitch twitch.

Now we were stuck in a stalemate. The darkness had taken over my body too, leaving me unable to move. On the flip side, without its stranglehold on the soul, the darkness had no source of magical power.

"Ugh, can you stop being stubborn? Come on out; quit hiding. Don't wait for me to call your name. Can't you read the room? You've stolen enough of my EXP already. Hurry up and *work*! Quit pretending to be General Health and Blockhead!"

Please. Who did it think it was kidding? What was a jobless, skill-less NPC like me doing picking up Shinto-Muso cane style? I never learned that back on Earth! Clearly, I was cheating!

"I never commented on it 'cause it was so epic I figured the real Shinto-Muso cane style would be mad…but there's Martial Qi Wizardry! SP-guzzling Martial Qi Wizardry! Also Lovemaking—now, that one I'll let you get away with. Big fan of that one."

Then there was the Blockhead skill. Only a blockhead would claim that Blockhead was useless. Sure, maybe being puppeted around like a wooden blockhead wasn't much on its own—but what about the act of puppeting?

"Still not showing up, huh? Wait! Was Body Manipulation in on this, too? Hold on! I thought Body Manipulation was the true skill behind Calisthenics. How deep does this rabbit hole go?! You tricked me! I did radio calisthenics every morning and everything! I made the orphans take up calisthenics too! And it worked—it made them healthier! So…thanks, I guess? Now come on, stop hiding. I don't care if you break my body. It'll heal on its own. Come *on*, get a clue! Come out of hiding. …Listen, the soul's in a bad way. If you don't show up soon…I'll be *really* angry. I mean it."

My pulse quickened, and I felt a shiver run up through my entire body. My muscle fibers flew apart; my bones snapped.

"Yaaaargh! My whole body is coming apart on me! Which isn't a surprise, but—I didn't expect it to be *this* bad."

I could feel Alchemy joining hands with the budding mystery skill, transmuting my poor body further. It even pulled in Qi Wizardry to construct a new foundation for my physical form.

"Urrrrrghhh! What, are you not done yet? Still, I s'pose this is all part of resisting the darkness. Do what you gotta do!"

I waited for what felt like ages as I stared at my stats screen. The darkness had fed on both of us—that was why it hadn't disappeared when I exorcised it from the soul. I had no more time. If I didn't act—if I couldn't will myself to move—it was game over for both of us. If I wasn't done—if I hadn't defeated the darkness by the time the Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water wore off—the darkness would only claim the soul again. For good.

Losing was inevitable. The darkness was so much stronger than me, and I was in no state to fight any longer. Losing was the only rational outcome. But I had given my word, so rationality and inevitability could go take a hike!

And then there it was. The skill. Right there on my stats screen, plain as day. Now I could do it. Now I could move again. Now I could go buck wild.

“Nice to meet you! Your name is…Hoplology? Well, it’s good to have you on board. The floor is yours—use all of my skills, even if it comes at the cost of my body. Right now, I’ll take whatever gets the job done.”

The darkness cloaked me and bit into my flesh—but only until I transformed myself with magic, trapping the darkness in place and preventing it from fleeing. Robbed of magical power and unable to move on my own, I used Blockhead to pilot myself and lianqi to counteract the spreading decay.

Three cheers for Blockhead, the ability to commandeer myself as an external agent. It worked in tandem with General Health, the skill that kept me safe from poison in the first ultimate dungeon. General Health was also the driving force behind my ultra-powerful Revival and Regeneration.

“Calisthenics also revealed its true form and evolved into Body Manipulation. But even Body Manipulation was a cover. Why do all of my skills have a deceptive streak? I can’t think who they could have got it from…”

With Blockhead working on the outside and Body Manipulation from within, I steered myself into action. General Health knit my broken flesh together and managed to eke out some semblance of life for me. However, even with their assistance, I wouldn’t have survived if not for Alchemy and Qi Wizardry. With them, I had precious little chance of survival as it was. This was the most dangerous form of self-control I’d ever invented.

“But if I don’t use it, then what else am I to do? Sure, it’s agonizing. But a promise is a promise.”

My skin split open; my muscles tore off in shreds; blood surged from gaping holes in my shambling cadaver. My bones grated and creaked together before snapping under the pressure;

magic alone kept me upright. My organs ruptured and burst; only lianqi kept them in some semblance of functioning. If not for the healing foisted upon me by my qi activation, I would have long since died. I just had no more time. I had to act now, excruciating as this was.

"Because if this goes on much longer, I'll be out of MP. Who cares if it hurts, so long as I can move?"

At long last, I forced my arm to reach out and drop the "Exorcising Liquid Light: Pour on user. Grants major magic defense buff and glows with light." Light meant nothing down here, on this, the lowest floor of the ultimate dungeon, but be that as it may—I gobbled up a complete regeneration mushroom and took up the Universe Staff. The Rod of Asclepius, that stitcher of wounds and healer of status ailments, kicked in, using Curing, Healing, Revival, and Regeneration. Its powers forced my body to keep going, and so I took up the Replicant Sword as well. Then, with one deft movement—auto-healing all the way—I re-equipped all the gear I had tossed off earlier.

"Whew! That was a close one. I almost passed out! And I'm not out of the woods yet."

A pair of warm, gentle arms wrapped around me from behind. I felt a loving stream of magic flow into me, replenishing my nearly spent MP reserves and healing my wrecked body further. It was the soul. But my self-destruction outpaced even her help, and every magic point she channeled into me was whisked away as Magic Entanglement started right back up again.

The soul smiled at me with a virtuous tenderness. She'd saved me, I realized. Sleeping Beauty's soul had come to my rescue—the very same soul who'd been twitching and panting not moments before. *Wait, I didn't say anything! I've forgotten all about it, I promise. I don't even remember what it was I've forgotten! I swear!*

"Hey, Hoplology? It's do-or-die time. I should be able to withstand your worst for a split second, so have at it. You've been hiding yourself away long enough. Get out there and show 'em who's boss. Entanglement…activate! AAAAAAGHHHHH!"

Hoplology! The theory underlying all martial arts, encapsulating physical and mental control alike. Cliff Notes version:

A sound mind in a sound body is conducive to busting baddies. *Help me out, General Health. We have a battle to win!*

"I—argh!—promised I—urgh!—wouldn't let the darkness—urf!—get away!"

I manifested my divine swords, and with the first, I stabbed myself in the chest. I mean, how else was I supposed to get at the darkness swirling and clamoring inside me? *That's where we're different, darkness. You can only consume. And me? I can perform destruction* and *Revival.*

And now for the second sword.

"AAAAAGHH! …Come to think of it, why did I try so hard to stop the darkness possessing my body? It's not like it could've done anything with it. I'm too broken to move."

The divine swords were the darkness's mortal weaknesses. Unfortunately, the self-destructive boost caused by their powers was also *my* mortal weakness. Thus, if I used the swords enough times in a row, my poor body wound up too injured to move.

"Which is when Hoplology kicks in to pilot it. I've also Restored and transmuted my body through Alchemy too many times to count. Finally, I'm resistant to shenqi, whereas the darkness isn't—in theory, at any rate. And yet it's still agonizingly painful!"

My innards felt like they were on fire. The darkness was rattling around inside of me, shrieking in agony and clawing to get out. Shadows oozed from my pores and slithered away.

"Good! That's finally done. No more darkness. Yeah, black is so not in fashion anymore?"

But there was no strength left in my faltering fingers to pull the swords from my chest. They were the only things keeping me upright. Once they were removed, I would collapse. Nor had I the time to focus on such things. I needed to intervene before the fleeing darkness slithered back into the soul—I needed to—I needed to—

I took a shaky half step forward and could move no more.

"You've…done enough. Thanks, Hoplology."

A half step was all I needed when it could be repurposed as a martial arts stomp. The earth shook when my foot struck the

ground. The air shuddered. My other foot followed its twin, propelling all my weight and magic into a single point. My left hand glided forward. My right hand shot after it.



Yeah, a half step worked just fine for my needs. A mere half step could channel all one's strength and all one's might—that was, if one had Martial Qi Wizardry and knew bengquan—smashing fist!

"Bengquan, Hoplology-style! 'Cause Hoplology is the master of the martial and the ancient sage of art? There's no way a half-dead darkness can survive a hit so OP, so godly, it should be called Half-Step Divine Fist!"

The impact of the bengquan strike made the air roil. The darkness was blasted into tiny fragments and scattered in all directions. A shockwave, a surge of MP and qi, rolled through it, destroying the shadows so completely that not a trace was left behind. And then it was gone. Completely. *Yeah, see? I told you half a step was enough.*

None of that incomprehensible power would've been possible if not for Hoplology. It was responsible for that terrifying blast of magic and qi activation. Me, on the other hand... Well, I think was ready to finally give up the ghost.

At least I kept half of my promises—Sleeping Beauty's soul was safe. But I also promised I'd come back. The dungeon emperors were waiting for me, weren't they? Problem was...I just didn't...think I'd make it...that...long...and...stuff?

DAY 115

NIGHT

Be it above or below ground, the world is full of false accusations! Yeah, and now I'm grounded?

THE ULTIMATE DUNGEON UNDER THE CATHEDRAL IN THE THEOCRACY, 100TH FLOOR

THEY HAD TO DRAG my brutalized remains back up the stairs. Miss Armor Rep was apoplectic and couldn't stop crying. Slimey quivered at me furiously and rushed to cast Curing on me. And Dancer Girl… Oh, Dancer Girl. She hugged the soul of her friend to her breast. She whimpered. She sobbed.

So I had to hold on—just a little bit longer. I couldn't pass out yet. Time was running out, and fast.

I extricated Sleeping Beauty's body from my item bag…but the soul just looked at me in sorrow and shook her weary head. *Yeah, I probably shouldn't have dressed her like a bunny girl…*

"It's too late, you say? Then it's time to use my secret weapon… Yeah, it's morphin' time!"

I laid the "Hylomorphic Necklace: Unites spirit and flesh into a single entity. (Limited to one-time use.)" around Sleeping Beauty's neck. What *should* have happened was that the beautifully bunny-suited body and the sensationally sexy soul would have fused. However, once again, the soul just shook her head.

I could see guilt in her eyes. She didn't want to come back to life. She felt guilty for all the people who had died trying to save her, and her conscience tortured her—it wasn't right that she was the only one who got a second lease on life. So, she refused to fuse with her body once more. She stubbornly clung to her spirit form and eschewed the possibility of rescue. It was her way of atoning for lives lost.

Fat teardrops spilled from Dancer Girl's eyes. The soul touched her, gently, giving her old friend one final farewell. It was time for her to pass on. To say goodbye to this world. Dancer Girl grabbed her and held her tight, the tears falling on Sleeping Beauty's

shoulders. She clung to her friend as if that would stop Sleeping Beauty from leaving. Grief molded Sleeping Beauty's gentle features. Her gaze alone told everything—no further words were needed. She'd made up her mind. She was ready. Her soul would never return to her body again...

"...All righty, up we go!"

I stumbled my way over to Dancer Girl and ruffled her hair. "It's gonna be okay," I said.

Then, with my other hand, I touched Sleeping Beauty's soul on the head. Mind you, I had the "Mindbreaker Gloves: Grip Augmentation (hyper, activates upon grabbing a head; super effective when bashing head into walls or floors)." equipped. And so...I gripped Sleeping Beauty's head hard, lifted her bodily, and smashed her face-first into the wall. Well—not *bodily*, since she was a soul. But you get the idea. Thank goodness I got a good grip on her...

"Do you think you're responsible for their deaths?"

I lifted her head again, twisted it in my fist, and slammed her into the wall once more. A cry of pain was torn from her lips.

"Did they ask you to feel guilty?"

Sleeping Beauty whimpered, Dancer Girl tried to pry me off of her—but I slammed her back into the wall regardless. Another scream.

"Do you think that's what they'd want? Do you really?"

I wasn't here to take excuses. I wasn't here to waste time. I didn't give a rat's ass what Sleeping Beauty felt. Her convictions could go take a running leap.

Slam! went her head once more.

She couldn't sob and scream her way into winning my mercy. What made her think giving up was ever, *ever* an acceptable answer?

"You think they risked their lives so you could give up on yours? You think that's what they wanted?!"

Slam!

Slam, slam, slam!

I lost track of how many times her forehead made violent contact with the wall. But I kept going. I would go until I broke her mind. I would go until I broke this spirit's spirit.

She went quiet in my grip.



“This is what you get for treating people’s lives like they’re nothing. This is what you get for spitting on their graves. Understand? I won’t stop until you say you’re sorry. Do you understand me?!”

I lifted her by the scalp, swung her up high, and dashed her to the floor. To the wall. To the floor. To the wall. Didn’t she get it? Didn’t I tell her how her people died smiling? Didn’t she understand? Didn’t she see what that *meant*?

I’d scowl at her until she saw sense. I’d bash her into the wall until the message sank in. *If I was the old philosopher dude, I would hit her so much worse*. I would’ve dragged her from the room a bloody mess. Eventually, a day would come—maybe not now, but soon—that Sleeping Beauty would open her eyes and smile, thinking what a wonderful dream it was she had. Wasn’t it wonderful that the elders had survived for centuries just for her? Couldn’t she understand that? I would break her mind against this wall until the message sunk in!

Slam! Slam, slam, slam! Didn’t she care about the old men who dreamed of her survival? Her happiness? Didn’t she care how they stood sentinel for her for eons?! They *begged* me. They made me *promise*.

It was just then—

“Wh-why do I feel a sense of doom?”

Too late, I noticed the glares boring into me.

Finally, after intimidating her like a brute—*ahem*, giving her a gentle pep talk, sobbing sexy Sleeping Beauty returned to her beautiful bunny-suited body. Finally, finally, her eyes fluttered open. It went without saying that her stupid selfish self looked brilliant in a bunny suit—dynamite *and* delicious.

“Hey! In my defense, we were running out of time! Her soul was on the verge of vanishing into the ether. I may have pushed her around a little more than is strictly necessary, but she had to learn her lesson somehow! What other choice did I have? It’s not like it hurt her—physical attacks don’t work on souls. And I couldn’t pull a Divine Sword on her; that would’ve killed her for real. Okay, so I got a *little* upset. So? I’m nothing to be frightened of. I’m famous for

being such a nice, polite, well-behaved teenage boy! Go on, tell her how nice I am. Write it down in your notes, too!"

Sleeping Beauty looked at me in utter horror before Dancer Girl and Miss Armor Rep pulled her into their arms. They stroked her head and whispered soothing murmurs in her ear, all the while giving me the stink eye. I wanted to join the group hug too! Heck, I wanted to be petted and murmured to by hot teenage girls. But I didn't dare get too close under such withering gazes. *Which leaves me with only one choice—ol' reliable!*

"Hey, Slimey. Have a crepe. Thanks for being so patient and waiting for me."

Bobble bobble!

The girls' glaring gazers homed in on the goodie Slimey gobbled down with glee. *Heh! It's working.*

"I'm sorry I made you worried, Miss Armor Rep. Can I give you a crepe to make up for it? Open wide."

...*Munch munch.*

The murder in Dancer Girl's eyes morphed into pure gluttony. *Jackpot!*

"Same for you, Dancer Girl. Don't worry. I'm okay now. Crepe to make up for it? Say aah."

...*Chomp chomp chomp chomp*.

Soon, smiles spread across the faces of my dungeon emperor pals. Sleeping Beauty looked at them wide-eyed. *Uh...Woken-Up-from-Her-Nap Beauty?*

"See? I'm nothing to fear. Here, you want one? They're super yummy. Everybody loves a sweet, fluffy crepe. Say aah!"

...*Nibble.*

Sleeping Beauty took tiny, fearful bites while keeping a nervous eye on me. Eventually, though, her tense cheeks loosened into a smile. Her teary eyes dried, and when I added a dollop of sweet cream to her treat, she began to attack it in earnest. I sat back and admired my handiwork: she and Dancer Girl, together, sharing a smile... *See that, old dudes? I kept my promise.* Yeah. I knew a smile of true happiness when I saw one.

"...Heh. Good."

Jiggle jiggle.

The old dude who'd kicked the bucket in the room we now stood had wanted nothing more than to see that smile on Sleeping Beauty's lips. That was his one wish. His sole hope. His single dream. Following him and the rest of the deceased old dudes into the grave was an insult. It was the largest slap in the face imaginable. Yeah, all they wanted was one smile... *For a girl who was scared out of her wits not two minutes ago, she sucks up crepes like a vacuum cleaner!*

Munch munch munch!

Unsurprisingly, Sleeping Beauty wasn't much of a talker. I wasn't sure she knew how to speak. Dancer Girl could keep up in conversations with the help of creative gestures, and Miss Armor Rep tended to nod along...although I didn't know if that meant she understood what I was saying. Pretty much all she ever did was nod.

I brought this up 'cause the senior members of my squad chewed me out the whole way back up the stairs—Sleeping Beauty tattled on me!

"I keep telling you! There wasn't enough time for anything else! Jupiter Eye said she was just minutes away from vanishing altogether. The darkness stole so much of her MP that it was glommed onto her, hard. That was the only way I had of removing it. Don't worry, I weakened the darkness first. I had the whole situation under control. Trust me!"

"Your body, disintegrated! Again!"

"You had to, pilot, self! You promised, Haruka! You promised, you wouldn't...die..."

Oh, this was *furious* furious. This was crying-level fury, the granddaddy of all fury!

"And I kept my promise. I'm still alive, see? If I'd died, I'd be dead. But I lived, so I'm alive. I am *not* gone to a farm upstate; I am *not* pushing up daisies, I am *not* on a slab on the mortician's table! So I may have reanimated a handful of times, maybe came back to life an occasion or three, or perhaps even got a game over and

spent several of my remaining retries. Who hasn't? Point is, I'm not dead. At least, I don't think I am. Y'know? I'm not dead?"

Psst, psst, psst...

Wha—tattletale! Were the crepes not enough? Did I have to bribe Sleeping Beauty with manju to win her silence?! Well, that seemed to work—she was now chowing down happily. It was the other two girls who looked at me in utter disgust.

"What possess you, use lotion on her? In the middle of a battle?!!!"

Oh no—not Miss Armor Rep's furious grin! Of all the terrifying angry expressions in her repertoire, this one easily topped the list!

"She says, you cover her, in lotion. Made her see, stars! What the hell, you do to her?!"

Huh? Since when was Dancer Girl fluent enough to use figurative language? And was she mad at me? No, she couldn't have been, right? There must have been a language-barrier-induced misunderstanding; Sleeping Beauty still lacked a strong command of the language. Being the very picture of fluency myself, I decided to set the record straight and clarify that I did nothing wrong.

"Nuh-uh, all I did was work really hard to make her nice 'n wet with Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water and then used the freebie hankie that came with it to carefully and attentively and painstakingly wipe her down, which was both a weighty and wondrous undertaking thanks to her weighty and wondrous assets and pure white naked body, which was unfortunately covered by this obnoxious black stuff protecting the readers' innocent eyes so I scrubbed that off as hard as I could, using a lot of rubbing and fondling and then there was a lot of touching and sobbing and battling with the darkness and squeezing and a sexy naked body and the vivid sensation of something soft and squishy under my hands and then anyway so yeah I cleaned that, and it's really something how her skin managed to feel so soft even while the darkness was corrupting it, and I really enjoyed how nice it felt, and there was lotion everywhere, and my hands slipped, and I sort of touched her all over, and we both had a really awesome time, and anyway I got all the darkness off SO, in conclusion, I did nothing

wrong? Blame the darkness, if you're gonna blame anything. It shouldn't have been so hard to scrub out."

(Spoiler alert: The girls did not blame the darkness. They just glared at me.)

The walk back was full of murderous looks. I responded with another volley of dessert cover fire—hey, at least Slimey was willing to be nice to me. It was not a fun experience, let me just say. And we had a lottaaaa dungeon left to cover.

On the 74th floor, Dancer Girl, Miss Armor Rep, and Slimey mopped up the leftover monsters. Sleeping Beauty and I sat back and watched to give ourselves a chance to rest. We had ourselves a nice little picnic while we spectated, even.

"Th…thank…you. Very…much."

"Aww, you're welcome. Don't mention it. It was my pleasure to get strong-armed into saving you. If you're going to blame anyone, blame those old dudes who slapped me with the job before up and dying. Yeah, I didn't do anything wrong? And stuff?"

Welp. That pissed her off. Back to enjoying the show I went.

Then it was more walking and more dungeon emperors tearing me a new one. Followed by more cheering them on in fights, passing around more desserts, and feeling the weight of more angry stares.

And then when we crossed into the 72nd floor, there were all the other girls waving at us… Scratch that! Waving *morning stars* at us! One hit from those things in my weakened state, and I was gonna be a Haruka has-been!

With a whopping thirty-plus girls, it was ten times the noise and ten times the crying. Amid all the chaos, I slipped over to the gate and zipped back up to the entrance of the dungeon.

I walked out into a battalion of knights and a squad of mages camped out around the outskirts. Most of the knights came from the Knights of the Scriptures, but I wasn't gonna let my guard down. I gripped the Universe Staff tight.

Just then, Sister Girl stepped out of the mass of combatants and announced to the crowd that the dungeon had been vanquished.

“The dungeon is defeated! At long last, this ancient doom has been thwarted! As princess of Aryuca, I hereby declare the founding of a new Church—a Church free of corruption! A new nation—a nation of the people!”

“Whooo!”

The crowd erupted into cheers. The knights saluted with their swords and swore their loyalty to Sister Girl, raising a fresh wave of applause, cheers, and general hullabaloo. Some old dude—I think he was the king? I dunno—showed up and hugged Sister Girl. His Oldness, the old bishop who had a thing for upskirting girls, bent the knee and swore his fealty to the royal family as well. Heck, I even spotted the violent old dude saluting and waving like mad at me.

The celebration seemed to never end. In fact, it spread like a wave until the entire city was clapping and cheering.

I let my grip on my staff slacken. Finally, it was all over. It was okay to sit down…maybe close my eyes for a minute or two… You wouldn’t believe how tired I was… This had been one *hell* of a long day.

DAY 115

LATE NIGHT

Convalescing and regrowing limbs—call that being a starfish in bed.

A GUEST'S SUITE IN THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

AT LONG, LONG, *LONG* LAST, the one hell of a long day ended, and I fell into a deep, deep, *deep* sleep. Much like a streamer in an ill-planned 24-hour marathon stream, I overtaxed myself and went down for maintenance.

I awoke to find three years had passed—okay, not really, but it would've been funny if it had, right? Actually, I awoke to find I was still broken and battered. My systems were offline—most of them, anyway.

"My lack of get-up-and-go aside, is it still the same day? Shoot."

I wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. My body had been taxed to infinity and beyond, with Hoplology blowing well past my physical limits. I could barely twitch a toe or flick a finger. *Uh... I might be a little* too *injured.*

When my full self-disintegration powers kicked in, they soon outpaced Revival and Alchemy. Even the complete regeneration mushroom was no more than a drop in the bucket. But at least I still *had* a body, albeit a completely static one. Sleeping Beauty did a great job healing me. Even now, I could very, very faintly feel my body stitching itself together.

"Did Hoplology trigger that too?"

Hoplology governed more than martial arts and other physical fighting arts. This skill encompassed all related technical disciplines, including the healing arts and qi manipulation practices. No wonder it had a hand in the Alchemical processes transforming my body.

"Honestly, I noticed that earlier but just pretended not to see. The moment I saw the name Hoplology, I knew I was way out of my depth."

Controlling Hoplology was a weighty task made for wiser heads than mine. Yeah, like Wisdom's? I really had no choice but to

let Wisdom handle the calculating and cogitating. *I just hope they don't combine forces… Now there's a match made in hell!* Should Jupiter Eye join in and form the Trouble Trio, that would put me way out of my depth—out of my width and length too!

Revival finished restoring my sensory system. The inner workings of my nervous system, though, were probably still a ravaged mess. I figured the situation had gotten so dangerous that Wisdom had cut the power to certain nerves altogether. Maybe Hoplology just got out of Wisdom's control, and with my body on its last legs, Wisdom decided I couldn't handle it anymore and hit the kill switch. That explained the strange bedbound state I now found myself in.

I took stock of the rest of my situation. Someone had taken my equipment off and redressed me in a yukata. My Presence Sensing skill still worked, and my brain was perfectly fine. Yup, my thoughts ran like well-honed clockwork. My memory was airtight. Miraculously, I even remembered my old high school's school song.

"How does it go again? 'Three cheers, three cheers for something High! Where something sun rises over something slopes and something rivers dry. Deedle-deedle, dum-de-dum, shoobie-do-boop-do-wop, la-di-da-di-da, something High? Y'know?' Yeah, that's exactly how it went. More or less. With a bit of artistic license."

At least I could breathe, apparently. And sing.

"Testing, testing. Are we reaching? Can you hear me, Major Tom? Can you hear me—come to think about it, both me and ol' Tom have left our homes behind to drift through another world. Whoa. Has isekai been a science fiction subgenre all along?! Okay, voice check done. My voice is back…but the rest of my body is still busted… I'm so bored. Da-da-duh, da-da-duh, da-da-duh, da-da-duh, da-da-duh, da-da-duh, da-duh-da."

My voice was back. I took deep breaths, refining my internal organs and tightening my core. Oxygen, qi, and magic ran up and down my limbs, rushing through my bloodstream to every extremity of my body. It formed a spiral, a cyclic revolution, of a blood-qi-magic mixture. This cycle imbued my muscles and bones with magic, activated my nerves, and linked them to the rest of my anatomical makeup with lianqi.

Long story short: I could manipulate magic *within* my body but couldn't channel it *out* of my body. Same with skills. I was bedridden and helpless—and at such a young age, too!

Which meant Alchemy was transmuting my physical form once again. This ultimately broken body was being reforged to be stronger and more efficient under the wise jurisdiction of Hoplology. Only because I was destroyed so exhaustively was I able to achieve this new form, and *that*, my friends, was why I couldn't move yet.

"I'm not to blame this time, either. The prereqs for this transformation are obscene! Fight off the darkness without a divine sword to avoid hurting your soul ally... Grr, those selfish old dudes! It's all their fault."

Were it not for the Darkness(?)-B-Gone Holy Water, I would never have eked out that win. It was the sensationally sticky lubricant that greased my hands running up and down her sides, with my tongue following in close succession to lap up any stray liquid. Oh, it was a challenging fight! A brutal round of the cleaning wars!

"Well, it looks like a certain appendage is in perfect working order... Why the hell was *that* prioritized in the healing queue?!"

I kept up my breathing exercises, taking care to maintain the correct rhythmic movements of my diaphragm. Soon, it became unconscious. I refined the neiqi generated by those breathing techniques and began circulating it through my body to make this proper breathing a constant and automatic function. My pulse and my breathing combined to form an engine for my qi techniques—a sigil through which magic pulsed. Was that Hoplology's end goal?

"Yeesh! It takes some pretty high specs to run Hoplology."

Hoplology embodied the reason that governed all artistry; it operated at levels so magnificent, no other art, even Martial Qi Wizardry, stood a chance of coming close. *If you look up "extra" in the dictionary, you'll find a picture of Hoplology!*

"And it's been hiding away in me all this time? Yeah, it's too complicated for daily use. Plus, it takes too much out of me. I literally can't move. I'd better lock this down in the interest of retaining basic locomotion."

Using unconscious breathing techniques to activate my pulse and invoke the qi-magic loop for constant buffing wasn't *totally* unreasonable…but completely remaking my body for that purpose was asking for too much!

"I guess I won't be able to chill out and live in my hermit cave for the rest of my life, so I'll need powers of some sort, right? Maaan…and here I was thinking there was only the one ultimate dungeon. If there's two, that means there's gotta be more, right?"

The more I worked, the more my chance of living an uneventful life as an NPC grew farther and farther away! I hadn't even been able to pop back to my cave to do the cleaning in days!

I couldn't be too mad at getting knocked out of commission, not when it was my fault for going overboard. But it'd been my duty to clear that dungeon at any cost. 'Cause that was where Dancer Girl had been imprisoned, y'know?

According to the old legend depicted in the mural, the old god dude's followers set a trap for Dancer Girl to keep their country safe. They locked her away in the bottom of the ultimate dungeon, and she became a dungeon emperor. Once Sleeping Beauty heard the news, she rushed to Dancer Girls' rescue. However, her powers were spent in the process, and only Dancer Girl's coffin was able to be spirited back up to the surface and safety. Thus, Sleeping Beauty was trapped. How tragic… And to heck with tragedy!

Sleeping Beauty became the dungeon's new Emperor. As time went on and the dungeon's power flagged, the old philosopher dude and his ancient gang of elders set to work to rescue her with feverish devotion. Unfortunately, the darkness had a firm hold on Sleeping Beauty's soul. Her body was the only thing the rescue party was able to recover, and they brought it back to the Cathedral for safekeeping.

They sent many other rescue parties down to retrieve the soul, but none could reach the bottom floor. The philosopher, fearing that the dungeon would one day return to its height of power, constructed the Cathedral—the reverse dungeon—over the top of it. His dreams of rescue were doomed from the start. But being doomed didn't stop him from constructing his suit of armor. It didn't stop him from descending into the dungeon's depths and pushing

forward with his dying breath…where his strength gave out on the 100th floor.

“Then he up and left the job to me! And died! Named me his backup player without so much as a by-your-leave! People in this world are selfish, selfish, selfish. So are my classmates, come to think of it… Maybe selfishness and gluttony are the default states of the human condition in this world. Apart from two individuals whose names shall be omitted from this record, all the girls are full of themselves, full of food, and full-figu… No, I didn’t say anything! Why are you still taking notes? The recon mission is over! Are you trying to extort crepes from me? Hush-money crepes with honey?! Blackmail is a crime, I’ll have you know! And how long have you been sitting here, anyway?”

Munch munch, nom nom, crunch crunch, jiggle jiggle.

I would not be swayed by their nasty threats! I mean, I couldn’t move—I couldn’t have swayed even if I had wanted to. The dungeon emperors plopped an item bag into my stationary hands and made my frozen fingers open the flap. Then they gobbled down goodies! Boy, but they were packing those desserts away! Sleeping Beauty outdid the rest—she seemed hellbent on trying at least one of every snack in my pack.

“Well, it must have been ages since you last had a meal. Knock yourself out, I s’pose. But don’t you want to eat something with a little more nutrition? …Eh, just this once, I’ll let it slide. It’s good to be able to share a meal in good company again… Wait, you ate through the whole bag already?! You guys are on fire!”

“Are you, all right? Stomach, hurt?”

Miss Armor Rep ruffled Sleeping Beauty’s hair affectionately. I think this is a good time to mention that all three of the girls were dressed as nurses with short miniskirts. *C’mon, body! A little movement here? All that stuff I said in the ultimate dungeon—now’s the critical moment; do whatever you gotta do—yeah, that was a lie! This is the most critically critical moment I’ve ever seen. My inner critic deems this a critical crisis!* (ß the screaming of my teenage-boy soul)

“Thank you for, honoring promise. You, saved me. My name, Faleria.”

I was a fool. All along, I thought Miss Armor Rep's pink miniskirts and white tights were a threat, but the true terror was Dancer Girl's classic white costume! Oh, and with those beautiful black-gartered stockings underneath… She was sexy beyond belief! Alas, my teenage boyness was the only part of me with any willingness to stand up! *…Isn't it common to heal the most important parts first? Does that mean the most important parts of a teenage boy are his teenage-boy parts?!*

"Angelica, Nefertiri, taught me, trick. Kiss boo-boo, all better."

My classmates must have taught the dungeon emperors this custom. As if a saint of healing didn't know how to heal!

Not like there was anything left to heal. I wasn't hurt—I was being completely repaired and upgraded from the inside out. *Still wouldn't say no to having my boo-boos kissed, though.* Especially if the kisses came from a super cute nurse in a sexy, sky-blue costume! Her white knee-high socks were ravishing beyond words, the pièce de résistance in her outfit. She and the rest of the number of naughty nurses prayed for me, tear-streaked and earnest, while stroking my hair and whispering in lowered, soothing tones… *Uh, the hair on the crown of my head? Stay above the waist, girls. I know that's the only part of me that works right now, but hands up here?*

I felt so…sleepy… I dozed off, and I felt myself being lifted into a pair of welcoming arms that carried me from the room. Were we… going back to the frontier? At this hour? Wasn't it the middle of the night? Mm… No, maybe I was just still asleep… The orphans were waiting for me back home… Everyone missed me—Poster Girl, Stalker Girl… Oh, and I needed to go back to the Beast Kingdom to pick up the meatnerds… I'd left them behind 'cause I thought things would've wrapped up in the Theocracy faster than this. The beastfolk were probably sick of them by now… Hmm? Was this a bath? Ahh… The dungeon emperors were bathing me 'cause I couldn't wash myself.

"I would've been fine with a sponge bath, guys. It's a whole brand-new (if somewhat broken) body; it can't have gotten *that* dirty."

The dungeon emperors removed my yukata. And that was when, to my considerable consternation, the rest of the clothes

began to oh-so slowly come off too.

The sights before me dazzled my eyes. Puffs of steam did an excellent job framing the strip show and performing the general purpose of steam in such scenes, but I did kinda wish it'd get out of the way and let me see the goods?

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What're you doing?!"

The three shirt-shucking sirens served me up a perfect slice of heaven. Bare skin pressed against bare skin; full breasts and shiny skin were on display for my ocular (and auditory, whenever a ripe breast jiggled with an audible *bwom*) pleasure.

Great Scott! An air mattress within the bath? You've outdone yourselves, by Jove! It must have been a great deal of work to cover the mattress in a resin-coated cloth for lack of vinyl mattress covers... I have the best Servants a fellow could ever ask for.

"We, promised. Bath, with, lots of bubbles. Slooow, slooow bath with not one, buuut...*two* sponges. And lots and *lots* of lotion."

"That's, right. Full-body oil massage. The ultimate in sexy. A paradise of sticky, sensual, pleasure."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! This is a little too much action for me when I'm out of action... As much as I want to get action, my teenage boyness is the only actionable part of me!"

There were two problems. One, I couldn't do anything because I was effectively immobile. Two, we had an extra person? Why was Sleeping Beauty stripping too?

Beautiful Sleeping Beauty looked as pure and pale as her soul, save for the pink blush gracing those alabaster cheeks. Her face could've been carved from marble if not for the emotion in her features. Yeah, she was kinda hot?

"Wasn't Sleeping Beauty a holy woman of the church, a patroness of purity, a central figure of chastity, a model of morality, an icon of immaculacy, the very stuff of virtue, and holder of assorted other holy titles—wasn't she supposed to be an innocent character?!"

Wasn't she supposed to be a foil for Dancer Girl's sensual seductress shtick? What was a modest maiden, a demure damsel, a

virtuous vixen doing climbing into a bath with me? Especially with such a lewd grin on her innocent lips!

“Here comes, payback. You gave me, much. Now I give you much. Much dessert, much payback. Much help, so…no ♡ wriggle ♡ out ♡ of ♡ this.”

“All three of us, wash you. With our bodies. And a triple-sized helping of lubricant.”

“In sextreme technique, full-body oil massage, the more, the merrier.”

Oh, I had been a fool. I had fallen hook, line, and sinker for Sleeping Beauty’s sweet, saintly demeanor… I should have known better! She was Dancer Girl’s best friend, after all!

“Hey, Wisdom? We’re in deep, deep doo-doo. Could you hurry up and reconnect my nervous system to the rest of my body? I really cannot stress enough how seriously we are screwed. Not that I’m complaining about being screwed, but can I at least get us out of this bathroom first? Wisdom? Hello???”

“Service, time!” trilled a trio of terrifying tongues.

“Whoa, whoa. Hold on. Let’s talk this out. What is that sextreme technique thing you mentioned? Oh, I see. So it’s not the same thing as the church’s virtue of chas-titty? Wait, now’s not the time for this discussion! Nor a triple lube full-body sponge bath! Gywoooh?!”

Yes, thanks to this secret-filled saintly slippery scene, I was now plagued with teenage-boyness-related theological conundrums. It was becoming a pattern! Why did my Servants always use my past actions to justify coercing me into sexy times? And how come I, the victim of said sexy times, always ended up taking damage to my sex appeal for it? I was not the coercer, but the coercee! This was doubly concerning when I couldn’t even move. I was at the complete mercy of these three beautiful creatures and everything—boy howdy, *everything*—they were willing to do to me!

Six slippery thighs scooted their way up and down my four limbs, scrubbing and rubbing me full of bubbles until even the most

stubbornly stubborn teenage boyness gave up and went @#$%+=¥&*&*?!

“C-c-c-calm down, me! Clear my mind of any impure thoughts… Try not to think about the beautiful buttocks just barely brushing my biceps…or the thirty fingers undergoing undercover operations in my unmentionables… Calm thoughts, calm thoughts… Oh dammit, this is impossible!”

The biggest problem was this: I was sixteen years old and had a sixteen-year track record of being single. Do the math—age = current record of longest streak w/o gf. And yet, for reasons outside of my control (or at the very least, control was outside the realm of reason), I had wound up with two concubines. Common sense dictated that owning a concubine sunk a boy’s chance to get a girlfriend, doubly so for a second concubine; this was where the chance of obtaining a girlfriend shrank to the subatomic level. For some baffling reason, accidentally using Servitude on an intelligent being dealt lethal damage to a boy’s reputation!

“I’m sensing a pattern. I’m seeing a theme; I’m tracking the signs; my sense of déjà vu is off the charts! The last time a girl forced me to use Servitude on her and make her my concubine, my sex appeal departed this mortal coil. In the many moons since, I’ve scraped and scrimped up the barest hints, the smallest crumbs, the tiniest morsels of sex appeal, growing ever larger through the powers of gravitational attraction, and just then a third girl comes along…and causes a supernova!”

Much like a star collapsing under its own gravity, I, too, was about to blow.

“No! Please! Don’t squish me between your chas-titties, lest I… Gnnyaagh! Not the most fearsome of the sexual arts, the most frightening of all pair attacks! Not the most dangerous application of lotion known to man!”

I was suddenly keenly aware of every moist slurp and slobbery suck as Sleeping Beauty took my appendage in her mouth. A thread of a certain lubricating substance oozed out from the corner of her oh-so-innocent lips, evoking obscenity, conjuring lust, and arousing —well, me, for starters. No! Not the pair of thighs—one lily-white, one pale amber—gripping my arms! Not two pairs of beautiful legs

holding me down, rendering me captive, using me as a tool upon which they unleashed their slippery, sudsy wrath! I saw stars!!

"A-at last! Here's the response from Wisdom! Let me see—the results of the analysis suggest this 'sexpertise technique' is a precision attack dealt via the mouth and hands; the 'virue of chas-titty' is an AoE attack using the entire body. Good to know. Wait. It's a bit late for all this! I could've used this *before* they started attacking! Put my nervous system back online, damn yo—nygghh!"

This writhing tangle of sensual appendages wreaked havoc on my tactical sensors, and as for my optical—oh, my optical... With so many spheres swaying and flip-flopping and shuddering and jouncing and bouncing just above me, it was like teenage-boy genocide! I was immobile. Completely free of equipment. Doing my damndest to withstandest the concentrated attack and not let the one healthy part of me give up the ghost. Haruka Jr. was rolling with the punches, springing right back up with every hit with plentiful persistence and fortitude and all the good stuff that came with the power of Sex God. But even Sex God had its limits, and we were rapidly approaching them with thirty stroking fingers, three murmuring voice boxes, and three tongues inching their way down the length of my body and—well, my length. Between the full body feast for the senses that was the virtue of chas-titty, the all-encompassing hybrid service fest gone mad that was the sexpertise technique, I was in hell! I couldn't take it any longer! I was gonna—gonna—!!

The SEX GOD is defeated! All Servants including the newest addition to the party receive: MOUTHFUL ×1

DAY 116

MORNING

Old man spit is gwoss and smewwy and fuww of cooties!

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

I WOKE UP FEELING REFRESHED and—well, never you mind about that. I also found that I could move! Slowly and stiffly, but it was still something. Controlling my body felt clunky and unnatural, but at least my nervous system was back in business.

"Albeit kinda weirdly."

See, my entire body was wreathed in a layer of magic. Whenever I moved something, that magic coating grabbed me and performed the motion for me in time with the signals from my brain. My sensory impulses scrambled to keep up, but with each small movement, my body and brain began to sync up. With every second ticking past, I gained a greater awareness of how each new bit of my body worked. It was hard work, but I was learning to move again! Yes, I mastered the challenging ordeal known as rolling over in bed.

I mean, I could roll over unconsciously, but that was too dangerous. I needed to keep a close eye on the physical reactions of each body part and slowly but surely re-optimize myself.

"Yowch! I cramp up every time I move. This sucks. I feel like I'm about to be torn to bits."

I needed the fine control of a clockwork-powered puppet dancing on gossamer strings.

"Jeez, I'm barely human anymore. This new set-up is hell to control… If I don't pay enough attention, I get majorly hurt!"

Calling my reaction times hair-trigger was an understatement. It was like, by the time I realized I was punching myself in the nose, my face was already a bloody pulp.

"I'm too darn fast, and my face is too fragile. Or are my arms too powerful? I only realize what I'm doing by the time I'm already done. Do you have any idea how freaky that feels?"

I was transformed into a self-destruction machine. *Well, that's nothing new. Just, my self-destruction is usually a mental problem. This is less an issue of resource bottlenecking and more needing to dodge myself every two seconds—where failure to get out of the way means death!*

"Maybe I should separate my control from my consciousness… Or maybe I should calibrate my sensory perception first."

People's nervous systems operated on a bit of a lag, regardless. Thoughts were the fastest elements of the human body; sensory information was slower. It's kinda surprising, honestly, how long it took for sensory information to travel from some part of the body to the brain and back. Hence the need for training muscle memory in sports and martial arts and whatever, y'know? That kind of training conditioned reflexes, effectively reprogramming the body to react as quickly as possible.

"In regular people, the brain's decision-making thoughts keep up with the sensory information due to the latter's lower speed. A body that moves at the speed of thought is a deadly weapon!"

By the time I realized what was going on, I had already finished reacting to it. Done and dusted, y'know? That made me really, really, really, really, really fast. My body zipped along at the speed of thought, too fast for my brain to keep up, and reacted long before I had any chance of controlling it. I needed to put some kind of limiter on myself. That limiter would in turn develop into proper control—taking the concepts behind Holding magic to the extreme!

"Yeah, this should theoretically work 'cause…I mean, I've been doing something similar for ages now?"

Prior to this transformation, I had achieved a similar effect via Blockhead. I forcibly propelled myself, generating reaction speeds equivalent to that of my thoughts. The problem I faced now was that there was simply no way to control these inhuman, super-speed reactions. For lack of any other recourse, I decided to put a set of limits on them. No wonder Hoplology was a hidden skill when it demanded these super speeds. Humans weren't meant to use a skill like this.

Boing boing.

“There’s nothing funny about it, Slimey. I try to think, ‘Oh, is that a bug?’ and the poor thing has been slammed violently through the wall by the time I’ve gotten done with the ‘Oh.’ A few minutes ago, I thought, ‘My head itches. I wasn’t even finished with the ‘M’ when my hand went slamming down toward my head. It would’ve smashed my skull if it landed, so I had to leap out of the way at the speed of sound—but then I was going so fast I overshot and smacked my head on the floor! My life is on the line here, Slimey. The only thing to do is use qingqi activation to disguise the problem, keep myself in a state of suspended time, and keep a *real* close eye on what my hand is doing.”

Wriggle wriggle?

Aww, Slimey patted me on the head.

I stood up very, very slowly and spent an agonizingly long time performing my radio calisthenics at snail speed. The routine movements were a part of my muscle memory, and this allowed me to sync up my brain, my sensory perception, and my physical reactions.

“I wonder if other kids sent to fantasy worlds spend this much time doing calisthenics. I bet they do. It’s only logical.”

Wobble wobble.

It was only after being sent here that I started to appreciate just how wonderful radio calisthenics were. Honestly, at this point, I was grateful just to be able to move at all.

That was ’cause I’d had to fight for my life last night trying to hold out against the tortures wreaked upon me. Alas, as much as I wanted to stick it out and eventually retaliate with some payback of my own, there was too little I could do in my frozen state. The dungeon emperors did a number on me. They didn’t even let me try to talk myself out of trouble. They made the terrifying argument of fait accompli and, with helping evidence of my various crimes, exacted the punishment—sucking the everlasting life out of me. Then, in the end, they forced me to use Servitude on Sleeping Beauty. Yup. I was up to three concubines now.

“I think my sex appeal is inversely exponentially proportional to my number of concubines… Pretty soon, Haruka’s Sex Appeal will turn up on the endangered species list.”

On the flipside, Lovemaking fully healed me—inside and out—and replenished my depleted MP. If not for Lovemaking, I might not've been able to move again. So that was a perk...right? If only I'd been able to move last night!

"It's a crying shame when three beautiful girls use their three beautiful bodies to give me a full-body massage...and touching any of them is off limits! Okay, yes—I touched one of them plenty earlier; what's done is done; fait accompli, yadda yadda yadda. But still! I couldn't move a muscle, and there were plenty of muscles I wanted to hustle! I'm innocent, I tell you! I've been falsely accused! Oh, what a tragedy."

Oh, the pain! Oh, the inhumanity! Oh, the sweet heaven! Who'd ever heard of something so cruel as a bedbound teenage boy, his senses intact but no ability to move.

"And now I'm way, way too flexible. I can bend just about anywhere. With this new level of flexibility, I could take lessons from Rhythmic Gymnastics Girl. But none of the teen boys out there want a teen-boy gymnastics scene, right? Wow, I can reach every spot on my back just fine. Goodbye, backscratchers!"

Jiggle jiggle.

Slimey didn't know my struggle—he was made out of goo.

Anyway, I even had a much bigger range of motion now. That was why things didn't feel quite right when I exercised. Like take what happened a minute ago. I tried bending backward—just a little bit, y'know—and I clonked my head against the floor even as I was still standing. How was I supposed to have guessed that would've happened?

"At least I don't fall over anymore. Wonder why that is. Do I have better balance now or something? Problem is, I've traded falling and bonking my head for *not* falling and *still* bonking my head. Not sure if that counts as progress..."

Wriggle wriggle.

It felt weird to suddenly inhabit a whole new body, but I had to suck it up and get used to it. In the same way that little kids learn to control their bodies as they grow bigger, constantly recalibrating

alongside their growth, so too would I need to train my body to perform all kinds of tasks—including those not meant for little kids!

"And a-one, and a-two, and a-three, and a-four. And a-fiiieeeee!!! I'm gonna die!"

Boing boing.

I didn't look any different on the outside, but it was smarter to consider myself inhabiting the body of a whole new person. I didn't know the first thing about this body, so my first order of business was to determine where its physical limits lay. That meant stretching—sloooowly stretching my arms, sloooowly bending backward, getting a little too careless, not paying as much attention as I should have, attempting to stand back up and rubber-band-snapping myself across the room. Well, *that* was unexpected.

Losing control of my limbs was nothing new, but at least the last time, I couldn't trust my own senses, I was able to use kung fu to recalibrate myself and go back to basics with my fighting style. This eventually fixed the physical problems I was experiencing. Now, though... Now my problems were a bajillion times worse, and I had no idea how to even start fixing them.

"The problem's not that I can't move the way I want to. The problem is, the mere act of wanting makes me move in dangerous ways I could never want at all!"

Already this castle guest room was pocked with holes. If those were found, the girls were going to be very, very mad at me. Good thing I told the dungeon emperors not to come near me! That went double for Sleeping Beauty. She got knocked down to level 1 when I used Servitude on her. If I wasn't careful, I could accidentally one-shot her. *Yeah...like that's ever gonna happen.*

See, she may have looked like the sweet, dainty, never-hurt-a-fly type, but that was all a lie. Deep down, she was a fierce dungeon emperor from the bottom of an ultimate dungeon—a master masseuse, a sensei of the soap suds, a veritable guru of great bodies! She was a wolf in sheep's clothing. A succubus in the guise of a saint! Boy howdy, I couldn't get enough of her!

But the most fearsome force of all was Miss Armor Rep's natural, god-given talents. She was already a master of the sexpertise technique, an expert in the virtue of chas-titty. But now

she had evolved; now she was reaching even greater heights! *Just look at her go! What is her end goal?!*

"I'm gonna get my revenge on her sooo bad…as soon as I learn to control my new body."

Wobble wobble.

I wasn't able to control my magic well either—seeing as MP and the body worked in tandem. I had to start from square one. Breathing was the first step of anything physical, and once I had control over that, the rest would fall into place on its own.

So I chose to practice the five-elements fist of xingyiquan. I had never tried this martial art style before; I didn't think I was capable of handling it. But I had a feeling this was necessary for Hoplology to achieve its goals. Why radio exercises and kung fu were part of Hoplology's master plan in a sword-and-sorcery world, one could only wonder, but whatever… At this point, sword and sorcery had kinda taken a backseat. The bulk of combat was devoted to me going ballistic with a crowbar-like instrument.

"A crowbar made out of the Philosopher's Stone. At least that's on brand for fantasy."

Xingyiquan was built on the back of several complex ideas but was itself relatively simple. It also had very few kata or set moves—just five of them, in fact. All were built on the principle of the half step forward. No more, no less. That's all that was needed to perform the kata in their simplest forms. Granted, taking a half step forward was a monumental task in this state. But I practiced each of the five katas, cycling through them all in turn, and—as ever—left all the hard stuff for Wisdom to puzzle out.

"Hmm…"

Wriggle wriggle.

I kept getting hung up on the five elements part. This was the reason I'd been avoiding this style this whole time. *I think I might have to let Wisdom handle the elements as well.*

"Yeah, I've been putting off learning this one because it seemed like a real pain…but I couldn't stop thinking about it all the same. It's been eating at me ever since I learned Wood magic and realized that no one else can use it."

In this world, there were only four elemental magics: Earth, Water, Fire, and Wind. Well, I guess there were eight if you counted White, Black, Lightning, and Ice…but yeah. Wood magic. The magic of furniture-making fame. It wasn't the same as the elves' Plant magic either. *Right, time to lock in. Five elements. Five. Shifting into a five elements mindset.*

The five elements were not the same as the four elements of classical Western thought. These five—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—formed the basis of the natural philosophy encompassing the elements and yin-yang. According to this school of thought, everything was made up of some combination of these elements. Life and death and the vicissitudes of fate were cycles; the whole of creation was a cycle of elements endlessly transforming from one to another… Anyway, key point: Wood was one of the five elements.

"Lessee here. So, let's say you have the *taiji*—the 'supreme ultimate,' the sum of all stuff in the cosmos. And in the taiji, you're gonna form the Five Elements out of chaos, right? And like they all interact with each other in cycles 'n stuff. There's the generating cycle, where each element produces the next in line. Those are yang interactions. Then there's the destructive cycle, where each element destroys the next—those're yin interactions—and then there's a cycle where two elements overlap and make the overall energy stronger. Plus the reverse-destructive cycle and the excessive-destructive cycle. Point is, some elements play well together and others don't. You gotta pay attention to their strengths and weaknesses, or else they'll clash. It's a form of natural philosophy with all the obnoxious drama of human relationships!"

Jiggle jiggle.

Tree roots held in the soil and prevented it from being swept away in a flood. Earthen dams held back rushing rivers and shaped the landscape. Fire melted metal into swords and axes, which were then used to cut down trees to make other items. Water extinguished fire to prevent it from running wild and burning up everything—the kind of logic you'd come up with if you wanted to sell a lot of buckets, I'd imagine.

"Now, if the fire burns too long and consumes all the wood, it'll sputter out from lack of fuel. If a tree sits in too much water, the

wood'll rot away. Ditto for metal—'cept it'll rust instead. And if too much metal is mined out of the soil, well, then you'll be outta land to work with. When too many plants burn, and there's too much ash in the soil, it becomes a lot harder to bury things. That's bad news, even for the folks in the industrial waste industry. Y'know?"

Boing boing!

"It's cool stuff, right? I think it's kinda fun. Honestly, you only need to learn the basic elemental combos to do xingyiquan—the whole theory behind it's just a fun perk. I could go on and explain all the yin-yang stuff, too, but there's a lot to it."

Wriggle wriggle.

"Long story short, everything in the universe can be represented by the creation and destruction of five distinct elements. This forms the basis of the various natural cycles, and via these cycles, the universe's eternal nature is guaranteed. Or something like that; I dunno. Anyway, applying that theory to martial arts and *qigong* gives you the kata of xingyiquan."

Bobble bobble.

Slimy seemed to be following along. He seemed equally interested in all the facts I info-dumped; I wasn't sure how much he really cared… *Good thing he's so cute; he gets away with it.*

Slimey aside, xingyiquan was a form of kung fu that incorporated the relationships of the five forms of qi with the natural qi cycles—at least, that's what it was back home. Here, it meant something completely different.

According to the incomprehensible theories of the nerds, xingyiquan was an ultimate art, a beautiful synthesis of qi activation and magic. Yeah, back home magic didn't exist; here, we were up to our eyeballs in magic. Xingyiquan used the principle of destruction to negate magic; generation, to buff magic. Or so the nerds swore, at any rate.

"The nerds were convinced they'd get isekai'd someday, so they prepared (with more zeal than was probably necessary). Thing is, they didn't bother working out or teaching themselves new skills. No, they were convinced they'd receive free cheat skills and spent all their time coming up with ways to exploit those. If only they'd put

that level of enthusiasm into solving problems back home… Like, uh, the things they were bullied for?"

There was also one other factor, and this one was totally cheating: This world was based on a Western four-element magic system, and therefore xingyiquan probably operated outside of the universe's magical laws. I couldn't say whether this was true or not—this was out of my area of expertise—but I didn't doubt it. The nerds had been right with all their theories about tongbeiquan. (Let the record show that I knew nothing about this fantasy version of tongbeiquan. *Do you hear me? Nothing!*)

"So all I gotta do is combine the dual forces of yin and yang, and using the principles upon which yin-yang and the five elements are based, plus adding the ten heavenly stems, the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac, the eight trigrams of the I Ching, the four symbols of Daoism, the four pillars of destiny, and the basics of feng shui… Okay, I don't think I can hold this all in my head and fight at the same time. Especially not midair! Unless I let Wisdom do all the heavy thinking."

Jiggle jiggle.

Practice makes perfect. I combined the lianqi of my entire body with a burst of quick, explosive power, striking at super close range with the wood form of xingyiquan—bengquan.

"Xingyiquan is based on these five elemental forms and the more practical, albeit more challenging to master, *shi'er xingquan*—the Twelve Animal Forms. I also have Chicken Fist, which is basically whenever the chickenatrice pops out of my head to crow at stuff. Ditto for Snake Fist, which is when a buncha hydra heads spawn up and down my body. I guess Lizard Fist is when the basilisk who's really a lizard shows up? Only stands to reason."

Wriggle wriggle?

Blessedly, I'd yet to hear of the existence of a Tiny Tanuki Fist or a Mean Girl Fist. These latter arts focused mainly on biting—a completely different discipline.

"Hmm… Hm hm hm hm hmmity himmity hmm…"

Wobble wobble.

There were only five kata to work with—*piquan*, *zuanquan*, *bengquan*, *paoquan*, and *hengquan*. Piquan—the chopping fist—represented metal; it was the art of raising and lowering a weapon. The water kata was zuanquan—the breaking fist—a form of uppercut that mimicked surging water. The smashing fist, bengquan, mimicked wood's flexibility; paoquan—the cannon fist—offered both offense and defense in an explosive burst of flame. Last but not least came hengquan—the crossing fist—which mimed the motion of a spade piling dirt.

Once I had those down, fighting was simply a matter of repetition and syncing my new body to the pace of the moves. I really wasn't capable of anything else—just repeating those five forms. But if all martial arts were derived from those five forms, and kung fu included every weapon in the world, was this not the same as mastering fighting as a whole?

"I never doubted you for an instant, Wisdom. But memorizing it all in one go is, well… Let's just pretend it's a struggle so all those teenage boys trying to learn 'em at home feel better about themselves."

Miss Armor Rep's pointed bengquan strikes cleaved the sky in twain; Dancer Girl's florid hengquan hits ripped open the heavens; Slimey's adorable zuanquan moves bobbled and wobbled. The figure of holy loveliness that was Sleeping Beauty, not to be outdone, roared an earsplitting battle cry as she launched her piquan precision moves. *Yeesh!* With her magical might adding to her already formidable physical strength, this girl stood a chance of surviving the apocalypse via the power of her fists alone.

"Who in their right mind labeled her as a sweet, innocent, saintly figure anyway? Her saintliness is only skin deep! I fell for her façade too—that is, until I realized she becomes a completely different person come nightfall. Yes, she's a sex-crazed beast, a man-eating menace, a predator on the prowl for teenage boys. Oh, how she terrified me! How she horrified me! How she rocked my world! She left me trembling last night and here, on the battlefield, she's got me quaking in a whole other way—in fear!"

That the dungeon emperors took such a shine to xingyiquan proved beyond a doubt that this was a powerful set of moves.

“Try not to overdo it, Sleeping Beauty. Be careful until you’ve got more experience under your belt. We don’t want you punching so hard your soul pops out of your body—like in ghost stories; you know that trope? See, the problem here is that your soul is, uh… kinda not wearing any clothes? Which is an enormous hazard to any teenage boys in the vicinity. I kinda don’t want to fight bent double? Be careful? (I’m still looking, though?)”

“Fear, not! My soul, not going, anywhere. It now, one with, body.”

She gave me a death glare, but all that mattered was that her soul showed no signs of popping out and springing around. Actually, scratch that. What mattered was that her sweet white thighs *did* show signs of popping out from her sexy sister costume feat. black tights (the outfit du jour) and springing around! The outfit complemented her beautiful curves and her legendary holy image. Just watching her move was so destructive it was a kind of kung fu in its own right.



I tore my eyes away and returned to throwing punch after punch, strike after strike. I focused on doing nothing but repeating these same moves over and over until they became muscle memory. Wisdom ran calculations on the data I accumulated, determining the optimal values for self-control. My only task was to keep throwing punches. So long as I could take a half step, throw a punch, and lift a sword, I was golden.

"Basically go 'Hmm!' a lot and wait for the problem to solve itself. I've got three amazing models to learn from. Yeah, they're honestly way too good for me!"

As much as I enjoyed midair dogfights or the graceful, dancelike fights of my previous body, I knew it was time to give those up. I would no longer pursue the impossible. It was time for me to focus on perfecting the few things that were within my power.

The frontier was still littered with dungeons, and new dungeons kept right on forming. I needed to be battle-ready by the time we made it back home. At the very least, I needed to be able to defend myself so that I didn't get in the way of the dungeon emperors while they did all the hard work. I needed to learn how to fight with a body that could no longer control its own magic. It was important. So, so important. How else was I going to make fat stacks of cas—I mean, defeat monsters?

"Hmm… Oh, I think I know what to do next."

I gave it a shot. Thirty percent Entanglement meant death. Twenty percent was probably out of my control as well, but anything under ten percent was theoretically executable so long as I stayed within the simplistic forms of xingyiquan. Now my goal was to practice until I could use Entanglement for up to a minute. From there, I would focus on perfecting it.

"It's dangerous 'cause I can't play it by ear and adjust as needed. So that's why I came to practice with you, old man. If I mess up and turn you to pulp, no great loss, amiright? Yup, I can just chillax and not worry about making mistakes. A pretty sound idea, if I do say so myself. And stuff?"

"Why the devil do you sound so eager to make a mistake, boy? You could at least fake a little concern! We've lost half the Order

already. We can't let you decimate the other half. We need someone on standby in case of an emergency."

So yeah—I wandered over to the temporary headquarters of the Knights of Whatever. The violent old dude and his band of knife-lickers, y'know? The old dudes who could reasonably be mistaken for church soldiers the likes of the ones I found in the Cathedral.

"Don't worry. We've got mushrooms in case someone gets hurt. Resuscitation as well, if someone dies. If that doesn't work, I guess I'll just bury you? Not like it matters; more old dudes will always spawn elsewhere, y'know?"

"No, we don't know! What the cuss do you take us for, boy? Now pick up your weapon and fight like a man!"

Nah, I couldn't do that. Using weapons with this new body was asking to get killed. I couldn't even control my basic functions; I had no idea what my body was physically capable of. Add weapons and all their traits on top of that, and something was bound to implode.
...Wait. How come my equipment's more dangerous than my enemies?

"Look, all I want is to gather some basic data on how my body functions. I can't equip anything on top of that when I don't have the base values. That'll only make the calculations more complicated, and I don't stand a chance of control at that stage."

Besides, equipping gear changed the base values of all my stats. Without proper data, a battle was a legit fight for my life. This raised the following serious questions: Was I capable of fighting with this body? And for how long? How long could I go before it started destroying myself? Right now, the only answer I had—the only fighting style at my disposal—was xingyiquan applied to fighting with a blade.

"In xingyiquan, I'm basically immobile the moment I make a move. I want to figure out what problems that'll cause in a real fight."

So I took up a sword—not the Universe Staff turned into a sword, just the legendary sword known as If Shuten-doji's Already Dead, Why Not Leave Slaughtered Old Men in Your Wake? or the Murderie Antoinette for short.

“Oh, ye fool of a lad… Don’t die on me, now. You’d best believe—I shan’t go easy on you! Raaaaaah!”

For all his grumbling, the violent old dude had a huge grin…

His sword fighting had improved by leaps and bounds in the short time since we’d met. It was brilliant—both elegant and true to the great art from which it stemmed. His thrusts were similar enough to the Skull Lord’s that I had no issue parrying them. My problem was the timing. See, xingyiquan required me to get all up close and personal with my opponents.

“Grr! What, can I not beat a mere stripling incapable of tripping over his own feet? I shan’t let old age get the best of me! Not like thiiiis!”

With every half step I took, I checked the old man’s advance and broke his guard with a well-timed strike. However, I still lacked the capability to incorporate any fancy footwork. Outside of these basic xingyiquan movements, I had no control over myself at all. Fortunately, in kung fu, the motions were identical regardless of if the practitioner was armed with a weapon or their bare fists. I used my super speed reaction time to execute these five kata and launch a lightning-fast blitz of sword moves. I charged forward like a bull, heedless of timing. I battered the old dude’s sword attacks into submission, overwhelmed his defenses with sheer force, parried his sword with the power of constant flailing, and wore him down with relentless half-step advances. *Stop running away, you dumb old dude!*

“H-how are you doing that? Wh-what sort of foul creature are you?”

I didn’t dare use any Entanglement, so I barely broke a tenth of my full output. Even then, I was so ridiculously fast that I ran circles around the old dude on sheer physical properties alone. Even though his Speed stat was far greater than mine, my reaction time more than made up the difference.

“Curse you! I won’t be destroyed now! Not with this completely new fighting technique!”

I parried; I dodged; I blocked—all with a scant five kata. I left everything else to my ungodly speed, catching his sword here, deflecting it there, lunging here, staying his blow there, and finally darting in with a zuanquan sword strike! I closed the distance

between us. I set an ever-changing tempo, attacking at precisely the right moment and with the speed of a viper... *Huh? He's not dead?* Some old men didn't know when to give up.

"Boy! Did you just try to kill me?! No, there was no mistake—you made a serious attempt to end my life! Damn you, boy!"

"Yeah, and I was so close, too. Old dudes are tough to stamp out. You look away for one moment and another spawns. Hii-yah?"

I drove forward with paoquan. The old dude danced just out of reach, so I chased after him with hengquan. From there, I brought the real pain with pulverizing bengquan—but that didn't kill the violent old dude either. Maybe the more orthodox the sword style, the harder it was to kill the old man wielding it.

"Don't give me that half-baked yelling! You frighten the blazes out of me! You *were* trying to kill me just then, I swear it! And we do not spawn, boy! How are you so bloody fast—Dammit, boy, you have no right running circles around me when you're so blasted injured! Raaaaah!"

"Ew! Gross old dude! Almost as gross as this surprise attack! But no, a spittle-flying, filthy-tongued, ugly-mugged old dude is much worse. Old dudes are downright yucky!"

The old dude was difficult to kill because he kept aiming low, sweeping shots at my feet to stop me from coming closer, and when he wasn't doing that, he was too wary of my Super-Speed to step directly in front of me. I linked the xingyiquan moves one after another in small, quick, precise movements, and when I broke that chain, it was only to grow even faster and more fluid. I cut down on wasteful motions. I eliminated every off-tempo movement until I was nothing but an instantaneous sword-swinging machine.

"Yucky?! What does that have to do with anything? Leave my face out of this, damn brat! I'll talk as filthy as I damn well please whenever I'm fighting *you,* nasty cuss! Devil take you!"

His barbaric strength was flagging, and in its place arrived a powerful yet elegant form of swordplay. Within a matter of days, I realized, this violent old dude had learned the art of his skeletal forebear. *How much did he practice?! '*Course, he didn't hold a candle to the Skull Lord yet—but this was now undeniably the same art form. All it needed was a blowgun.

I panted like a winded buffalo. “This old dude’s impossible to kill! An immortal old dude’s just a regular old dude, I suppose. But it’s an old dude’s duty to get murdered, so would you please stop dodging my sword?!”

The old dude’s sides heaved in a desperate search for oxygen. “How the cuss is an immobile snotty stripling so bloody hard to fight? Damn you, boy! Can’t you at least act like an injured man should? I don’t care if it’s a bloody lie! Struggle for once, damn you!”

He just kept on coming. No matter what I did, this brute of an old dude was stupidly strong. Each attack took no more than a millisecond, but he managed to stop every move with no more than sheer pigheaded strength. Worse, he kept growing more and more violent—hence the nickname—as the battle dragged on. Even then, he never got sloppy. He never left openings for me to exploit. His sword fighting just kept on being elevated into a greater and greater art form—an art form that would be passed on to future Knights of the Whatever. An art form passed down by the grandmaster Skull Lord. *At least the blowgun part seems to be dying out…*

“Yeesh, now I can tell the Skull Lord was your great-great-grandpappy! The blowgun was bad enough, but the blowing spit in my face is even worse! If you’re hellbent on lip flapping, at least invest in a blow gun? It’s quieter and doesn’t spray spit across the darn battlefield? What is this, a poison attack?!”

“I thought you couldn’t move, you damn brat! How the cuss are you even dodging the spit?! Raaaaah! Let me hit you! Let an attack glance off you, for cussakes! Stagger a bit! You have no bloody right to fight so bloody well when you’re so bloody injured! My pride is in shambles! How can I not hit a boy on death’s doorstep who can barely move? And it isn’t poison! Men aren’t monsters, boy!”

“You sure? I think I’d melt if I got old-man spit on me. Sounds pretty poisonous to *me*. Also, it stinks? Yeah, I’m dodging away for sure. I’m way more concerned about the spit than the sword!”

I put the last dregs of my flagging strength into my final lunge, my final half-step, my final—go! My ultimate thrust met his ultimate slash; our swords clashed and flew apart. *Dammit!* I had

failed, and now I was exhausted. At least the old man had fought to a standstill, too. *...Maybe I can hit him with a blow dart?*

Pah-tooey!

Ka-thunk!

"Aaaaghhh! Accursed brat!"

The old dude wheezed and spluttered for several moments more before switching tack.

"Are you and your folk returning to Diorelle on the morrow? I must thank you all for the great service you've rendered my people—aye, the Church, but my ancient ancestors as well. You've also done me a kindness in saving Leticia. We are in your debt, lad, for everything."

"Hm? Oh, you mean how I taught you the Skull Lord's sword art? Don't mention it. I wasn't gonna let it die with me, y'know? I'm not a sword user. I don't have a job at all—I mean, unless you count the side jobs that keep me busy 24/7. I'm so swamped with side-jobs I have no time to send out any job applications. I'm the tradeless jack-of-all-trades. Anyway, just think of it as repayment for housing us for a couple of nights. And stuff?"

I was utterly spent; my body was a complete wreck. I was past the point of fighting. But the old dude was just as exhausted. He was one small tap away from collapsing on the spot. Or one small blow dart—which made this my win!

Honestly, being able to hold my own without any equipment at close range was epic. If I maxed out Hoplology, I could prolly use Ground Shrink to solve the few remaining issues in my technique. But that was a stupid idea right now; trying to use Hoplology when I was still taking baby steps to control my own body was asking to blow myself up.

Honestly, it seemed virtually impossible to master Martial Qi Wizardry and Hoplology. The world would've been full of godly fighters otherwise. Mastery probably granted the Sword God title, which I firmly believed was impossible for me to achieve. Miss Armor Rep had that title, and I was nowhere near dungeon emperor level. I was a bog-standard boy. A normal NPC. A typical

teen. I couldn’t achieve the level of godliness demanded by dungeon emperors. Yeah, it was totally impossible?

DAY 116

EVENING

I don't make it a habit of giving parting gifts, but for your parting gift, I'll make a sexy nun habit.

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

OH, I WAS SO VERY, very busy! If I wasn't drowning in reports, then I was wallowing in the onrush of matters to attend to or decisions to be made. The words of my new friends rang in my head: *First things first, form committees.* I did just as I was taught. I formed committees on every subject imaginable, and once I gave them their guiding principles, I let them loose to decide all the details for themselves.

"My lady! I've come to make my report."

"Your Highness, might I ask a question?"

"Archbishop Arianna, I'd like to make an appeal…"

"Princess Aria—Arie—Ar——I'm so sorry, I tripped over my words. Let me start over!"

At length, I finally spoke up over the clamoring petitioners.

"It matters little what you call me. I need not your titles nor your respect. Please, your reports come first. And take great care to speak carefully around Lord Haruka—I'm afraid I don't want to give him any ideas."

My ambition was for the Theocracy to remake itself anew. We would henceforth have a separation of church and state, and my royal family was to oversee a Church-auditing agency. Its duty was to ensure the Church never stepped a toe out of line again. As for the Church itself, we were to return to the old ways—the true ways. Our enslaved beastfolk would be set free. The system of slavery itself would be abolished.

There was so much to do and so precious little in my power. But I had to tell the world what wonders I had witnessed with my own two eyes. My people needed to hear my tales—tales of brave bands of children slaying monsters on the frontier, stories of the ever-kind beastfolk and their devotion to their families, legends of

the heroes who did battle in the bowels of the earth against dungeon fiends. Oh yes, I'd seen this much and more in my time with them.

"All cities are now flying the flag of the royal family. None have resisted your rule."

"We are mustering our full armies at the border we share with the Empire. The imperial army is falling back. I dare say this conflict will end without a fight."

"We have received the draft of the constitutions outlining the judicial and executive branches of government. Presently, we are poring over them to ensure we have not overlooked any trifling errors."

Our goal was to change the system of government without inciting chaos, and what a challenge that was! The various and sundry concerns on my plate tangled together into a teeming snarl. We worked to stipulate in no uncertain terms whose responsibility was what; which jurisdiction belonged to whom. By custom, such governmental affairs were defined at the city level. Now, we unified these myriad local rules into a single, national code of law. It was no wonder we inherited the Theocracy in such a poor state, as the country lacked even that.

"The elections for our legislators are now complete. We shall now proceed to review our laws against Diorelle's new constitution and determine what is outdated and in need of a fresh coat of paint."

Before anything else, we needed to create a system of impartial laws that applied to every citizen equally. Why, we lacked even a national taxation system! We left taxation in the hands of the local churches, thus breeding the prejudices and corruption plaguing the country.

"The Church has agreed to be submit to routine inspections per the Bureau of Auditing, Your Highness."

"Thank you. How have the other archbishops reacted to the news?"

"It has yet to be put in writing, but they submitted a verbal acknowledgement."

As of right now, the Theocracy had but seven archbishops and other powerful members of the clergy. With our newly minted Parliament just established, our next step was to conduct a complete review of the way the Church functioned. We wanted to abolish any evil practices and promulgate new laws without sowing too much chaos. We would rebuild the Church from the ground up in tandem with the nation. We had a long road ahead of us—so very, very long—but if we did not pursue it to its end, there was no hope of a future for us all.

“Your Highness, it appears there is much missing data in the census records. I am requesting manpower to form a committee and look into the matter at once.”

“Three new cities have submitted two ledgers of census records, Your highness. They will need to be reviewed and audited as well.”

Without proper legislation in *any* branch of the government, it was little wonder the words in the royal family’s directives were twisted to suit each faction’s needs. The nation was hardly regulated in the slightest. It was our fault—my royal family’s negligence. We were rulers in name only. Truly, we had not the power to lead our people. That we should have fallen so far, grown so feeble, was our worst crime of negligence. We should not have prayed and sat around wringing our hands. We should have acted. We should have been rulers first and supplicants to God second.

“The leaders of the Olonov and the Hodel factions have fled into hiding. Our knights are searching for them.”

Fresh corruption came to light with every stone we turned over. The country sat neck-deep in the filth of embezzlement and crime, the large part of it the work of men and women who served God.

“Now, now, my child. You mustn’t frown so. Oh dear, here at court I must call you the Princess Ariel, mustn’t I? Forgive an old man. The years have robbed me of my wits.”

“Sup? Nice work holdin’ down the fort. You want a mushroom? Here, let’s delegate some of those huge stacks of paper. I brought you a helper.”

Archbishop Stecater and Book Club President arrived with Lord Haruka trailing behind them. He was in no fit state to walk, but he managed to stagger in nevertheless. I saw him earlier with Jupiter Eye, and it petrified me. He looked ghastly. It was as if some cruel being had flayed him within an inch of his life.

I was no stranger to the battlefield. There was blood on my hands, and I could not forget the countless deaths I had witnessed in this cruel world of ours. The sobbing and screaming of those who'd been left to die still rang in my ears. I'd seen thousands die in agony, but the sight of Lord Haruka then—oh, that was so horrible I had wanted to turn away. His wounds were grimmer than all the multitudes of agonized souls I'd borne witness to. His mind bore so many scars, it was stranger to think he was not dead. It was all the crueler that he had lived; the pain of his injuries gnawed away at his soul. He may have looked healthy and whole on the outside, but I knew he was riddled with marks, grooved with ruinous injuries, in a place so deep no spell could ever heal it.

"My... My Lord Haruka..." I finally managed.

"Heya," he said back. "It's been a while, crocodile. Oh yeah, I was fighting with one of your old dudes today."

It struck me, then, that no one in this room but I understood what a miracle it was that this person was standing and breathing before us. I had to bite back my tears. Now I knew. Now I knew why the king of Diorelle and Lord Meropapa—the very same man renowned as the savior of the continent—heaped such incessant gratitude on Lord Haruka.

The frontier was a place of a joy. It was not the cruel land in the stories told to me back home, for the boy in front of me had taken all its cruelty and borne it within his body. He destroyed all misfortune and left abundant happiness in his wake. And so on he went, throughout all the world, snatching up its cruelties and redirecting them upon himself. On and on he went, spreading happiness far and wide. I could not have been here today if not for him and not for his actions—the same actions he repeated many, many times over.

After discussing the matter with Faleria herself, we decided it was best to keep her identity secret. I was all for revealing her story

to the people, but she was reluctant to appear in the public eye. She said she had been dead and gone for many centuries already. Even with her body recovered, she was no longer one of us mortal beings.

She was a dungeon emperor—the most powerful creature in the world. A being of such deadly strength that fear and hatred dogged all her steps. And who could blame anyone for fearing her? It was tragic that it had to be so—but it did not mean that Faleria was doomed to a tragic ending. Fate held great things in store for her, a smothering force of happiness ready to crush all the misery visited upon her in her unhappy past. She had met Lord Haruka, and there was no better indicator of the arrival of a happy ending. Much like it had been with me, much like it had been for the rest of us happy few, Faleria's fortune was assured.

A thousand pens raced across a thousand pages. Ten thousand papers flew across Lord Haruka's desk as fast as he could write them. Instructive texts and other documents piled high upon our tables as the Book Club President sorted through this veritable library at astonishing speeds. We had blueprints aplenty, calculations galore, mountains of guidelines that would take us untold years to chip our ways through. She tunneled her way through them all, reduced the mountains to rubble, and left only empty space on the desk behind. Here, now, was our roadmap. The future of our nation.

"Even the king of Diorelle or the duke of Omui, great men as they are, would never be able to accept this gift without undying gratitude."

And if not them, then how could I? I simply hung my head and let the tears gather in my eyes. Anyone would have been awestruck at this generous gift and the dazzling speed at which it was granted to us. But I knew better. This was not the mere miraculous feat of magic it appeared to be. No, this was an effort of extreme concentration and every scrap of Lord Haruka's will to control his Magic Hands. On any other day, Lord Haruka would not have asked the Book Club President to check his work. Had it been yesterday, Lord Haruka would have had no need for her at all.

He was not dressed in the black cloak for which he was famed. His boots, too, were gone. He wore not his gloves nor carried his staff; he lacked all ornamentation save a plain headband and a ring.

For Lord Haruka could not don equipment—not if he wanted to control himself. It was all he could do to move in this lightest of clothing. He maintained an image of perfect poise, but I saw the appallingly chaotic mass of magic roiling within him. I saw how desperately he struggled to suppress it.

His voice betrayed not a hint of his struggle as he relayed orders. Some objected to his commands, but he silenced them with a sharp glare. Most dissenters quailed under that frightening stare and soon did as they were bid. But a few amazed me. The foolhardy brave—the knight commander, the royal blacksmith, some guild leaders—stubbornly persisted in raising objections. What fools they were!

Lord Haruka said, “All right. You ’n me are gonna talk this out.”

He ushered us out of the room and closed the door behind us. Just then, there was a series of loud thumps as if something—or several somethings—smacked against the wall. When the thumping ceased and the door opened once more, the few rowdy protestors seemed to have had a change of heart. Suddenly, they were all keen to cooperate and see sense. Yes, for now, the gloves were off—quite literally; Lord Haruka had just removed his Mindbreaker Gloves. I didn’t hear much talking at all, but I suppose he must have broken their minds—again, rather literally—against the wall. The living room’s walls were now smeared with blood, making it seem rather the opposite of a living room!

“Right-o, that’s everything the His Upskirting Oldness asked for. In exchange, he’s gonna give me a copy of *The Gentlemen’s Guide to a Select Subset of the Church’s Nuns (Latest Edition)*! Didja know his upskirting powers are next level? All he needs is one look to learn a girl’s three measurements! Anyway, I’m off to do some much-needed sightseeing!”

The evil gleam in Lord Haruka’s eyes was a tad disconcerting…

Lord Haruka made out that his favor was a trifle—a slight nuisance, perhaps, but nothing more. But underneath the façade, the rivulets of sweat running down his cheeks betrayed the real

truth of his labors. How he had worked to secure the Theocracy a future. How he had struggled to impart upon us everything we needed to know in his brief time here.

I fanned the pages of one of the newly completed tomes upon my desk. It contained all our new laws and everything else our reborn realm needed to achieve a happy future. Page after page… Starting with legal administration, then progressing to census reform and agricultural revolutions, the book covered everything from districting to flood control before finishing with a plan to reshape industry, manufacturing, and education. Schools were to be built, and everything from the content of their lessons to the textbooks they would use were stipulated in this massive tome.

"I've finished my organization, Your Highness. This should be enough to get you started. Then comes the real work! Life is constantly in flux, and by now, what Haruka-kun has written is already outdated. Take this and rewrite it. Make additions. Scratch out old lines. Let this be a living record of your learning and fine tuning. For you see, Your Highness, this is only just the beginning."

With that, the Book Club President placed a thick catalogue in my hands. I refused to let myself complain—not after the horrors I saw Lord Haruka subject himself to—but I couldn't repress a sob. I was supposed to read *all* of this?!

Oh, but the catalogue turned out to be a summary of essential books and important topics to prioritize. *Thank you—sniff, sniff—Book Club President!*

DAY 116

NIGHT

They may not be in the bath, but things are getting steamy!

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

W*ELCOME TO THE LATEST girls' meeting… There sure are a lot of us.* Our little band began with me and my nineteen female classmates transported to this realm from Earth. We soon gained several inexplicable additions to the growing family: two dungeon emperors, a princess, a duke's daughter, a maid, and an elf. With a princess-slash-nun and two beastfolk sisters, we were up to twenty-nine people—quite a crowd in small rooms, that was for sure! And now we had a third dungeon emperor swelling our ranks. Even in these large palace rooms, packing in thirty girls was a trick.

"Where's Haruka-kun?"

"Bathing."

Haruka-kun's bathing companions of the day were Slimey and his Demon Scythes. *Won't that make the scythes rust…?* Well, I couldn't complain about what he did with them. The scythes were the true MVPs, honestly. They had acted as Arianna-san's guard as she followed us into mortal peril. I couldn't have told you how many times they saved her life or rescued her from the clutches of traps or assassins. They were truly stalwart guards who deserved to be recognized for their fine efforts. I couldn't begrudge them a chance to cozy up to Haruka-kun for a helping of attention and sweets.

"So is it all over? Is the fighting done?"

"Mm-hmm. Done and dusted."

It was a war in name only, honestly. Our victory was assured the entire time. It was like playing chess with a king who couldn't be placed in check. Whenever an enemy tried to take Arianna-san, the dungeon-king-class Demon Scythes simply whizzed in and sliced them to pieces. Three scythes together were the closest thing to a dungeon-king guard a person could ask for. They were our saviors. The real heroes of this war.

"I bet Haruka-kun is spoiling them silly."

“Right? He kept brushing and petting the heck out of his horse, the other star of the show.”

To continue the analogy, we had a “knight” piece that could fly to any square on the board. That was why Haruka-kun had felt comfortable leaving all the hard work to us. The church may have had trump cards, but our jokers were the most powerful cards in the pack. That’s right—we started cheating in round one and never stopped.

Speaking of cheaters… Haruka-kun, who cheated at everything, who was rewarding the Demon Scythes for their hard work, who was still in no fit state to do the most basic of tasks, spent all day sparring with real steel against the lord commander of the Knights of the Scriptures.

“Why can’t he just sit still?! He’s a broken wreck!”

“Haruka-kun has no off switch. His mind is always working a thousand kilometers a second. It’s what makes him so reckless—he’s always barreling off to try something new.”

“Yeah. The only time he can sit still is when he’s focusing on his side gigs.”

Those accurate assessments made me sigh. No matter how strong he became, Haruka-kun’s cycle of destruction just continued unabated. It was an endless refrain of Haruka-kun pushing himself past his limits, growing ever stronger, and blowing himself up. Worse, whenever he reached the point of total collapse, he never learned his lesson! He didn’t even look abashed! He just went right back to it and carried on his daily routine!

“He’s finally back…but in awful shape. He’s stronger, but at what cost?”

“The cost of completely destroying his body… It’s terrible.”

“There’s no end to it. It’s so horrible to watch…”

“After how hard he’s worked, he’s lost everything. He’s back to square one again.”

“We don’t have the time for him to relearn everything he’s lost bit by bit. He *has* to strain himself and regain his skills… That’s a heavy burden to carry, and I don’t think he’s physically up for it.”

His skills were just too powerful. They physically annihilated him. Now his entire body had to be remade from scratch, thus scrapping every technique he had. He had struggled and fought, eventually winning back all the power he had lost…only for everything to be destroyed and go up in smoke. Only to have to start all over again.

"We should just give up on stopping him. *He* can't give up, so why even bother?"

"Right? He's, like, allergic to giving up."

"Why does everything bad have to happen to Haruka-kun? It's like the world's out to get him… That, or it's the consequences of his own actions."

"Yeah… That's kinda what he gets for bullying god."

Worry for Haruka-kun and hatred for my own helplessness battled in my breast. Sorrowful frowns marked the other girls' faces; gloomy sighs pervaded the room. The nerve of Haruka-kun, acquiring such a flock of pretty young things! Rescuing us all, giving us treats…and he had the gall to act surprised when a third concubine came calling! Said concubines had (again) come to us other girls with the offer to join them, and when we put our feet down and flat-out refused, the dungeon emperors were very sad. Even I—and I wasn't into girls—could recognize just how drop-dead gorgeous Haruka-kun's inner circle of women was. And yet, even with three stunning starlets on his arm, Haruka-kun kept moping around and whining about his lack of a girlfriend…

"No, like he legit means it."

"Yeah! He's super freaking jealous of all the jocks."

"…He's got a point there. The jocks landed fiancées in, like, two seconds."

"The jocks don't trust Haruka-kun. They keep telling him, 'I wanna show her off, bro! I wanna introduce her to you, I swear. But I can't shake the feeling y'all should never, ever meet!'"

Our local band of jocks had started going out with some of the preeminent members of Diorelle's First Division. One belonged to the family of an archduke; the other four descended from powerful noble houses in their own right. They were a few years our senior

and towered over us all; lovely girls—sweet, innocent—but my goodness were they ever buff! Their abdomens were chiseled; their biceps made them regular Amazons. Yet, at the same time, they were so inexperienced with boys they barely knew how to talk with them. They were the shyest, sweetest berserkers who had ever lived.

"But did you see the look in their eyes when they danced with Haruka-kun at the ball? They fell totally head over heels for him. Sex God sure is scary, huh?"

"Well…yes. Scary in the sense that the Sex God goes buck wild whenever a woman comes near. Or at least, that's what I'd expect from someone with a Sex God title. Maybe ours is just…a late bloomer?"

"He's certainly horny enough to be a Sex God…"

"His latest sexual escapades are, and I quote, that three dungeon emperors ganged up on him, used the argument of fait accompli in favor of taking a third concubine, and forced him into using Servitude on a girl via a sex battle… So he's made no progress at all, basically."

"Yup."

Cut him some *slack… It wasn't like he could move.* There was no way Haruka-kun was mobile in that state. Anyone with a Sensing or Eye skill could tell. Haruka-kun had that brand-new-body sparkle from head to toe. This wasn't totally unheard of in a world where Revival magic was a thing, but most wounds could be patched up with Curing or Recovery. Revival magic was meant for emergencies. It was the final resort in the healer's toolkit.

Not only was Revival an advanced skill with relatively few users, it was downright dangerous to use. Regenerating missing limbs or crushed organs always carried a risk, limiting Revival's usage to dire emergences only. If a person wanted to speed up natural healing, they used Regeneration. If they wanted to fix a wound, they used Curing. But Revival was a whole other kind of Divine spell. Whenever it activated automatically, it constructed *completely new body parts* out of magic.

"People say it's dangerous to lose more than 10% of your body and try to grow it back with Revival. It's not allowed."

Not because it was impossible, but because it was unbearable. The excruciating agony exacted a terrible toll on a person's mind as Revival knitted the new flesh together. In most situations, Revival was only used in small, tiny increments with frequent breaks to make sure the wounded person was still all right mentally. It was too potent to use all at once and willy-nilly.

"But it's not so bad when you use it on yourself," I pointed out.

"Oh yeah. You have Revival too, don't you, Class Rep?"

I sure did, hence why my collection of horrifying nicknames—Meat Shield Rep and Human Sacrifice Rep—kept growing. These didn't refer to my role in battle, of course. I'd never been thrown to the wolves in a fight. No, my classmates wanted to throw me to a very different wolf, and *that* was what I was terrified of!

"Yeah," I said. "Revival is automatic, but it's really, really slow on its own."

It only sped up if you fed it magic, at which point you were basically controlling it.

"What if you were half-dead already? Would you have enough MP to use Regeneration? I wouldn't think so, right?"

"Not if you were a normal person. It'd be impossible for me to use Regeneration for so long and so quickly like Haruka-kun does. I would never be able to handle the pain."

Not only was Regeneration horrifically torturous, but it also guzzled far too much MP. Because most people used it so rarely, it even took forever to level up. Low levels equaled low regenerative abilities—so for me, at least, the pain was manageable in a pinch.

"Regeneration is this nasty because it wasn't meant to be a people skill to begin with. It was for monsters."

"Right. It's a kind of legendary magic. No one's ever seen it appear naturally on anything but monsters."

I got my Revival skill because I had Hijack. Haruka-kun got his when Regeneration evolved. Regeneration turned into Revival instead of something like, I don't know, Ultra Regeneration or Autoregeneration or whatever. It only turned out like that because he kept self-destructing to the point where Regeneration couldn't keep up on its own. That was how powerful Revival was—and now

even Revival wasn't enough to repair the catastrophic damage to Haruka-kun's body.

Poor Haruka-kun was torn to shreds, ground to a fine pulp, and then outfitted with a fresh body from entirely new organs cobbled together into a working human form. The darkness worked from the outside in to eat his flesh; his skills worked from the inside out to fry his mind and snap his nerves. His recovery was all thanks to the presence of legendary healer Faleria, his large stock of complete regeneration mushrooms, and his theoretically impossible possession of level max Revival. And even that wouldn't have been enough. If he hadn't grown so physically powerful—basically transmuting himself to sublimity—through intense training, he would never have eked out survival. It was pure luck that he lived. But maybe living was the crueler option. Had he died, he would never have felt a pain worse than death, a pain worthy of insanity, seared into the folds of his brain.

"He saved, me. Yelled at, me. Told me, not to, die."

"Yup. That's Haruka-kun for you. He gets furious if you ever abandon hope."

"Especially if you were only doing it to hurt yourself. He must have been apoplectic."

The glare Haruka-kun leveled at Faleria-san frightened her. He made her cry. However, she realized that he came to her bearing a message of love authored by many, many people. All of them wished for her to be saved. All of them wanted her joy. So, in the end…Haruka-kun smashed her soul's head into the wall until she sobbed, begged for forgiveness, and fled back into her body…? Apparently he was so horribly rude—and by rude, I mean downright abusive—he convinced her to live and…patted her on the head afterward…? And gave her a sweet treat?

"And then was shocked about the events later that night. Wow, Haruka-kun."

"Why does it always come as a surprise to him?"

"Right? You'd think it'd be obvious by now."

"That would be because Haruka-kun lacks any self-awareness whatsoever. He has no principles and no scruples about leaving

responsibility in whatever other hands he can find. He never considers the consequences until they happen to him. He does not think about the pros and cons. He does not speculate what the cost of an action might be. He merely continues on his merry way, doing whatever happens to strike his fancy."

"Ahh, that makes sense. He never stops to think, 'What will happen if I do this?' or 'What will the other person think?' Hence… the surprise."

"He doesn't even think stuff like, 'Oh, if I do that, they'll owe me a favor.' 'Maybe I'll get something out of this if I do XYZ.' He literally just does stuff because he wants to. Then when anything annoys him, he just fights it."

"When someone *does* feel like they owe him a favor, it shocks him. When someone says something nice about him, he freaks out and runs away. Very smooth, Haruka-kun."

Haruka-kun just did whatever he wanted in his own Haruka-kun-y way. When people reacted positively to that, it therefore made no sense to him. It also made him really, really uncomfortable.

He was a phony villain. Like a proper villain, he was selfish and self-serving and willful. He was up to his ears in crimes. He dragged people kicking and screaming into happiness and fortune. He was a villain, all right, but only a fake one. A lie of a villain.

"And for all that, he still can't get a girlfriend, huh?"

Nod nod.

Imagine being saved by a guy who literally came apart at the seams just to fight for you. How could you *not* fall for him? Faleria-san totally did, and she worshipped the ground he walked on just like all the other dungeon emperors. See, Faleria-san's thinking was pretty old-fashioned. She and Nefertiri-san came from the same time period, so it wasn't surprising they shared the same outdated ideas. In their minds, a great guy worthy of respect equated lots of wives and lots of concubines with whom to have lots and lots of babies. Angelica-san was no better. Us modern-day girls didn't vibe with the idea; there was less of a generation gap and more of a *historical era* gap. The problem was, though, the three dungeon emperors were no longer biologically human. They were monsters,

so they couldn't bear children. Hence why they chose to be concubines.

"Maybe it's not as outdated as we thought. Like polygamy's still a thing in this world, y'know?"

"In times of peace, it makes the most sense for families to have one husband and one wife. But when war comes around, a bunch of the dudes die, see."

"Yeah. It's not uncommon for guys to take in multiple wives on the frontier, y'know? Still, it's rare to see more than two—maybe three, tops—women with a single guy."

In this fantasy land, it was still relatively rare for women to have careers and independent lifestyles. Honestly, I hadn't seen that anywhere but on the frontier. The world was too dangerous for women to leave the safety of home. Frontier ladies did, but that's 'cause they were high level enough to maul any monster they ran into. This granted the frontier women a degree of independence and freedom to work, but even then, I felt like younger women and girls still didn't leave the house much at all until very recently. It wasn't until a cutthroat peace settled over Omui City that it was safe to go out.

"Well, so long as they're happy, who're we to judge?"

"Poor Haruka-kun's the only one unhappy about it."

Nefertiri-san and Faleria-san sure didn't mind. They were all smiles, chatting with each other and devouring slices of fruit basket cake with glee. This must have been the outcome Haruka-kun wanted, and when Faleria-san tried to deny that to herself, no wonder he flipped his lid. No wonder he beat the ultimate dungeon and the darkness in a fit of rage. Then he came home in a thousand pieces, too broken to move…only to be devoured in bed. *Well, at least it made Faleria-san happy?* Also, I had doubts about this whole Sex God thing… Surely someone that godly at sex wouldn't have lost so many nightly sex battles.

I watched the dungeon emperors giggle and chat with one another. *I think they must be having so much fun because they* know *how miraculous it is for them to be afforded this chance.* They had each spent centuries trapped in dungeons with nothing but the darkness for company. In their isolation, they'd completely lost the

power of speech. Now, though—now that they once again felt human touch, now that they could reach out at any time and always, always have someone there for them—now the simple act of saying their present state out loud was bliss. And having Haruka-kun there in their lives brought, well…brought its own set of perks. Sex God-related perks.

"Well, what do we say, girls? Should we beat a dead horse and try lecturing him again?"

"For what? Getting set upon by the dungeon emperor he fondled and using Servitude on her at gunpoint?"

"Followed by going off on his own and worrying about it? Again?"

"I just know he's in the bath venting to Slimey about it… I can hear Slimey's conciliatory *jiggle jiggle* from here."

Even if Haruka-kun wasn't aware of what he was doing, he was still saving girls' lives and sharing a traumatic experience with them. Misattribution of arousal, like in that famous suspension bridge experiment, y'know? Or, if not that, maybe the terror followed by kindness worked some Stockholm-syndrome-esque brainwashing on them. Whatever you wanted to call it, it was turning into a pattern. Once he used the treat + good-girl head pats…yeah, it was a done deal. What girl *wouldn't* throw herself at Haruka-kun after that? *Surprise, my ass!*

"He's always going on about those stupid flags; meanwhile, his big stupid idiot flag is flying high and proud."

"Yup. His *enormous* stupid idiot flag."

Even Wisdom could do little to make Haruka-kun understand the way girls thought. Jupiter Eye could see all of creation, sans what lurked in the heart of a girl in love. His Blockhead skill had evolved and vanished off his list of stats, but Haruka-kun was still dumb as a stump. The lack of a skill did nothing to change the fact that he was a menace to monsters and maidens alike.

"Isn't saving a girl from eternal despair, isolation, and darkness the biggest flag there is?"

"Flying a flag so high airplanes crash into it!"

“It’s not just that he’s gambling his life for her. He’s throwing himself into the betting pot instead of throwing the dice. He’s emerging broken and bloodied in the process of saving her. Like, can you blame her?”

“That’s flying a whole stream of flags! That’s flying a flag so big it covers the whole ground!”

Then he topped it all off by giving her dessert, a warm pat on the head, and telling her she was free now—free to go! Haruka-kun was essentially dumping her! He didn’t even let her say thanks first. He told her he didn’t need thanks; she owed him no favors; in fact, he refused to even hear it. Whatever she did next, his face said, was entirely her business—*he* didn’t care. *God, it’s no wonder they jump him and demand he use Servitude on them*. And Haruka-kun acted like it came as a surprise! He pleaded total shock when they made him a very happy (if immobile) man that evening! Which then became the topic of tonight’s meeting: a technique to rival even the allegedly infinite rejuvenating powers of Sex God, an art belonging to the orthodox sect of the Church, a secret lost to time, a rite that even the royal family of the Theocracy had once known and now forgotten—the secret art known as the virtue of chas-titty! And now was our chance to learn it!

“Oh my god. You did WHAT with your WHAT?”

“Y-you squished his you-know-what between your…?!”

“Th-this world sure has profound arts!”

Uh-oh! Seeing as our meetings usually took place in the bath, we soon had a string of near-drownings on our hands. Their stories did a number on us. See, this technique weaponized the entirety of a girl’s body in an ever-morphing tango of legs, chests, hands, and mouths. If three girls kept that up until he agreed to make one of them his Servant…well, I don’t know what I might have done if I were Haruka-kun! Even the hand gestures they used to describe the event got me all hot and bothered!

“Oh lordy… S-so you pinch it between your… And then you lick… And…and…”

“Y-y-you lube up and use your *whole* body?!”

“H-human ingenuity knows no bounds!”

Good thing we weren't in the bath now—this conversation was a drowning hazard! Even we, who had picked up virtually every rumor about sex floating around two different worlds, were just moments away from yelling timber. The poor beastfolk girls, who were probably much too young to be hearing any of this, were in a far worse state. They were bright red up to their bunny and wolfy ears; they'd long since keeled over clinging to each other. *Medic? Someone get them a mushroom.*

Plonk, plonk.

The lesson continued until every last one of us threw in the towel. At that point, the three conquering heroes tied up their hair, donned sensual minidresses exposing far too much back and shoulder, and sauntered out to go take down a Sex God.

Which was followed by a large quantity of high-pitched moaning.

DAY 116

NIGHT

How do you make an octopus laugh? With ten tickles—problem is, I only have three?

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

WE HELD A DISCUSSION and ultimately decided that Cooking Club Girl would make dinner tonight. I was laid up, so this was going to be her chance to do a cooking trial run. It was also a chance to fulfill every teen boy's dream—to taste a girl's homemade cooking!

A chance to fulfill the dearest wish of my teenage heart! A spread of dishes and a line of girls saying, "Open wide!"

The girls decided among themselves to give four of the pieces of "Yggdrasil Fruit: Acquire a skill of user's choice," to the arts club girls. That part was easy; everyone agreed to that unanimously. Deciding the recipient of the fifth piece of fruit was trickier. Finally, the girls elected for it to go to the Book Club President, thus giving the arts club girls a total monopoly on the fruit.

The Book Club President opted to learn Organization; Sewing Club Girl and Fashion Club Girl, Sewing; Fine Arts Girl, Visual Art; and Cooking Club Girl—what else?—Cooking. Now it was time for her to cook her first meal in this world apart from grilled fish and salad. She more than delivered, producing stew and hamburgers bursting with homemade charm. It was such a blast from the past that all the girls teared up upon tasting it. It tasted like home—a delicious nostalgia I couldn't have produced had I tried.

"Thanks for making dinner!"

"Waaaah… Thank you for eating it… Haruka-kun, thank you so much… I'm so happy I can finally cook again…" *Sniff sniff.*

Cooking Club Girl's job penalties were gone! Now she could use her Dexterity stats alongside her Flame magic and Slash skill to whip up tasty meals. She was deathly focused when she cooked, and the food turned out just the way she wanted. Yup, with her Dexterity buffs, she was an accomplished chef once more.

“Thanks for handling the cooking. It was great! No need to thank me; I just grabbed the fruit ’cause it was there? I didn’t want to eat it and get even *more* weird skills; ’sides, skills only unlock if you have the basic aptitude for ’em, y’know? What other skills could I possibly get? Flawless Conduct? Perfect Integrity? Falsely Accused? Yeah, none of those sound very helpful.”

“…Um. Perfect Integrity aside, thank you. It was really sweet of you to do this.”

The arts club girls’ smiles were bright as the sun even with tears forming in the corner of their eyes. Still, it bothered me. It had taken almost four months to get them back what was theirs by rights. These were their talents, y’know? The product of years of hard work? It was only fair that they had the ability to use those talents. All I’d done was let the girls practice their hobbies again—just like anyone had a right to.



“Dinner was great!”

“Thank you so much.”

“You’ll totally have to cook this for us again.”

“...Heh heh. Okay.”

Even with the new transformation, all five of the arts club girls retained their combat roles. They probably could’ve switched to new jobs with the right skills, but they didn’t want to. They wanted to keep fighting along with the rest of the class.

Incidentally, I was kinda surprised that the Book Club President got to use the final fruit. At first I assumed it was ’cause no one wanted to make her feel left out, but it turned out she just really, really wanted it. Yeah, she had a thing for organizing and sorting?

Honestly, I couldn’t really blame her. The Organization skill kicked ass. With one look, she read and analyzed all that slop I scribbled down to help Sister Girl govern the Theocracy. Then Book Club President wrote down instructions for further revisions and created a catalogue and manual as companion pieces for my resources. The Yggdrasil Fruit was anything but wasted on her. The girls were sorely lacking in anyone with managerial traits, and the Book Club President was more than ready to step into the role.

She also used Organization on her stock of fighting expertise to engage in tactics and formations talk with Class Rep. I wasn’t sure what that made her—a strategist? An adjutant?—but whatever name she went by, she alleviated some of the tactical burden that had rested squarely on Class Rep’s shoulders. I mean, Class Rep didn’t even have a single second-in-line in her chain of command.

Unrelated, but the beastfolk twins had joined the latest girls’ meeting, thus swelling the ranks once more. From what little I overheard, the girls were talking about...meat shields? Decoys? Human sacrifice?! *Yeesh! What the heck are they doing in there?*

“Never mind about them. What say we have ourselves a bath, Slimey?”

Wiggle wiggle.

I took the Demon Scythes and Slimey with me into the bath. I had given Horsey the royal treatment of brushing and dinner

earlier, and now it was the Demon Scythes' turn. I scrubbed them down with oil to keep them free of rust and let them munch on tasty morsels while I sharpened their curved blades. As necessary as it had been to provide all the girls with guards, leaving that task to the Demon Scythes and Horsey was asking a lot from them. The scythes must have had their nonexistent hands full protecting a herd of girls in the middle of a battle.

"Here ya go. Eat up. Thanks for protecting all my pals, y'know? You deserve this reward. Here, let me oil you up."

...!!

My classmates were—of course—perfectly normal and well-adjusted teenage girls. Killing people couldn't have been easy on their consciences. For all that they acted tough, I knew this war must've unsettled them. On a battlefield, a moment's hesitation could mean the difference between life and death. Guarding the girls, then, was no easy task—but the scythes went above and beyond; no girl had suffered so much as a scratch. For that, the scythes deserved a feast! *Incidentally, I have a few experiments I want to run, but those can wait for later.*

"Ahh... Come on in; the water's fine... Y'know, for such a long time spent in the bath last night, I sure don't remember having a long, pleasant soak. Seems like I blacked out partway through, even? I'm just saying, three-vee-one'ing me is no fair. One dungeon emperor can destroy an entire army on her own, and three? Pshaw. Those curves are cheating! A wave attack of dungeon emperors on a teen boy who can only get it up, forget getting up, is plain unfair!"

Jiggle jiggle.

With appropriate limiters, I was able to just barely control my magic. I could only use up to 30% of my total magic potential at a time, but that didn't mean I was capped at 30% of my former output. Yup, my magic was more efficient now. The control also felt more...well, *physical*. Less cerebral than it had been. I needed more time to run analysis, but for now, I was simply happy to see that xingyiquan was paying off.

"Oh well! I can think about it more later. Puzzling over it won't give me any answers, and besides, I never learn how my skills work until I put them in action."

I was reminded of a proverb—the more you like something, the better you're inclined to get at it. Carried out to its logical conclusion, the more you *leched* something, the better you were—a theory substantiated by history and its many successful leches. Inspired thusly, I climbed out of the bath and set off for the bedroom ready for a round of experimenting, test running, and general revenge-seeking!

With a fresh coat of determination, I unfurled my tentacles and charged the three minidress-clad beauties. My opponents were three of the most gorgeous girls in the world, and the only weapons I had at my disposal—the only things I could control—were a measly three tentacles. Smirks adorned all three of those fetching faces, and the battle switched to extreme close contact…but what I lacked in quantity, I made up for in quality. This time, instead of trying to visualize the magic, I tried controlling my magic through physical sensations alone. And it worked! I caught the girls in my tentacular grasp!

"Oooh! A-aaah!"

"Gotcha! You're mine."

Despite being purely magical appendages, the tentacles looked perfectly lifelike now. They were each a bit thicker than a thumb and were mottled with lumpy protrusions up and down their lengths. My upgraded tentacles were both harder and girthier than their previous counterparts, and they seemed so lifelike—practically throbbing with hot, red blood—that it was, dare I say, sensual. A pair of pink, flesh-colored suckers curved on the cusp of one of Miss Armor Rep's perfect ankles; the tentacle coiled around her calf and began the winding, sinuous journey up her leg.

Several hundred?—thousand? A lot, at any rate—suckers oozed a sticky, mucus-like fluid, generously lubricating every square centimeter of leg as the tentacle lovingly squirmed its way higher, ever greedy for pale flesh. The cloudy mucus glistened on her bare, brilliant thighs. The tentacles parted her lips, and the wriggling reddish-brown tips bit into her skin, searching, searching, swaying and writhing up, up, up…

"Gh-ahh!"

"Ah… Haah, haah, ahh. Aaaah!"

“Mmnngh, ahh… Nrrghh!”

The tentacles wormed their way into the girls’ dresses, disturbing the fabric and baring the skin as they tunneled inward. I caught flashes of pale skin whenever an undulation of a squirming appendage lifted a garment. Thanks to the Philosopher’s Stone, the overlapping effects of Status Ailment Infliction increased Sensitivity Boost even further, causing a dramatic jump in the mucus’s ability to turn the girls on. Tentacles constricted further, oozing slime and cementing the girls further into my captivity.

Then the saint’s skin—once holy, now defiled by the moist machinations of these wrinkled worms—constricted under the playful touch of the covetous tentacles. She was powerless to resist me, utterly at my mercy. Dripping mucus and perspiration, she bucked her hips and mewled. Shudders traveled up her entire body. She *danced* for me, and I? I drove her successive degrees of wild.

“They sure call her the Saint of Healing for a reason! She recovered from her first faint in seventeen seconds; the second, eleven; the third, seven. We’re now sixteen fainting spells in, and she’s down to an average of three seconds per faint.”

“Aaaaaaaahhh! …Mmn, ahh, ahh, ahh, ahhhhhhhhn!”

Her tentacle tolerance was growing, as was her recovery time—her Regeneration was working overtime! *But hey, we get better at what we like doing. She and I just happen to like doing each other!* With every minute of effort, Wisdom’s processing power shot up, and more tentacles popped out of thin air. Alchemy’s transmutive effect was working its wonders on my brain, and I felt a knot of magic and qi collecting in my cranium.

Sleeping Beauty’s innocent features warped; her slender form shuddered. Once, she was the picture of chastity itself. Now, tears blurred her gentle, clear eyes; drool besmirched her lolling lips; convulsions racked her shapely torso.

“Her recovery powers are incredible! Her mental willpower… not so much.”

Now that the tentacles’ control was governed by my physical senses, every touch was felt more keenly. Every squelching, burrowing motion was felt in my soul. The symphony of moaning rose to a crescendo—yes, *Yes!* My ability to control myself was

growing by leaps and bounds! These late-night training sessions against my dungeon emperor opponents were the perfect opportunities to level up my skills. I positively *brimmed* with motivation and drive! Here was the battleground; here was the field upon which teenage boys toiled. Here was the arena of lust, of desire, of passionate wanton eros so potent I was liable to forget myself even in the thick—the heat—of the battle.

"Yeah, I think we're up to uhhhhh 2 percent payback for last night? I mean, I'm such a nice, considerate, conscientious guy I totally added interest! I'll repay your thank-you and your service with double the gratitude and gratuitous tentacles! Welcome to the wriggly worm waltz! Yup, say hello to my little friends—the chickenatrice, the lizardisk, and a Sensitivity Boost for good measure."

Last night's blushing maiden had become tonight's willing concubine—the third thus far—in spite of me letting her go and her loved one's wishes for her to seek her happiness… *Well, she's definitely enjoying herself, so…I guess this counts?*

"All right! Let's go for a minimum two-hour squelching sesh to practice my magic control, and when that's done, we'll have a pop quiz to test my physical control? Yes, that'll be the true teenage boy battle—the genuine juvenile jihad—the hardworking horndog's hostility. I'm locked and loaded; I'm ready to fire at will! Let's goooo!"

"Aaaaaah!"

Yup, I sure worked hard! Mwa ha ha ha!

DAY 117

MORNING

It's raining man(ju)! Hallelujah!

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

I STARTED THE DAY OFF with meditation—enhancing my mental faculties, further improving my grasp on my physical senses. Exacting strict, scrupulous—down to the smallest detail—limits on my powers, circulating lianqi and magic through my bloodstream. My goal was to one day reequip all my armor and maintain perfect control. I couldn't continue to live the armorless life! If only I'd been able to use the crowbar-like instrument yesterday. I could've smashed apart the violent old dude's brainpan!

I focused hard, eliminating all wayward thoughts, and focusing my attention inward onto myself. *...Why must the girls insist on starting their one more sets right in front of me whenever I try to meditate? In leotards, no less!* Long limbs lumbered directly in front of my eyes. Boobies bounced and butts bounded centimeters away from my ocular organs. It was hell—a hell of my own horny making. *What exactly am I supposed to be training here?!*

I forced myself to be silent. To erase all sense of self. To be as nothing. No distraction would arouse any emotions in me; my mind would be like a blank sheet of paper; I would merely look out and see the world for what it was. Yes, I would look out and see...kick-back and bum-lift exercises... Oooh, no! Arrgh, I was powerless before the leotards hugging mounds of soft flesh. A fury of violently oscillating buttocks was unfolding before my very eyes! Before I could shake off my impure thoughts, I had to do something about this *other* shaking!

"Up, down! Up, down!"

Insentience. Emptiness, emptiness. Be one with the void. Release your ego. Let it go; let it float away. Free yourself from the trappings of the flesh. Untether your mind; achieve the perfect state of no-self. Speaking of flesh trappings, I was feeling very trapped by the perky flesh all around me! The yawning gap between each leg was infinity itself; in my state of Insentience, I kept my unseeing, innocent eyes

closed—but Jupiter Eye couldn't tear itself away from the bountiful paradise of fine figures in front of me! I was torn between seeing nothing and getting a very interesting eyeful!

Was I deep in meditation, or did I not even exist? Was I lost in the non-state of my mind, or merely lost in the sauce of all these trembling teenage thighs? *Oh god! Too close! Help! This is eye poison!* Maybe the girls thought it necessary to stick to me like glue as my round-the-clock guard. Well, in that case I simply needed to meditate harder—lose myself until I was nothing, nothing at all, free of all worries, free of all thought… I had no trouble losing myself; I got lost all the dang time. The problem was losing these intrusive thoughts. Somehow, they always seemed to catch up with me.

"Right, left! Right, left!"

It didn't matter what I called it—a distraction, meditation's worst enemy, a smells-like-teen-spiritual awakening—but this site of more thighs was a sight for sore eyes. *Are they actually on guard duty? Or are they doing this 'cause they're bored?*

Gotta think about something else. Let's see… Right now, Sister Girl was in the process of uncovering all the church's crime. She made every priest swear on the Tablet of the Covenants that they would confess their sins and receive their punishments. Many priests were now on the run. It was a whole shitshow. *I always thought the problem was the* bride *running away at the altar…but I guess this time, it's the priests?*

But it had to be done. Dangers still lurked within the borders of the Theocracy, and the church had yet to be expunged of all its rot. I didn't know if that justified giving me a full suite of bodyguards, especially not if they insisted on wearing leotards and working out right in front of my meditating teenage-boy nose… I was rapidly losing this battle of wills, but sending up the white flag was bound to cause trouble once the girls noticed.

"One, two! Three, four!"

"Five, six, seven, eight!"

Elf Girl had her hands full 'cause the country was still packed with dangerous dissidents. She had amazing Emotion Sensing, perfect for discovering what wicked things lurked under a reputable

mask. I knew this for a fact—too often, she'd called me out for the wicked things lurking in *me*!

So I finally admitted defeat, gave up meditation altogether, and started focusing on magic control instead. The dungeon emperors had foolishly let their guards down around me, and I took advantage of that last night with my tri-tentacle tactic. However, now that I had enacted my sweet, sweet, *sweet* revenge, I knew they would be wary of me from this point on. Three tentacles would not be enough again. Not when I was up against six hands!

"Un, deux! Un, deux!"

But I still couldn't use Magic Hands. Magic Threads were too dangerous. It was all I could do to produce a few tentacles. *Wait, why did the one-more-set crew suddenly back away?* Oh, one of my tentacles popped out to say hi.

"I didn't touch any of you, I promise! Anyway, why are you wearing the sheerest leotards known to man?! Pay attention to your outfits when in the Jupiter Ey—I mean, the public eye. Ladies should have more modesty! You guys are halfway to looking like *ladies of the night*! There's nothing ladylike about you. I'm pretty sure ladies don't lather themselves in body oil and engage in nighttime services!"

"Shut up, Haruka-kun! Just put the tentacle away! Down, boy, down!"

My list of useable skills had shrunk dramatically, and I could barely tap into 30% of my physical capabilities. *Eh, that'll do for now.* Hoplology would more than make up for the lack of available options.

I mean, I used nothing but Magic Entanglement and my lowest-level equipment to go toe-to-toe with the violent old dude, and I did all right for myself. I was at less than 10% of my usual firepower—no equipment, no Entanglement, no nothin'—and I held my own just fine. Weakened as I was, I'd had an explosive increase in physical prowess. Albeit an uncontrollable and unusable increase.

Point was, my low stats were made up for in other ways. Further results of analysis came pouring in every second, and Wisdom kept taking those results and crunching further numbers at supersonic speeds. If a single hit from a tough foe was enough to

do me in, my only option was to dodge. Speed and reflexes had always been my saving graces—*safety ropes, if you will*. The only difference now was that those ropes were too robust to grab in one hand. And hey, I wasn't complaining.

"Shake, hop! Shake, hop!"

Last night's physical therapy sesh, aka fight to the death, finally made magic and physical control click. I got in lots and lots and lots of practice to make sure I had it down pat, too. Then, just to be on the safe side, I kept up the piston action a while longer until I was sure I had an airtight grasp on the subject! No, I meant it. I really grasped plenty of subjects. Fondled 'em too. Squeezed 'em a bit, even. I gave my tentacles and my command of magic a thorough workout. It was difficult but very, very rewarding!

Imagination was powerful, but just thinking about something didn't will it into existence. To cast magic, the spellcaster had to conceptualize it in its entirety. To shoot Fire Bullets out of my fingers, I had to map the path they would travel through the air; describe the revolutions they made as they shot away, spinning. My brain and my soul had to act as one; they had to stack on top of each other perfectly. Like a 3D figure seeming to pop out of a 2D painting, a magic sigil would materialize inside of my body. Its lines were drawn along my meridians and veins; my blood, qi, and magic were the paints that gave it color. The marriage of the mind and the spirit gave birth to this hidden trick art of the human form, an image evoked from the synthesis of body, brain, and heart—blood, magic, and qi. *Kinda cool, am I right?*

"So, like this?"

KABOOM!

"Wh-wh-what are you doing?! That's dangerous!"

"Uh, well… Whoopsies? Wow, I'm, uh, so surprised it did that?"

All I did was shoot off a single fire bullet…right? Utterly baffled by what had just flown out of my hand, I lifted my finger and stared at it—and then it clicked. Suddenly, I saw everything. The hidden design plans, the explanations of how it all worked, appeared in my mind in a flash.

That explosion had started life as one of my basic Fire Bullets. Fire Bullets were actual, physical bullets Entangled with Fire magic—basically, pocket-sized fireballs made with the help of a piece of metal. However, Hoplology had taken one look at that and gone, "Yeah, that's cool, but what if we do this instead?" One radical transformation later, and these new Inferno Bullets functioned more like a wave gun. In a single blast, the Inferno Bullet tunneled through the thick palace walls and vanished off into the distance… taking most of my MP with it… What the hell *was* that thing?!

"Yeah, that's uh…not what I thought it'd do…"

"You're telling me!"

"What was that just now?"

"A magic bullet? No way."

"No magic bullet should leave a gaping chasm in the wall!"

"Or fly that fast!"

"Seriously… I just saw a flash of light, and then something whizzed past."

And thus began the endless hell known as Hurricane Lecture. I was flooded with warnings; girls thundered at me; a steady hail of rebukes rained down. The bluster was more like a gale-force wind! We were reaching natural disaster levels! Worse, I had no safe place to rest my eyes, so through it all I had to stare resolutely at the wall. *Blame the leotards!*

"What is your problem, Haruka-kun? Why can't you sit still and meditate in silence?!"

Ah, I realized what the problem was—the girls had run out of dessert and were now experiencing the withdrawal symptom of anger. I whipped up a line of manju, which bobbed through the air before raining down on sixty eager eyes. It was the latest in my line of products, and I invented it during my mind-wandering meditation. *Behold, the new Theocracy specialty—Cathedral manju!* With that handy decoy, I was able to drive off the hurricane of angry girls and return us to sunny smiles once more. Success!

Omp!

"Wh-what was that maneuver? You snapped all my decoys out of the air with your *mouths*?! Just like in basketball, there's a saying

—she who controls the manju, uh…loses control of her weight? Wait, no. I didn't say anything! Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am!"

Alas, my flawless escape plan was dashed to pieces when the girls rocketed into the air, blocking my shot (at freedom), and *omp*ing up all the manju. But when it was my turn to retaliate, I was ready with the reinforcements. *Go, manju rain!*

"Whoo-hoo! It's raining manju!"

"You there, under the hoop! Crouch and box out!"

"Y-you won't get away with this, Haruka-kun! Manju radar, activate!"

"Hey! Who stole my manju? Which one of you sneak attackers did it? Where's the manju ninja hiding?"

"Captain! Dire shortage of manju on the starboard side, captain! We need more, stat! Your orders?"

"Yummy!"

Curses! Now the girls were mad at me! As has been known to happen, my brilliant plot ran afoul of an error and turned into an idiotic scheme. Now, hoist with my own petard of a pretty poor plot, I was moments away from drowning in a herd of stampeding teenage girls. The sweets slip-up had transformed my classmates into a snarling mob. It was now a free-for-all of pushing and shoving, the usual buried-in-a-boob-pile problem with a fun leotard twist. I was drowning in the ocean of raging teenagers and raging hormones; I was moments away from terrible teenage-boy disaster!

"Argh! The ocean is vast, and soft, and round, and jostling to and fro, and shoving in my face, and jiggling, and rushing at me in waves, and I'm *really* not doing so hot in the teenage-boy sense! Wait—why do you know the virtue of chas-titty trick of squeezing me with your thighs!"

"Whoo-hoo! Manju, manju!"

So nice you gotta say it twice… Just like the surging wave of twin "manju" buns jiggling in my face as I was crushed beneath the feet of the stampeding herd of frantic females.

The confusion of teenage girls writhing above me fused with the new technique of using their full bodies served to light the fuse

on my teenage boyness's missile, which looked in danger of misfiring on these misses at any moment.

"Argh! I gotta get outta here! But I can't!"

"Manju, manju!"

Between my self-imposed physical limitations and my lack of equipment, I was in a tight spot.

"Unfortunately, teenage boynesses react whenever they encounter leotards—it's just science! This chemical reaction results in an expansion that is about to boil over, and if it boils over on you, it's not gonna be pretty! It'll be social suicide for me! I'll end up with the Hermit title—or Pervert, if I'm not lucky! This situation is toxic to my sex appeal!"

"Manju, manju!"

The masses demanded manju, and it was clear that I had grossly underestimated the severity of the situation. Now that my classmates were over level 100, their figures had likewise evolved. Each of them could proudly stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the dungeon emperors with their generously full figures! Pert body parts stood at attention, drawn in sharp relief thanks to the skintight leotards hugging them tight, proving they were in the prime of their youth, the flush of their health, the most robustly robust and amazingly lovely part of their growth period!

Indeed, I could already see that the measurements I had taken the last time I made underwear were grossly outdated! The girls should've been past their growth spurts, but there was no stopping these evolution spurts anytime soon! The thighs alone! Oh, those thighs! Oh, those astounding asses—

Splurt!

The SEX GOD is defeated! The party feels compelled to nurse (yeah, let's...let's call it that) him back to health!

***

I came to in a cloud of fatigue and looked down at myself. These...were not the clothes I was wearing earlier. I must have

sweated buckets under Booby Mountain. Maybe the dungeon emperors changed my clothes for me. Damn, they were thorough about it too—they even swapped out my boxers.

I felt drained. Languid. And kinda…jazzed? Maybe I was just worn out from having all those racks stacked on me. The happy feeling could be chalked up to the feeling of sweet release—being released from the pile, of course. *Man, I really do feel tired.*

"That unplanned, unscanned, and unmanned misfire—I'm talking about the Inferno Bullet, of course—did a number on my MP, but…someone topped up my tank? Huh. Lovemaking must've mistaken the manju tussle for a tussle in the sheets and activated by accident."

To protect my dignity, it must be noted that the only misfire in that scene was the Inferno Bullet—no accidental off-gassing teenage boynesses. I held up very well, right up to the moment I passed out…*I think*? But then, why did I have on a fresh pair of boxers?

"Morning, sleepyhead."

"Oh, hey… Morning? And stuff?"

Getting the lecturing out of their systems restored the girls to their usual un-angry selves. The stampede must have been a byproduct of manju-addiction-induced manju deficiency syndrome. Manju were not to be messed with!

And then, bright smiles on their faces, my classmates clapped me in chains and hauled me into court for a trial. *Wait. What are the charges?* I racked my brains, but nothing came to mind. I didn't do anything wrong???

"Wait, you have the wrong idea! My actions had the purest of intentions. I simply scrubbed and fondled Sleeping Beauty's soul until hers was as sparkly clean as mine. I put all my teenage-boy emotions into the operation of carefully and conscientiously making her clean with my super-duper holy handkerchief—capable of rubbing out even the most stubborn stains! Through the power of scrubbing and rubbing, I made her beautiful soul even more beautiful until she was melting and gushing and bleached clean! That ought to be classified as a good thing."

“What are all these excuses, and why do they make you sound unbelievably guilty?!”

I gathered that some details of Sleeping Beauty’s rescue had gotten lost in the telling. The way the girls said it, it sounded like I forced a half-naked girl into an erotic massage. I had no memory of such an outrageous accusation. Lies! Slander! It wasn’t my fault I only had a single hankie to work with! If I felt up the contours of her body, that was only because it was such a thin sheet of fabric! Sheesh!

“Had I enough holy water for two people, I would never have resorted to such extreme measures. But what other choice did I have? I just had the one bottle to cover the entirety of Sleeping Beauty’s body… Oh, and what a body it was… I mean, there just wasn’t enough holy water! Things would’ve been different if monsters dropped refill packs, but no. There was just too much darkness on her…and it covered all the fun bits!”

Yeah, the darkness had been thicker on Sleeping Beauty than I had ever seen it. Being as she was just a soul, the darkness had an easier time siphoning magic from her than it did from flesh-and-blood people. It gorged itself on her magic and grew stronger… blotting out a number of things I really would’ve liked to see!

Anyway, magical beings like souls were extra vulnerable to the darkness. That meant I couldn’t use any of my magical beings—my tentacles, my various snakes, and so on. The darkness had the numerical advantage against me, which had made the task of saving Sleeping Beauty all the more difficult.

“We hereby find you guilty of being horny in the middle of battle!”

“What should his punishment be? A fresh set of undergarments for all? Bras *and* undies.”

“Agreed!” the rest of the girls cheered. “I have orders for him!”

The guilty verdict came down while I was lost in thought! And on what awful false charges too! What self-respecting teenage boy wouldn’t feel a little warm under the collar while running his hankie over a truly beautiful soul? If not for the darkness bearing down on us, I really could’ve gotten distracted there… Oh well—I couldn’t blame the girls too much. Too-small underwear could chafe

painfully, especially over certain perky, pointed—steepled, even—appendages. *Refitting? More like a nip and tuck, amiright?*

But the last time I screwed up my courage and so, so bravely sacrificed my sex appeal to handcraft (tentaclecraft?) girls' underwear, I thought I'd seen it all. I thought I'd faced my greatest challenges yet. But no. The girls' girls had grown *again*! Despite my classmates' aging slowing to a crawl after passing level 100, their bra sizes missed the memo and kept evolving with reckless abandon. At this point, all my classmates looked like models. With every passing day, they further challenged stereotypes about Japanese women's assets. (Except for approximately two members of a certain itty-bitty committee who shall not be named.)

"Oh, don't tell me...I've gotta go through the ordeal of measuring you all *again*?!"

It would've been less painful to commit seppuku twice over at this point.

"Yup! We can do that once we get back to the frontier. Sound good?"

"Thanks, Haruka-kun!"

On second thought, maybe seppuku wasn't the answer—even if the crimes I was accused with were a) offensive to my sensibilities and b) untrue. *Yeah, apparently seppuku is bad now?* See, the problem with false accusations was that most of them stemmed from the mass media sheeple bleating, "Suicide is not the aNsWeR." "Criminals have rIgHtS tOo." Woke bull! By that line of logic, whenever someone committed a crime, it was only lawful and moral for the perp to get revenge for being accused, y'know? The killer had to be protected, and if the victim died, it was all their fault for giving up. Duh. As a modern-day high school boy, it was my duty to respect my elders and their esteemed opinions (kek). Which meant one thing—it was moral and right to strive for revenge day in and day out!

Yes, it was vital I put every effort into my one-on-three early morning rumpus revenge sessions! For those were daily battles I could not afford to lose!

What didn't kill me made me stronger, meaning Sex God would rapidly become my most optimized skill. That was my goal, and I

was ready to put in blood, sweat, tears, elbow grease, snot, saliva, and the obvious and unmentionable bodily fluid!

I had relearned how to cast magic; I had a strong understanding of it once more. Maybe I wasn't ready to use magic in moving combat, but I could give it a shot in crafting. Yeah, based on the data, my plan was theoretically possible. Building something of this size was kinda stretching the definition of an experiment... Still. I thought I could swing it?

DAY 117

MIDDAY

*Calm down, girls! You're running my c*ck around the clock!*

THE ROYAL PALACE OF THE THEOCRACY

WE PLANNED TO SET OUT for the kingdom this evening. We didn't have time to sit around; we had to catch up with the freed beastfolk and make sure they got back to the Beast Kingdom safely. However, before we could go, I had one last errand to take care of.

The Cathedral was now a deserted ruin. The brainchild of a brilliant philosopher had stood as a fortress guarding against the ultimate dungeon for centuries, but now its job was finished, and it had fallen into rubble. The dome, a huge hunk of stone that looked ready to crack apart at any second, was in the middle of a giant city. If the dome broke, all hell would break loose too. I couldn't let the old philosopher dude's guardian turn on the people he loves. 'Sides, it was kinda my fault for destroying the Cathedral in the first place.

"It might be too dangerous to equip all my equipment, but I *should* be able to make this work with just Alchemy and my magic… Oof. Well, I don't have to do it all in one go if it's too tough. Back where I came from, people took their sweet-ass time building buildings anyway… Yup, 'If you can't afford a marble basilica, let them see slate!' Attribution unknown?"

Jiggle jiggle.

Slimey was the only one to come with me on this errand. My other pals kept a safe distance behind protective barriers. Demo work could get dangerous.

I felt confident that I could handle the demo part, at least. Beyond that…well, I wouldn't know until I tried. But I thought I'd gotten the hang of what I wanted to do in the Inferno Bullet experiment. That was a heretofore unused ability that combined my inner magic, qigong, Alchemy, and magic sigils into one composite type of Sorcery. And if that was all there was to it, well, that didn't sound so bad. All it needed was careful focus and a strong mental image. A perfect mental image, really. If it wasn't completely airtight, then the consequences could be disastrous.

So there was this brilliant Catalan architect by the name of Antoni Gaudí who began work on a towering church called the Sagrada Família. It was still unfinished today. It was supposed to take approximately three hundred years to complete—or that was the original plan, but now, it was projected to be half that. What sped it up, see, was the advent of technological advances like 3D printing and CNC (computerized numerical control) stonework tools. Architects were able to construct virtual mappings of the completed Cathedral and use this data to work backward and streamline the design, logistics, and construction processes. This drastically reduced the expected labor period.

"Oh, but they still spent a good century or so working on this thing back in the 1800s without any of that fancy technology. It was supposed to take so long because the Sagrada's design is bonkers. Only a couple of lines run straight; there are no right angles; it's all curves and thirty bajillion carvings on the façades. It's one of those things that's theoretically possible to build but would take freaking forever. Isn't that neat?"

Wobble wobble.

The design alone was super impressive. Attempting to build it was an even bigger flex. Whoever designed a building knowing it wouldn't be completed in their lifetime and whoever else worked on it for hundreds of years, safeguarding that three-hundred-year-old dream… Well, they rocked. The Sagrada Família was a true miracle of architecture, and I stood no chance of seeing it either—unless I made it for myself here in this fantasy world!

"Yup! Because this is a Cathedral, so if anyone has any complaints, we can pin 'em on the old god dude."

And because this was a fictional universe, no one cared if I plagiarized the design! I'd seen the full CG renderings and blueprints back home. I had plenty of raw material if I repurposed the Cathedral's ruins, and the Universe Staff would provide all the heavy machinery I needed. Yeah, nothing could beat the power of leverage. *Physics, am I right?* I made the VR layout Wisdom's problem and handed the CNC stone-processing equipment and 3D printer work to Magic Threads. Then I held everything together in my mind and took a deep breath. I fused my body and soul, evoking

a magic sigil within me. Blueprints skittered across my closed eyelids; images of the completed church danced through my mind.

And then I *imagined*. My mind, my soul, and my body twined into a single impetus; a mixture of blood, qi, and magic roamed my veins, sketching the contours of the sigil inside me. Everything worked together in the service of this one enormous, complex task—compressing an enormous amount of magic, working it into thought, building it into design, giving it life. Working backward from the mental image of the finished church in my mind, I rewound it back to its composite elements and rebuilt it into the final product. Once I had this running on loop in my head, I was ready to make it real. To manifest it. I could manifest many things—alas, a girlfriend was not one of them. *Sniff…*

"Focus, focus, fo—hey, if I don't have a girlfriend, why don't I just make one? Okay, 'make' is maybe kinda a gross word. That makes it sound like my girlfriend's gonna be a body pillow or something. That outcome is so sad I can't even see it through the thick haze of tears! I see no possible outcome for me but ones that leave me sobbing! Oh, the pain! My poor, young heart is crying out! It's worse because, this being fantasy, there's probably some way that the body pillow girlfriend turns into a real girl!"

Wobble wobble.

No matter how girlfriend-less I may have been, a (Pinnochio'ed) body-pillow girlfriend was still cringe incarnate. Anyway, I was done crafting! Oh—not crafting a body pillow girlfriend. I meant the church.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief. "Wow. I somehow managed to pull that off in under a second. Is…that gonna be an issue?"

Wriggle wriggle.

Sorcery was a little too eclectic to be called pure magic. Also, Wisdom must have been annoyed that I left it to handle all the hard work, because I had a splitting headache! The back of my head felt like someone had taken a beating to it, and my forehead was burning so hot it was inventing new types of pain. Only in this world would there be so many different ways to self-destruct…

"Well, the church looks perfect to me. If I have to nitpick…then can I ask why the sign says it's an 'Eroticathedral'?"

Wobble wobble.

Too bad I was out of MP to fix it. And considering the sexy nun habits I traded His Upskirting Oldness for the nubile nuns in the *Gentlemen's Guide*, maybe the name wasn't so bad after all. It kinda fit, in its own way.

"Wh-what is this wonder?"

"It says it's called the…Eroticathedral?"

"Heavens… Are we sure it isn't a cathedral?"

Excited voices rose up behind me. With that, my mission of "friendship and goodwill" to the Beast Kingdom and the Theocracy was complete. The Theocracy part, well—the peace mission was actually just a ruse for a sneaky spy mission. A very obvious and violent sneaky mission. But now we could all get along and create true friendship and goodwill, preferably the kind involving me patting cute beastfolk girls on the head.

"Yup! Now I'm on good terms with both nations, and I say this is a perfect gesture of my goodwill. We destroyed all the relationship issues on either side, and all's well that ends well. I even fixed the broken Cathedral… Well, now it's the Eroticathedral. That's sure to cause misunderstandings… With all the sexy nuns everywhere, the church is about to be inundated with horny converts. If the church starts offering sexy services, I might just be one of them!" *Ho ho!*

The rescued beastfolk were largely scared of humans, so we sent them on their way with little to no fanfare—no farewell party, no grand ceremony. Just a wave goodbye from some friendly faces. Meanwhile, Sister Girl, her party of nuns, and the violent old dude's knights were coming back to the frontier to dungeon crawl, so we didn't need to say goodbye to them either.

I was totally spent on MP and bedridden, so I had to ride back in a carriage. Turned out, mass construction projects were still kinda rough. I hadn't calculated how taxing all the complicated mathematical formulas and fancy statues would be.

I heard that the new building was to be called Zaasimov's Cathedral. It would be the old philosopher dude's tomb, the legacy of the Theocracy's steadfast protector. Well. It was Zaasimov's

Eroticathedral, really. Don't ask me how or why that got misspelled, but I blamed it on Wisdom and its preoccupation with a certain sexy saint. I didn't do anything wrong.

Now Zaasimov was formally canonized as a saint, and the church promised to tell future generations of this great dude… I shuddered to think how they'd mess that one up. Given the track record of everything else, he was probably going to go down in history as Zassimov…

Then off we went, once again on the *Lovely Lady Knights Liner in Name Only 'Cause No Lovely Lady Knights Have Ridden It? Y'know? Express*. Lying in wait for me were three tongue-lolling, wild-eyed beautiful women in tight, stretchy miniskirts. Loved the eyes. Huge fan of the eyes. Especially with those square-framed, nonprescription eyeglasses!

"Are you countering my teenage boyness with sexy teacher costumes?! Thank god you guys aren't real teachers. No boy would ever survive high school!"

Their stockings were scrumptious, the terrifically tight outlines of their taut tuchuses made me ready to get held back a grade and stay in high school indefinitely. Part of it was the fabric, but a huge part of what made that thin, almost see-through skirt so sensual was the solid spheres underneath. The teacher trio was hot to trot! *Turn 'em loose, and they'll bring the education system to its knees!* With them at the helm, high school would've been a black hole localized on teenage boys, sucking them in at enrollment and never spitting them back out for graduation.

Their skirts were either navy, beige, or charcoal-pinstriped, but every ass was uniformly wonderful. Brother, I was ready to hit the books just for a chance to hit that. What was more, the glasses looked phenomenal on all of them! My high school had nothing but old man teachers and the kind of female teachers that didn't show up in teenage boy daydreams, so this fictitious fictional world high school was winning by a landslide! If the average junior high boy saw this, he would've applied to transfer into this school district like a shot. Yes indeedy!

"You ran out, magic again. Time you, learned your, lesson."

"Class is, now in, session."

Black stockings highlighted beautiful thighs, allowing me to admire just how nice their legs really were. The fabric above the butt was mesmerizingly—distractingly, lusciously—see-through, and whenever the garter lace teased me as it edged in and out of view… Oh lordy! Not the absolute territory!

Six long, shapely legs swayed closer… N-no! Not the fearsome virtue of chas-titty! The secret art that weaponized a woman's entire body! Apparently, it had a legs-only variant!

"Even the slippery feel of the stockings sliding alongside me has been turned into a weapon of mass destruction! Wait. When did you remove my armor? Oh hey, long time no see, Prometheus. You're back?!"

"Time for you, take your lesson!"

As if the leotard booby pile hadn't been dangerous enough for my teenage boyness, here came the second wave! From high school girls to high school teachers! This was a trap! Oh, the most perfect of traps, and I was caught fast in it!

Three pairs of ruby-red lips began to nibble at my nethers, smearing kiss marks up and down my schlong. A sliver of bright red tongue darted out from one of those gems of a mouth. I couldn't tear my eyes away from its tip, sticky with spit… Oh no. Ohhhh no. This was not good. This was real bad news, bears. Aiiii*eeee!*

"This is, de-ten-tion. For bad boys like y-o-u." *Shloop!*

The carriage swayed sedately as it trundled along. Me, though—I twitched and bucked like I was caught in a magnitude 10.0 earthquake. Meanwhile, the teachers rolled up their tight skirts to let my eyes feast on everything underneath: the beautiful legs encased in their black stockings, the sumptuous lace just beyond that, the mouthwatering garter belts, and the bands of cream or cinnamon swaying in time with the rocking of the carriage!

Okay, so I had given payback ten times over last night. So? Were the girls really so immature as to seek revenge in these obscene outfits in an endless rotation all the way back to the frontier?

The answer was yes. I had originally planned to spend the trip scoping out my stats and doing a careful review of my skills, but…

what could I say? The unrockable carriage had come down with a bad case of the quakes.

“Maybe Hoplology can use this opportunity to figure out how to wriggle out of chains…”

It had already mastered Lovemaking, giving me huge boosts to Lovemaking’s stamina and rejuvenating powers. My ability to counterattack was greater than ever. Problem was, I couldn’t move or use any skills with the Prometheus Chains on.

I watched the Eroticathedral shrink into the distance from the rocking carriage window. And then we were on the road, and there was nothing to do but enjoy the bumpy ride.

“Hey, wait a sec. Even on a field trip, why would there be three teachers for one student?”

Legends spoke of this world’s Hot Damn-sels, women of ultimate power and sexpertise. I’d already had my hands full battling two of them on the daily, but now when there were three? Uh. I was literally screwed.

“In any other story, we would fight, I’d beat you and spare your life, and then you’d join my party. In *this* world, I save your life, you demand I use Servitude on you, and then you jump my ass! Can this world learn to recognize a trope to save its life?!”

“We, know tropes. We are, teacher trope!”

There was no end in sight for this battle… Oh god, and there they went switching off again.

“I-is this the isekai staple of legend?! The forever fearsome threesome?!”

This world was no fair! And completely obsessed with sex! Seriously!!!

◆

AFTERWORD

◆

I BET NOBODY BELIEVES my editor's threats anymore and assumes there will always be an afterword in these books no matter what. With regret, you are exactly right. Here is your afterword. Condolences.

Yes, once again, I deleted and crossed out and whittled down as much as I could...thus adding five pages to the total manuscript. I also wrote a one-page prologue, putting me a solid two pages over my allocated page count. *This time,* I thought, *I'll make the page count exactly.* Actually, no I didn't. Doubting my ability to hit page count the whole time, I wrote a two-page afterword too and sent that in. Yup. Anyway, thanks for checking out this book!

Let's dive into the summary. In Volume 12 of this light novel series, I've committed the great light novel taboo of introducing a new love interest who is summarily mistreated by our physically abusive protagonist. In my defense, *Loner Life* has always been a story where none of this should be happening. Therefore, please go blame my editor Y---da-san. Blame him! (I can't thank him enough for all he does.) Ha ha ha.

Once again, a thank you to Saku Enomaru-sensei for their wonderful illustrations. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Bibi-sensei for their stellar work on the manga. Likewise, thank you to the new manga editor Takamasa-san; it's a pleasure to have you aboard.

In other miraculous news, I had the pleasure of being listed on Suikyoushi-sama's list of top 100 Naro authors (https://www.thatta-online.com/thatta01/that420/midare.htm). I looked at the other names on the list and was horrified. I don't deserve to be in their company. Thank you very much, Suikyoushi-sama.

Moving right along...I mentioned a move in the afterword of Volume 9, and honestly, I've still not done any of the unpacking... It's Volume 12 now... I guess I have no other life updates at this moment in time. Yup, I'm allotted two whole pages for the

afterword, and you still get zero juicy details about my life. Ha ha ha!

Speaking of allotting, I was once told I'd be given five pages for an afterword. I said, "Next time I have that much room, I should include *Isekai Editor Y---da Monogatari*—(that's another series I write)—" and crammed that saga into two of the pages...at which point it vanished mysteriously, leaving only the afterword. So, in a fit of spite, I took *Isekai Editor Y---da* to the 18+ offshoot of Naro, Nocturne, and have been posting it there at hideously sporadic intervals. Ha ha ha.

Also, a thank you to all my webnovel readers. Also also, a thank you to the ones who send me corrections for my glut of typos. It's funny, though. How come when I fix them, the spellcheck still underlines the whole manuscript in red? So sorry to all the editors at Ouraidou!

Oh! This volume marks the debut of the mom bunny, who is bizarrely popular online. Saku Enomaru-sensei kindly drew a picture of her as a thank-you gift (lol) for Takao-san (https://twitter.com/HawkTail01). Takao-san is a huge help posting social media announcements for us.

This novel wouldn't have been possible without the enormous assistance of many individuals, excluding an editor who shall not be named. To all of you, thank you very much for your work on each and every volume.

—SHOJI GOJI



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