THE GM GAME MASTER HAS LOGGED IN TO ANOTHER WORLD

02



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ILLUSTRATOR

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Chapter 1

The window of the emperor's office shattered with a loud crash. The next second, a man and a woman fell through it. Fifty meters separated the room from the ground, and any regular person would have no doubt fallen to their death.

The hunter, still dressed in all black complete with dark sunglasses and his hair slicked back, switched his lightsaber off and neatly slid it back in the scabbard hanging from his hips. At his feet lay the carcasses of the dozens of iron beasts he had ruthlessly destroyed. Some were still twitching with sparks flying out, but most were already motionless.

The Gear Leech had yet to be completely destroyed, and it slowly extended its mechanical finger with a creak. As it pointed at No Face, rays of light gathered at its fingertip.

The hunter walked up to it from the side and brought his hand down, splitting the machine's head in two with his bare hand. Unable to fulfill its mission, the Gear Leech collapsed to the ground. A drop of oil escaped from its glass eyes as if it were crying with regret.

"Well done," No Face said with dramatic applause. "I will admit I was a little scared my precious seedling would be stolen from right under my nose. Your intervention was most welcome, Hunter."

The hunter barely acknowledged them and answered with a short grunt. No Face did not seem to mind the curt reply.

"Is he dead? Did you get him?" asked Iiro Weizern, looking down from the broken window.

While dozens of silver vines had grown from his back earlier, there were less than ten left now. The man had also lost an arm in the battle but it was slowly growing back, along with new vines.

"I felt several barriers blocking me when I hit him. He must have been hurt, but I doubt he died," the hunter answered.

“What?! Then we need to go after him at once!” Iiro exclaimed.

“Giving chase would not be wise. Here, see for yourself,” No Face said, dropping a small monster made of thorny vines from the window.

It had yet to reach the floor when they heard a loud explosion. The monster had been shredded to pieces.

Iiro let out a shrill cry. “It exploded?!”

“He left traps,” the hunter stated matter-of-factly.

“Indeed. This one seems to activate when it senses a presence. He assumed we would go after him. Let me see...” No Face stopped to think for a second. “I’m sure a failed experiment will do just fine. I’ll have a monster track his scent. Anyway, Hunter, what happened to Chogokin?”

“Tadashi? I was able to prevent the worst outcome, but Exmizer was stolen.”

“A pity. It will make things more difficult for us. You said you were able to prevent the worst, so I assume you retrieved the seed, yes?”

“I did,”the hunter said. He took the glowing seed from his pocket and showed it to the hooded figure who nodded.

“You could have done it yourself,” the hunter sighed. “It should have been easy for you to grab this and escape.”

“I wouldn’t say that. As you know, there was someone particularly difficult to deal with there. Had I approached, she would have noticed me. My existence must be kept hidden. That so-called ‘hero’ is also too big of a variable.”

“Well...” the hunter answered after a pause. “I never expected her to show up as the head of the demons. Should I have disposed of her?”

No Face shook their head.

“No. It would have been a little premature. For now, we just have to make a beautiful flower bloom in this empire, and our work on this continent will be done. The Great Admiral is waiting for us offshore. Join him, and take the seed to the mainland, Hunter... Or perhaps I should call you Imitator instead? You did a good job. There’s no need for you to wear this face any longer. How about going back to your usual appearance? I’m more fond of it anyway.” No Face let

out a little laugh.

“I don’t care whether you like it or not,” the man answered, taking off his sunglasses and bringing his hand up to his face. He started peeling.

Under his mask, the man who had been called “the Hunter” up until now had black eyes to match his raven hair and sharp masculine features. A large scar spanned from his forehead to his eye. His true face looked a little younger, and he appeared to be roughly twenty-five years of age.

“It wasn’t a bad face, but I suppose I won’t have any use for it on this continent anymore. I made sure to learn all of his powers, though.”

“He did have rather nice abilities,” No Face commented. “Now, now! I will soon hold a feast with my monster friends. Do you want to join, Imitator? I’m sure a wonderful flower will soon bloom from the nursery.”

The Imitator glared at No Face, visibly displeased by the invitation.

“No, thank you. I’ll be heading out,” he said, before adding. “I’m borrowing a dragon.”

“Too bad. I’ll be joining you as soon as possible, so I’d be much obliged if you could wait for me with a cup of tea at the ready.”

“Keep dreaming.”

“How cold...” In spite of their words, No Face laughed heartily.

The Imitator was losing patience and simply left. On his way out, he caught sight of Philia trapped by an enormous thorny vine. His eyes were fixed on her, but he wasn’t looking at Philia herself. Rather, he seemed to be gazing into the distance. Albeit reluctantly, he did not slow his steps and soon exited the wrecked office.

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A man and a young girl walked hurriedly, each of their steps echoing in the darkness of the sewers. The man was resting his weight on the young girl’s shoulder. He shot her a glance, and the two of them stopped in their tracks.

He leaned against the wall and tried to calm his breathing. There was a large open wound that stretched from his shoulder to his lower back, and he had cuts

and bruises across his body. He whined in pain.

“My lord?! Are you all right?” the young girl all but screamed. Colona’s usual composed expression was nowhere to be seen, her worries laid bare instead.

On the other hand, her master, Shou, was still as carefree as ever. “Good grief. You don’t need to yell in my ear—I can hear you just fine. Ah... I sure messed up. This all went pretty badly.”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t able to break the curse in time, and you had to sacrifice valuable resources.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault we ended up having to deal with such a difficult opponent. I retrieved my Chimera, so that’s already a pretty good outcome if you ask me. Still, where the hell did that guy learn all those new techniques? He can even clone himself now!” he exclaimed. “The Imitator sure earned his name... And considering the equipment he had on him, the real hunter must be long dead. This is going to get annoying.”

“My lord, have some water,” Colona said, materializing out of nowhere a bottle of water and a box with a red cross on it. “I will perform first aid. Please rest for the time being.”

She carefully pulled down his robe and started applying a healing gel to his open wound. When she had finished, she then expertly wrapped a bandage around his torso.

Shou brought the bottle to his lips and grimaced as the water rushed past the cuts in his mouth.

“Ouch... My good looks are suffering today,” he complained.

“If you can joke around, I’m sure you’ll be just fine,” answered Colona dryly.

“Hey! That’s not how it works, is it?” he whined before adding. “Looks like I won’t have time to rest anyway. We have a guest, Colona.”

Shou readjusted his clothes and fixed his eyes on a dimly lit pathway in front of them. He could hear something slowly crawling toward them.

Colona cast some light on it, and they could now see that it was a strange creature made up of thorny vines entangled in intricate patterns. While it

looked somewhat like a monster, it was nothing like anything they'd seen before.

While its head was that of a Kobold, it was attached to a bear's torso. However, its lower body looked like that of a slime. On each side, it had tiger paws complete with mantis sickles on the ends. All in all, the vine monster looked like a failed chimera.

The main difference was that every body part had been forcefully attached to the others with vines. It was a botched job, though, and blood was leaking out from the gaps.

Soon after it had made its appearance, a few crocodile monsters—a species that populated the sewers—came crawling, most likely attracted by the striking smell of blood.

"Tsk! They just had to send such a grim creature after us," Shou complained. "Colona, get rid of it as fast as you can. If we dillydally too much, we'll get surrounded."

"My lord, the movements of TARGET: UNKNOWN are strange. Stay alert."

Long vines suddenly sprouted from the ominous chimera, and they pierced through every single one of the crocodile monsters.

"Friendly fire?" Shou wondered. "Yeah, no, that doesn't seem to be the case, does it?"

"The very structure of TARGET: HOLE CROCODILES is currently being modified. Unknown—provisional name: Fake Chimera—appears to have the ability to transform its prey into monsters that share the same characteristics as itself," she explained coldly.

Shou let out a sigh and grabbed a few cards.

"Thanks for the level-headed analysis, I guess? I wish you'd panic a little more, though. Just like earlier—you were so cute."

"You were imagining things, my lord. Perhaps you were hallucinating due to the blood loss," she said. "My lord, please give me a weapon."

"I know, I know. All right, let's fight our hardest for a little longer. Gatling

Buster!” he chanted, throwing a card in the direction of Colona.

The card disintegrated, and rays of light gathered in Colona’s hand, slowly taking the shape of a Gatling gun.

“Hurry up, Colona. I have to get in touch with Asta. There’s no time to lose,” Shou warned.

“Understood. I will annihilate them,” she answered, pulling the trigger of the Gatling gun.

The shrill and ruthless sounds of the weapon filled the sewers.

“Giiiiiiiii!!!” the fake chimera cried out as a rain of bullets fell upon it, opening up countless holes in its body.

Its body was growing smaller with each passing second as chunks were destroyed by the bullets.

Shou also summoned both a magic sword for himself and an iron beast—Metal Sharkman.

Metal Sharkman, armed with an imposing spear, jumped into the sewage waters without any hesitation and went after the hole crocodiles that had been corrupted by the thorny monster, impaling them one after the other on his spear.

Shou rode on its back, and used it as a stepping stone to get closer to the crocodiles, finishing each of them off with a thrust of his sword.

Having finished his part, Shou returned to the stone pathway, stepping over the shredded remains of the fake chimera on his way to the surface. Colona and the iron sharkman followed behind him.

A look of nervousness had replaced his usual carefree expression.

I need to hurry. We have some time thanks to Colona starting to break the curse, but we still only have two or three days at best. And the poor princess was crying... Making a woman cry is the worst thing a man can do. Wait for me, princess. I’ll bring Tatsuma to you.

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I was currently fighting a battle ten times tougher than the one that had taken place on the Great Plains of Grandt. Why, you ask? Well, such a large-scale battle naturally resulted in a large number of casualties.

We weren't just taking care of our allies, we were healing our prisoners as well. Tatsuma, the renowned Wei General of the empire calling for surrender certainly had its effect, and most men had easily thrown down their weapons.

However, a small fraction of the enemy soldiers refused and lashed out instead. We were left with no option but to deal with them in a less amiable way. Still, when I stepped up and cut one of them in two with one swing of my blade, the rest succumbed to fear and lost the will to fight.

Anyway, back to the main topic. People who could use healing magic were scarce, so I had to run around and treat people left and right. I knew this would happen and had prepared thousands of High Potions beforehand, but with Barry having run wild in the city, there were more casualties than expected. Many civilians—who should have never been involved—were hurt. As a result, the potions I had prepared were far from enough.

While the death toll in Lurf was incredibly high, some civilians and soldiers had managed to escape Barry by hiding inside buildings, and others had miraculously survived in spite of being buried under rubble. They had escaped death but were still hurt to various degrees—their injuries ranged from simple fractures to large wooden debris lodged in their bodies.

The search for survivors was still ongoing, and a rescue team led by Tatsuma and Hayato had been deployed. With their brute strength, they could easily lift rubble no one else could. I remembered standing alongside a group of soldiers, all of us watching dumbfounded as the two of them lifted the collapsed roof of a building all by themselves to check for survivors. With my current strength stat, there was no way I could do the same. *Maybe I could do the same with magic, though...*

The two also had maps that could spot people which allowed them to promptly locate survivors and transport them to the designated medic stations.

We otherworlders hadn't been summoned at the exact same point in time, but we still came from the same world and shared common knowledge. Before

the battle, we had talked it through and put together a guide of sorts to follow in the event of a large-scale disaster.

We had decided to implement a procedure called triage which involved attributing colored papers to patients based on the gravity of their wounds. Those who had died were marked black, patients in need of urgent care were red, people who were conscious but still had serious wounds were yellow, those who could still walk on their own were green, and, finally, people who were uninjured were white. We hadn't been able to find paper, so we used small pieces of rope instead. Jirou, Haruka, and I had more than enough dye, so coloring them had been easy enough.

The volunteers—made up of uninjured soldiers and prisoners—were in charge of taking care of the green group. They performed first aid and distributed potions. High Potions were enough to cure the people of the yellow group, but sadly, there weren't enough to go around.

To keep up with the demand, we had tasked the Alchemist Guild and the few soldiers and adventurers with alchemical skills with producing as many as possible, as fast as possible. They were able to harvest the necessary herbs from Haruka's special field so, hopefully, they'd be able to make it work.

Sadly, while Haruka was able to grow a lot of herbs extremely fast, the soil would then become infertile for the next few years. That being said, Haruka's farm was in a forest, so even if it was impossible to farm on for a few years, it shouldn't cause any serious issues. The trees would eventually grow back too if the ground was left alone.

Our main problem was the red group. These people could not be cured with High Potions and, unless magicians used healing magic, they'd die before long.

I rearranged my skills for the occasion. I wanted to try Skill Fusion, but given the urgency, I figured I would leave experiments to another day.

Passive skills: MP Recovery (Medium), MP Recovery (Low), HP & MP Recovery (Medium), Physical Reinforcement (Extra-High), Healing Magic Boost (High), Healing Magic Area Boost (High), Max MP Increase (Medium), Heightened Senses (High), Magic Boost (Medium).

Active skills: Energy Conversion.

Energy Conversion was right out of the magic swordsman's repertoire and had a cooldown of five minutes. It allowed the user to convert half of their HP into MP.

There were so many people to heal that I wasn't sure I would manage even with this.

I had also swapped out my usual weapon, Seven Arthur, for the Rod of Aleclepius which increased the HP restored to the target when using healing magic and decreased the MP cost of healing spells. It was the go-to staff for healers.

"Aargh..."

"My hand... My leg..."

"Am I...dying...?"

Hundreds of civilians and soldiers voiced their despair all around me. *I want to put them out of their misery*, I thought before realizing it sounded more like a villain's line. I meant it in a nice way, though.

I pictured my spell spreading across the largest possible area before chanting, "Area Heal!"

"Ah! My wounds!"

"How...? I'm alive?! I'M ALIVE!!!"

"Yes, you are! That's incredible!"

"My leg! My leg is moving!"

Thanks to my GM gear—namely the Soul of the Valkyrie and the Rod of Aleclepius—I was able to reduce the cost by a lot, but the spell still ended up taking a third of my total MP. At least it worked wonders.

I knew of more powerful healing spells, but since my main goal was to heal as many people as possible, Area Heal was my best bet. It was also the most efficient spell MP-cost-wise. I didn't waste too much time listening to the words of thanks from my first batch of patients and headed toward another group of

wounded.

No matter how many people I healed, there was no end to the number of critical patients being brought in. I had already cured at least a thousand people, but my next destination was also filled with patients marked red. *This is depressing, but I have to hang on...*

My belly was already full to the brim with High MP Potions. I had drunk so many I felt sick. To be honest, I just wanted to give up and go throw up in a corner to make myself feel better.

But there were still so many left...

Adel walked up to me. “Masaki... Are you all right? If you keep pushing yourself, you’ll collapse. You just fought a battle earlier today,” she said, her voice full of concern.

I felt bad for making her worry, but knowing that she cared so much lifted my spirits somewhat.

“I know, but...if I don’t do this, many will die. I have to pull through.”

I had learned long ago that healing magic users were rare, but I was shocked to find that there were less than ten of them between our two armies. On top of that, none were able to use powerful spells like me.

Their scarcity was apparently a recent phenomenon. While there were more in the past, many healers had died or disappeared mysteriously in the last few decades, leaving no offspring behind. With healing magic abilities being largely gained through inheritance, this was what led to the current situation. That was what the palace’s healer had said anyway.

Apparently, healing powers sometimes appeared again in families after skipping a few generations. As an inheritor vampire who had inherited the long-lost powers of her ancestors, Adel was a similar case.

Regardless, both armies’ healing magicians had all exhausted their MP reserves already. They were either sleeping in the medic station bunk beds or just sitting in corners, waiting for their mana to recover.

Some had tried to drink MP potions, but, just like me, they had gotten sick.

They hadn’t been able to bear it and were out of commission for the time being.

When I arrived at the next medic station, I came face to face with a mother holding a small child looking like they might die any second.

“Please! Wake up! Please... Don’t die! You’ve only had four birthdays, let’s have many more together, okay?!” She cried out as she clutched her child’s hand.

Damn it! There’s no way I’m letting this kid die! I can deal with soldiers dying in a war, but a four-year-old kid losing their future is just plain wrong!

“Area Heal!”

I cast my spell on as large an area as I could and used enough mana so that the child that was on the verge of death—as well as the soldiers and prisoners in the vicinity—would be fully cured.

“Ah... What is...?”

“Mommy...?”

The mother broke down in tears as her child called out for her.

“Mommy... What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

She hugged her child close to her chest as she wept, a look of surprise on her face. The four-year-old couldn’t grasp the situation and returned the hug.

What a heartwarming scene... I’m glad, but...I used too much...magic. I’m gonna...

“Masaki?!” Masaki!”

I can hear Adel’s voice... No... Many are still waiting for me...to treat them.

I clenched my teeth and used my staff to support myself, trying my utmost to stay conscious.

“I’m okay... Next.”

“Masaki! You can’t anymore! Your body won’t be able to stand it!”

“Adelheid is right. You can’t do this anymore. You’ll collapse in a matter of

minutes if you keep this up," a voice said.

I turned to look in its direction and saw a demon woman. If my memory served me right, she was the one who had led the demon tribes here and served as their general.

"I just need to drink an MP potion..." I answered.

"I'm fairly certain you have already drank more than fifty of them," the demon woman stated.

"Masaki! Did you drink that many?!"

Had she been counting? I didn't really have a choice, though. I could only heal up to three hundred people at once. Even with the MP I recovered thanks to my skills, if I didn't use potions, I'd run dry immediately.

I had no choice but to keep on drinking potions so that I could heal more people.

"All right, just listen. If you keep this up, you'll be dead soon. At the end of the day, potions are drugs. If you overdose on them, you'll have to deal with the side effects."

Death.

I wondered if I could truly die with Invincibility activated, but that didn't stop me from being overcome by a dreadful feeling.

My nausea suddenly got worse, and I started feeling dizzy. My head was pounding so hard I thought it was about to burst. I hadn't felt this bad since the time I caught the flu. And my symptoms were getting worse and worse.

I felt someone clutch my arm tightly. It was Adel. I glanced at her, and she looked like she was about to cry.

I shouldn't have made my precious...fiancée feel like this. But what am I supposed to do?

"I'm glad to see you've finally calmed down. All right. Let me give you a hand," the demon woman said before turning to my fiancée. "Adelheid, I'm

borrowing him.”

“Eh?! What are—” Adel started.

The woman paid her no mind and pulled me closer, bringing both of her hands to my face.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing?!” Adel all but yelled.

“What are you doing to Masaki-san?!” another voice came.

I had no idea Akiha was even here... Wait! I don’t have the time to worry about that now! Is she...KISSING ME?! Damn, her tongue...

“Wh-why did you—?!” Adel was fuming.

“How was it?” the demon woman asked after taking a deep breath. “Can you feel yourself brimming with mana?”

What? Actually... She’s right?! My MP has been fully restored. How? Did she do this with that kiss?

“Y-yeah. How did you... No, who are you?” I asked.

“I forgot to introduce myself. You can call me Asta. I’m just an insignificant general.”

“An insignificant general... You can’t mean that, Lady Asta...” Adel seemed to want to continue her rebuttal, but a look from Asta-san stopped her in her tracks.

Looks like they know each other.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you for helping me recover my mana. There are still many injured people waiting for me, so I will excuse myself now,” I said politely.

“Wait.” She grabbed me by the shoulder, stopping me in my tracks.

I tried to ignore her and leave anyway, but I couldn’t take another step forward with her strong grip pinning me in place. *I wouldn’t expect any less from the general of the demon tribes.*

I could have used my abilities to escape her discreetly, but she was starting to get on my nerves.

“I told you I had more people to treat, didn’t I?” I snapped.

“If I let you go on your own, the same thing will happen. I’ll come with you,” she stated before turning to look behind her. “Adelheid.”

“Y-yes!”

“I have something to teach you too... It looks like you still can’t use your excess mana properly. Considering the state in which Mr. Hero put himself, it might be better for you to learn that skill.”

“By ‘that skill’, you mean...”

“Indeed. I’m going to teach you Mana Transfer.”

From what Asta-san was saying, it sounded like Adel had more mana in stock than I did. I supposed it wasn’t all that strange since she had inherited the characteristics of the vampires of old.

Still... For the transfer method to be a kiss... Isn’t that a bit much?

Adel was bright red. For some reason, Akiha who was still standing next to her was just as flush.

“Learning Mana Transfer will definitely be of use in the future,” Asta-san continued. “Luckily, Mr. Hero here has more than ten times the amount of mana a regular person has. You don’t have to worry about transferring too much at once and turning him into an invalid.”

“I would be very thankful for the lesson but... Hang on. Lady Asta, Mana Transfer can be activated by simply touching someone’s hand, can’t it?!”

What the hell? She didn’t even need to kiss me, did she? I mean... Being kissed by a beautiful woman did feel good, but what was she thinking stealing a kiss from me right in front of Akiha and Adel?!

Be as it may, Adel is speaking to her awfully politely. She must be quite the big shot.

“Tee-hee! I couldn’t help myself—he just looked so tasty. You’ll forgive me, right?”

Don’t “tee-hee” me! What do you mean by “tasty”? Are you a succubus or

what?

"You never change, Lady Asta, do you?" Adel said with a sigh. "Mana Transfer is a secret ritual of the demon tribes. Are you sure it's all right for me to learn it?"

"It only became a secret ritual because barely anyone can master it. I know for a fact you can handle it, Adelheid. I'm sure the elders won't complain even if I teach you."

"If you're truly certain...I gladly accept."

"It's no problem. Mr. Hero—"

"Could you please stop referring to me like that? It's so embarrassing. Please call me Masaki," I cut in.

"Is that so?" She laughed. "I'll show you how it works by restoring his mana. I'm sure you won't have any issue with this, Sir Masaki."

"Of course not. There are still so many people to heal."

I then proceeded to go around healing people with Adel, Asta-san, and, for some reason, Akiha, in tow.

Mana Transfer was truly a big help. Since the two of them had tremendous mana reserves, we were able to heal groups of people one after the other.

At first, Adel struggled a little, but Asta-san was a great teacher and she was soon able to transfer her mana to me without any issue.

If pressing a hand to my back was all it took, I really wish she had done that from the start, though.

"Area Heal!" I chanted before turning to Akiha. "By the way, why are you on this side of the battlefield, Akiha??"

"Me? Well, I can summon First Aid Kits, so I tried to keep people alive until you could come for them. I thought we would be able to save more people if I started from the opposite direction."

So that's why there were fewer people on the verge of death around here.

It made sense for an FPS player to have access to emergency kits. Thanks to

her, more people had been saved.

“I see. Thank you. I struggled a lot being the only one who could use healing magic. Adel, Akiha, Asta, the three of you helped me a lot.”

There was a limit to what someone could accomplish alone. I was no exception, even with my GM powers.

Being able to use Invincibility and magic didn’t mean I could save everyone. If anything, the most difficult part of today wasn’t the fighting, it was helping and healing people.

Thanks to everyone’s efforts, we were able to keep the death toll as low as possible. But even so, some lives couldn’t be saved.

War is truly horrible... This needs to end.

Chapter 2

After doing my part to treat the wounded, I was finally able to catch a break and decided to try out the latest skill I had learned: Skill Fusion. Saying it this way made it sound like it was something I'd been taught... *It might be more accurate to say I had an epiphany.*

Anyway, it was time to give it a try.

My MP consumption rate had long been an issue for me, so I selected MP Recovery (Low) and MP Recovery (Medium) before activating Skill Fusion.

——MP Recovery (Low) + MP Recovery (Medium) = MP Recovery (High). Will you proceed with the fusion?——

A message went through my mind and when I checked the chat log, I noticed it had been written there too.

You bet I'm gonna say yes.

——Skill Fusion has been activated. MP Recovery (Low) and MP Recovery (Medium) have combined. You have learned MP Recovery (High).——

I immediately checked my skill list. MP Recovery (Low) and MP Recovery (Medium) had both disappeared, replaced by MP Recovery (High).

I should struggle a little less with my MP now.

I wanted to do the exact same with the low and medium versions of HP & MP Recovery, but as soon as I tried to activate the skill, a pop-up appeared warning me that I had to wait twelve hours first.

Looks like there's a cooldown. I resolved to try again later to get the high version of HP & MP Recovery too.

Over the next couple of days, I gradually combined skills while the higher-ups were busy reorganizing the army to prepare for our march on the empire. As for

our prisoners of war, they were made to rebuild the city of Lurf.

After everything that had transpired, some of the empire's soldiers requested to join the kingdom's army. They were either assigned to units that lacked manpower or to Hayato's unit. There were talks about putting some of them under Jirou's command, but since his men handled reconnaissance missions and dealt with intelligence and espionage, it was deemed to be too risky.

It would have been of great help if Tatsuma had decided to join us too, but he repeatedly said that he had no such intentions. For the time being, he was put under house arrest in a fancy residence prepared for important guests. Not that it made much sense to detain him since he could most likely escape whenever he so wished...

After three days of waiting, Jirou informed me that the army's reorganization would take some more time so I decided to visit Youko. She was still suffering from the drawbacks of exhausting all of her mana at once.

She'd used it all to repair her golems, which now consisted of not only Gigant Golem and the dummy golem but also her new giant robot, Exmizer. As a result, she was bedridden and hadn't stepped out of the field hospital in the past few days.

Adel had been transferring mana to her, but every single time, Youko used it all up in a matter of seconds and returned to her sickly state.

According to the military doctor, it was a textbook case of continuous mana exhaustion, and there was nothing else to do but wait for her body to recover naturally.

"Uugh..." Youko whined, her fox ears and tail drooping.

She seemed to be in more pain than I had expected.

I had been through mana exhaustion quite a few times myself, and I knew how awful it felt, but having to deal with it for several days in a row must have taken quite the toll on her mind and body.

"Youko, how are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

"Not so good... I'm sorry. I wish I could have helped you heal... As for what I

need... A hug would be nice," she answered.

If a hug is all she wants, I'm happy to deliver.

"Of course," I said. "And don't worry. You've done more than enough in the battle. Thanks to you, Chogokin barely caused any damage. You did great."

"He he." She sounded pleased.

I embraced her as gently as I could and she looked up at me. She was a little bashful, a soft blush covering her cheeks.

I was also having a wonderful time, feeling the softness of her feminine body in my arms. We were so close that I could smell her scent. I felt myself relax. The exhausting work of the past few days had tired me out more than I had thought.

While they weren't as large as Adel's, I could also feel her two shapely mounds against my chest.

"Thank you!" she said with a little giggle. "I feel a little better now."

"I'm glad. Get a lot of rest, all right?"

"Yeeees."

I petted her head until she fell asleep. A fond expression showed on my face as I watched her sleep. Her blond hair was silky smooth, and threading my fingers through the strands felt amazing.

I stroked her hair slowly and she soon settled into a peaceful sleep, breathing in and out softly. I exited the room as quietly as possible to avoid disrupting her rest.

Sleep tight, Youko.

The moment I stepped out of the field hospital, I heard a commotion. Something must have happened.

I started heading toward the prince's quarters. On the way, Paddle contacted me through Telepathy.

<Milord! Milord, can you hear me?! Something terrible has happened!>

<I can hear you just fine,> I answered. <Calm down and explain. What's going

on?>

Paddle, the ever-calm older brother was panicking. Something big must have happened over there too.

<We were asked by Count Alan to go keep an eye on the empire's movements at sea so we approached their coast alongside a kingdom warship. The thing is...hundreds of fishing boats, merchant vessels, and warships are sailing away from the capital at full speed!>

If it were just the warships, we could assume they were heading into battle, but it didn't make sense for civilian ships to follow.

<Even their gigantic frigates sped off without paying us any mind. We thought it was incredibly strange, so we looked in the direction of the imperial capital with the telescope we borrowed from Count Alan and...the whole city is overrun by thorns! There was even this enormous tree I'd never seen before in place of the castle and weird plant monsters skulking about! They were attacking both the soldiers and the citizens!>

<Did you say an enormous tree?> I exclaimed.

I was immediately reminded of Barry. After all, his body was made out of a tree-like matter. The situation in the empire appeared to be dire.

<I'm guessing the commotion here is related to that,> I continued. <Keep watch from the sea. Try to get as close as possible, but don't put yourself in danger. If the monsters reach the shore, flee at once!>

<Got it! I'll relay everything to the Boss too. And don't worry, we'll try to save as many refugees as we can while we're at it!>

He understood my thinking without me saying it. Having such talented subordinates was a blessing, and I resolved to take good care of them in the future too.

<Good. I'll have to cut our talk short for now,> I said. <Just a reminder, but don't overdo it, okay? I couldn't bear to lose precious comrades.>

<Aye, aye! We know that!> Paddle said before cutting the telepathic communication.

I rushed to the headquarters.

Prince Leon was already there, and Hayato, Adel, and Jirou were sitting next to him. Asta-san and the general of the allied forces—whose name I still did not know—were also present, along with Tatsuma who was restrained with handcuffs.

Prince Leon was busy listening to a report, but when he saw me come in, he stood up immediately.

“There you are, Masaki. I was about to have someone get you. Something terrible seems to have happened in the empire.”

“Paddle contacted me through Telepathy to let me know. According to him, an enormous tree grew where the castle stood, and monsters are roaming the streets. Ships are fleeing the empire by the dozen as we speak.”

“Is this true?!” Tatsuma all but screamed, jumping up from his chair as his face tensed up.

“Yes, my subordinates witnessed all of this a few moments ago,” I answered before turning back to the prince. “What did you hear?”

“Roughly the same. I sent scouts to the imperial capital, but our communication was cut off after they’d made their report.”

Paddle and the others were at sea, so they were still fine, but the scouts within the city had most likely already fallen prey to the monsters. I had no doubt the prince had sent furtive and swift people, but this was too sudden. They wouldn’t have had time to flee.

“Tatsuma, I must ask about that ‘enormous tree,’” the prince inquired. “Had you heard anything about the emperor growing something like that?”

“No. There were regular trees around the castle but nothing like this,” Tatsuma answered. His response was very matter-of-fact, his tone even.

He was trying to appear uninterested, but I could see he was itching to know more. Had he not been captured, I had a feeling he would be rushing back to the empire this very second. I had nothing but bad memories in the capital, but there seemed to be something Tatsuma treasured there.

“We won’t figure anything out by chatting here. The army isn’t ready to

mobilize, so we should assemble a small force, and see what is happening for ourselves," Jirou offered.

We all agreed. The situation there seemed to be just as dire as what had happened in Lurf.

And here I thought we were finally done with the empire... We're anything but finished, huh?

We had to pick people who could depart right away, so Adel, the prince, and I were obvious candidates. Prince Leon could take along two more people on his dragon, and we decided on Hayato and Tatsuma.

Jirou, Asta-san, and the general would stay here to finish reorganizing the army before their march to the capital.

I was a bit worried about taking Tatsuma along, so I went to ask Hayato about it.

"He's in love with the princess of the empire, you see. He's refused to leave the empire all this time, and now that the capital's in danger, he fears for her. There's no need to worry, he won't betray us. I can vouch for that."

"Quit it, Hayato! None of that's relevant right now!" Tatsuma interjected.

I see. He's head over heels for the princess. Now I get why he's so restless.

Since there was no risk of a Wei General betrayal, I was fine with bringing him along. On the other hand, taking Youko was out of the question. I felt bad for leaving her behind, but it was more important that she rest.

I recruited Haruka for her plant expertise, and Akiha's long-range attacks and heavy weapons would definitely come in handy too. The issue was that my mobility would suffer if I tried to move around while carrying one of them. Prince Leon's dragon couldn't take any more people either.

This was something I didn't want everyone finding out about, but I don't have a choice.

"Prince Leon, I've kept quiet about it until now but I have a... How do I put it... A special way? I have a special way of transporting people. If we use my method, we can let the dragon preserve its strength, and we'll even arrive

faster.”

As I started explaining, everyone stared at me dumbfounded. But it didn’t take long for them to agree with my method after I showed them how it worked. There was a limit to how many people I could transport this way, but considering the size of our force, it wouldn’t be an issue. We had no time to lose.

“Masaki, can I have a word?” Asta-san stopped me right as we were getting ready to head off. “I have an ally in the empire. If you can meet up with him, I’m sure he’ll be of great help to you.”

“An ally? Do you think he’s still alive even with...everything that’s going on?”

“He contacted me a short while ago, so he’s definitely alive. He seems to have been wounded, but you should be able to heal him. He’s an otherworlder, just like you. A little peculiar, but I can guarantee he’s a very skilled man.”

“An otherworlder... Could you tell me his name?”

“You must have heard of him. He’s called Shou Sakakiyama. He’s better known as Shou, the Machine Beasts Tamer.”

She’s talking about Shou?!

“He’s been doing a lot of work for me. I even recruited him as a mercenary to participate in the war. You may not be aware of this, but some otherworlders are not affiliated with any country. Instead, they sell their services as mercenaries or become adventurers. There aren’t that many of them, though,” she explained.

I hadn’t thought about it, but I guess everyone has their own circumstances. I wonder if I’ll meet them eventually... Whatever, I’ll think about that later.

“I sent him to the imperial castle to ensure the war wouldn’t drag on, but the timing ended up being rather poor, and he was dragged into this mess. If anyone knows what’s happening there, it’s him.”

“I see... Then talking to him first should help us sort things out. Got it.”

“Oh my. I thought you might have issues meeting with him after having battled once before.”

“I’m not sure how to explain it, but...I guess it’s just a feeling I have. Back when we fought, he never tried to attack the prisoners. He didn’t seem like a bad guy.”

Though he stole everything of value aboard the ship!

Even though Shou was able to summon beasts, he didn’t lay a hand on the pirates and only used one chimera against me. Even assuming he might have some sort of limit to the number of beasts he could summon, he clearly looked like he was taking it easy the whole time.

He also seemed to take good care of his summons and had worriedly rushed to save Colona when she was in trouble.

“A feeling, you say?” Asta-san said with a little laugh. “We share the same sentiment. Well then, Masaki, please take care of my friend.”

She bowed her head.

Hang on, hang on. You’re definitely an important person within the demon tribes, aren’t you?! Even if no one else’s looking, you can’t lower your head so easily! But...I guess Shou is just that important to her.

“Got it. Please wait for the good news. I’ll be off, then,” I said, returning her bow before hurrying to join the prince and the others.

I rearranged my skills as I flew alongside Prince Leon’s dragon. My picks this time included new skills I had obtained thanks to Skill Fusion.

Passive skills: Magic Boost (High), MP Recovery (High), HP & MP Recovery (High), Martial God Principle, Heightened Senses (High).

Active skills: Triple Impact, Drill Banger, Oversword, Thousand Dust of the Six Realms, Drill Banger Impact.

Triple Impact involved a series of three thrusts. With that effect, it was nothing more than an ordinary attack skill. However, after using Skill Fusion to combine it with Drill Banger—a skill that allowed the user to deal damage that ignored the target’s defense stat—I obtained Drill Banger Impact.

After facing strong foeslike the Leviathan and Barry, I had seen the limits of Oversword.With Drill Banger Impact, sturdy scales and armor would be obstacles no more, and I'd be able to thrust my blade deep enough into my enemies without worry.

I had tried it out on the robust monsters that lived in the area, the great barrier golems. As expected, I had easily pierced their defenses and was able to open up holes in their bodies in spite of the magic-imbued iron ore that covered them.

The barrier that protected these golems was said to be sturdier than even mithril so piercing it that easily had been a little anticlimactic. However, it also meant that even if more foes like Barry showed up, I'd be able to get rid of them quickly.

Now that I'm done with that, let's speed up a little.

The prince and I were flying toward the imperial capital at full speed. After a few hours, we reached the sea, and shortly after, the castle town—which I had once observed from the window in my jail cell—came into view. Neither the city nor the castle were anything like I reembered, though.

A gigantic tree stood in place of the castle, and strange plants were spreading, invading every corner of the city. The ramparts were covered in thorns and had become more greenery than stone at this point. The thorny vines had even spread to the trees. They were entangled around them like mistletoe.

I noticed monsters fighting each other. On one side were strange monsters made out of thorns, just like Paddle had said. On the other were...kobolds with dog heads.

"Even the high kobolds are struggling. There are too many of them," I heard the prince whisper to himself as we flew.

High kobolds were strong monsters. A party of moderately strong adventurers would have trouble fighting a group of them. However, there were just too many of the thorny creatures for roughly a hundred kobolds to handle—they were so numerous that they filled the city streets in every direction.

I tried appraising one of them and learned they were called “fake humes.” According to the explanation, these fake humes were humans who had been corrupted by evil thorns. The ones shaped like beasts were “fake beasts,” and those that looked like beastmen were called “fake werebeasts.”

All in all, the monsters created by the corrupted thorns were all called “fake” something. If I had to classify them into one group and name it, I’d probably just go with something like “the fakes.”

While the high kobolds were holding their own, defeating thorny monsters one after the other, but there was no end to them. The kobolds were gradually being pushed back.

I raised my hand in the direction of the Fakes. I took some time to picture what I wanted to create before unleashing a guided Flame Javelin.

It exploded right above them, and fire rained down upon the thorny creatures.

I had focused on the image of a fragmentation grenade before sending out my javelin. If I dared say so myself, my experiment was a success.

The fire quickly spread from one thorny monster to the next. The Fakes were clearly at a loss and had stopped in their tracks, confused by the fire that spread as it consumed their bodies.

The high kobolds didn’t seem to understand what had happened either, but that didn’t stop them from picking themselves up and launching another offensive while the enemy was distracted.

With a group of the Fakes burning, the kobolds soon found a way out of the encircling net. Some were even using my flames in their own battles.

That should help them, I thought. Now the outcome of the fight would depend on their tenacity.

“Magic, or more specifically, fire magic seems to work on them,” I said. “They’re not regenerating either.”

“That’s good,” the prince answered. “We’re getting closer to the city gates. Let’s see if we can find a clear landing spot with no enemies around.”

“Understood.”

Thankfully, the prince hadn’t complained about me helping monsters out.

I noticed a small kobold child among the group. As they were chased by the grim monsters, it clung to what I assumed was its mother, trembling in fear.

I assumed people would think of me as a hypocrite for trying to save monsters, but I didn’t regret lending them a hand. *I hope they manage to survive with their own strength from now on.*

The prince and I found a place with only a few enemies around and promptly took care of them with the dragon’s fire breath and my guided fragmentation javelins. Once we were sure the area was secure, I materialized a door to my Room.

“Glad to see we have finally arrived,” Adel said, as she stepped out of the door.

The Kisaragi sisters, Hayato, and Tatsuma followed from behind her.

The secret method I used this time was...my Room. No matter where you entered from, its inside was always the same. This meant that if I opened my Room again after reaching my destination, the people inside could simply exit there. This trick allowed me to transport groups of people from one place to another.

On top of that, they would not be tired out by the trip and could fight in top condition.

“Haruka. We can see the tree from here. Do you have any idea what it is?”

“Hmm... Let me see... I’d need samples—” She cleared her throat. “To put it simply, I’d need information on these plant monsters. The only thing I can say for sure is that none of this is natural.”

Haruka... I’m pretty sure we had all figured out it was no normal tree considering it had pierced through the castle.

While she still spoke with her usual leisurely tone, her face showed hints of worry.

“You need samples, huh? Don’t worry about that—they’re coming to us themselves. Let’s head inside the city and deal with them as we go!” I said, as I noticed dozens of enemy marks gradually getting closer to us on my map.

If we stayed put, we’d get encircled in no time. And we had to get closer to the center of the city to look for Shou.

We reached the castle town gate, and my whole map appeared red with an overwhelming number of enemies swarming around.

I guess this means there’s no risk I’ll accidentally hit a civilian. I’ll just open up the way in one go!

“I’ll open up a path!” I exclaimed. “Thousand Dust of the Six Realms!”

Hundreds of aura weapons started floating around me. They were all released at the same, flying toward the monsters like hundreds of arrows, piercing so many holes through the enemies that they ended up disappearing entirely.

If I had just killed them normally, we would have had to deal with their corpses covering the floor. This made everything easier.

Tatsuma and Hayato—together, our vanguard—advanced first, making use of the path I’d created. Haruka, Adel, and I were next, while Prince Leon, his dragon, and Akiha acted as our rearguard.

We had decided to put Haruka in the middle of our formation with Adel and I—who could handle both close-quarters and ranged combat—on each side. Haruka was a very talented person, but she had been summoned from a farming MMO. If we treated her the same way as the other fighters, she’d be in great danger.

We stepped into the castle town in formation and soon noticed that everything had been overrun by thorny vines. Dozens of monsters were roaming around the main street. As soon as they noticed us, they lunged.

“Damn nuisances! Get out of my way!”

“RAAAAAAAAA!!!”

In the blink of an eye, the two members of our vanguard had sent roughly a

dozen monsters quite literally flying. Some tried to approach us from behind, but the prince sliced the fake humes in two while Akiha fired her shotgun to blow away a large group with a single shell.

It was my first time witnessing the prince's fighting prowesses. He was incredibly strong. His dragon looked a little despondent, probably disappointed not to get a turn.

"Samples! Samples!" Haruka sang, picking up small segments of vine and stuffing them into test tubes as we walked.

"Onee-chan... We're fighting here," Akiha sighed.

After collecting each sample, Haruka placed the test tubes in her small pouch. Although unassuming, it worked as her inventory. I remembered seeing her take a trolley out of it once. I freaked out.

I left the fighting to my comrades and focused on searching for both survivors and Shou on my map. I wasn't the only one who could use this sort of map, but I was almost certain mine was the most precise.

After staring at it for a while, I noticed two yellow marks in a back alley among the sea of red. *Survivors!*

"Hayato! Tatsuma! Head round that corner!" I pointed. "There are survivors in that alley!"

"Got it!" they both exclaimed.

Even though they tried to get there quickly, there were too many enemies on the way, and I could see the ocean of red marks closing in on the two survivors. *We need to hurry or...*

"Water Dragon Invocation!"

Gathering magic while running was no easy feat, but I had gotten used to it during the previous battle. I concentrated the water I needed in my right hand and pushed forward before unleashing a water dragon from my outstretched arm. The monsters standing in my way were annihilated on the spot.

Thanks to my attack, the path through to the back alley was now completely clear. I hurried over and found a small child in the arms of what I assumed was

his mother. The moment I stepped into the alley, a wolf-shaped fake beast lunged at them.

I won't make it!

"Masaki-san! I'm borrowing your back!"

"What?! Hey!"

I suddenly felt something bounce off my back. I turned to see what had happened and saw Akiha in the air. She had used me as a springboard.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Three bullets later, and the head of the fake beast rolled down. Its body disappeared soon after.

I hadn't been able to save them myself. At such a short range, I was worried they'd be harmed if I used a skill or a spell.

I knew taking her along was a good idea.

"Are you all right? Are you hu— I see you hurt your leg. Is your child all right?"

"They're fine! Thank you so much... I thought we wouldn't make it..."

Since the lady was hurt, it was my turn to help. I figured Light Heal, a minor healing spell, would be more than enough to deal with a little scratch like this.

I put my hand over her leg and cast the spell, healing her wound without leaving a scar.

The woman was surprised for a moment but jumped to her feet and bowed enthusiastically.

"You even healed me! I can't thank you enough! I'm sure our meeting was ordained by Lord Yggdrasil himself."

"Yggdrasil?"

The legendary World Tree Yggdrasil came up in plenty of fantasy RPGs and novels back in my old world. Do they also have that here?

Tatsuma, the most knowledgeable among us when it came to the empire's customs, stepped up to answer me. Apparently, Yggdrasil was the name of a

religion that originated in this continent before spreading all over the world. It also had followers in the Sentdrag Kingdom.

Naturally, the god they revered was Yggdrasil, the World Tree. They believed the divine tree was located in a faraway land and pierced through the clouds, reaching all the way to the heavens.

While some religions might have worrisome connections with politics, Yggdrasil had no such ties whatsoever. In an attempt to be accepted, they even made great monetary contributions to the countries in which the churches were established.

Apparently, they weren't all that big on proselytism. Believers were free to join or leave at any point. All in all, the religion was only moderately popular among nobles and commoners alike.

"There's a church of Yggdrasil in the imperial capital. She must be a believer."

"I am," the woman confirmed. "The church put up a barrier, so we hoped to take refuge there, but...we were attacked by those monsters on the way."

A barrier, huh? I wonder if it held up with so many monsters around.

I zoomed out my map and there was indeed an area in which not a single monster mark appeared. Instead, plenty of yellow marks were packed in there. *This must be the church of Yggdrasil.*

"I just checked on my map, and it looks like the church is still safe. Let's drop these two at the church before we head on our way."

As we made our way toward the church, we stumbled upon several survivors who had been too slow to flee the city. We didn't have the time to waste, but it didn't mean we could just ignore them either.

Among the people we rescued were a general and his soldiers. Thanks to them, our small force became even stronger.

They had noticed the crest of the Sentdrag royal family on Prince Leon's armor and while they were cautious at first, Tatsuma's intervention—and the capital being overrun—was enough to convince them to point their swords at the monsters instead.

Soon, we had a group of ten regular citizens and five soldiers following us around. The soldiers worked in pairs and helped slaughter monsters as we advanced. Despite our growing force, our pace was barely impacted.

When we were enemies, I hadn't given much thought to fighting them, but now I realized imperial soldiers were very competent.

We finally reached the church and came face to face with a young girl.

"Why did you leave the barrier?! You'll get attacked if you stay here!" Tatsuma yelled, running up to her.

As for me, I immediately recognized her.

"Colona?!"

Does that mean Shou's here too?

"Masaki, do you know her?"

"Yeah. We had a little bout in the past, but...I'm pretty sure we can trust her."

It was hard to let go of my apprehensions, but since Asta-san had vouched for them, I was fairly certain Shou and Colona could be trusted. Asta-san and Adel seemed close. I doubted she'd try to trick us while we were already in such a dire situation.

"Thank you for your trust," Colona said with a cold mechanical tone. "I assume that the people behind you are...the reinforcements Lady Asta spoke of. My lord is waiting for you inside the church, along with the survivors. Please help him, Lord Masaki."

Her last line sounded more sincere, and I could tell how worried she was about Shou.

We stepped into the church and saw the many wounded either lying down on the floor or leaning against the walls. Those who were uninjured also looked to be exhausted, and their faces were gloomy.

The sisters were running around, bringing water and medicine to the patients, but they were unable to keep up with the sheer demand.

“Colona, give me a few minutes,” I asked.

“All right. Understood.”

I replaced my sword with the Rod of Aleclepius. “Area Heal,” I chanted.

My spell covered a large area, and voices immediately erupted all around.

“Oh! My wound!”

“How...? How am I alive?!”

It looked like some people were on the verge of death. *I’m glad I made it in time.*

“Sorry for the wait, Colona.”

“Losing a few minutes is not a problem. My lord is waiting in this room,” she answered, as she led me toward a room in the back.

I wasn’t sure bringing everyone along was a good idea, so I decided to take Akiha, since she could use emergency kits, as well as Adel and Tatsuma—who was intent on learning if anything had happened to the princess.

The prince, Haruka, and Hayato stayed in the nave of the church and distributed potions and Haruka’s special fruits to the people we had picked up along the way. They were also in charge of asking around for information.

Meanwhile, we pushed open the door of the small room. Inside was a man dressed in a black and blue robe lying down in bed, a bandage tightly wrapped around his chest.

As soon as he noticed us, Sakakiyama Shou laughed heartily and waved.

“Yo. Sorry for showing you this sorry sight. I see you made it all the way to the Sentdrag Kingdom in one piece.”

“I...can’t say the same about you, can I?”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t say so either. For a very good reason, though. Would you leave a cute maid to be chased by monsters? I can’t.”

“So you got hurt protecting that maid?”

“More or less. I had to live up to my name, you know. Anyway, Mr. Hero! I

know you've been hanging in the kingdom these days, but you have to tell me where you found such pretty girlfriends. Two of them at that!"

Two? He's not wrong about Adel, but Akiha and I aren't in that sort of relationship...

I looked behind me and saw that Adel was blushing. As for Akiha, she...had turned around completely? Did Shou's comment piss her off? *Urgh. I'll have to make it up to her later.*

"That aside, let's get to healing you. In return, I want you to tell us what happened in the castle."

"Sounds good to me."

"All right. Stay still for a second..." I raised the Rod of Aleclepius in the direction of Shou and chanted, "High Heal."

His entire body was enveloped with a faint glow. As the light dissipated, Shou pulled on his bandage, removing it to check the state of his wound. There wasn't a single cut left.

"Wow! Talk about impressive! You even got rid of my old scars. Well, I guess it's story time."

After being summoned into this world, Shou worked as both a mercenary and an adventurer for a long while in order to earn money. During that time, he traveled a lot. That's when he met Asta-san and, believe it or not, he even got acquainted with the demon tribes' leader, the Demon King.

How cool is that?

But I was surprised to find that the Demon King was just some old lech who tried to touch Colona's butt while they talked. He writhed in pain when Colona pinched his hand.

The Demon King had met with Shou to ask him about the empire's frequent summonings. It was Asta-san who sent him to investigate.

"I have to thank you, Masaki. With your destroying fleets and taking strongholds left and right, the empire was constantly dispatching soldiers. It

made it easy for me to infiltrate their ranks. Once I was successfully undercover, I planned to protect the princess, take the emperor captive, and escape, but...”

“This whole mess caught you off guard.”

“Exactly.”

“Shou, what exactly happened inside the castle?” Tatsuma had stayed quiet until now, but he cut in now, his voice serious and impatient.

“Ah, this is our first meeting, is it not, Tatsuma? Sure, I’ll tell you. All this time, the ringleader was Iiro. The prime minister of the Granfang Empire.”

“Iiro! That bastard!

“You probably already know how...interested Iiro was in the princess, don’t you, Tatsuma?”

“Yeah. Princess Philia told me time and time again how bothered she was by his constant attempts to get close to her.”

“That bastard’s almost forty. Twenty-five years older than the princess. Damn *lolicon*.”

Yikes... Definitely a lolicon*. And not even a gentlemanly one.*

Adel let out a sigh, and Akiha was very visibly disgusted.

“A bit of an age difference could still make sense in a marriage of convenience,” I remarked, “but...a fifteen-year-old and a forty-year-old is definitely pushing it. Iiro isn’t an elf or a dwarf, is he? Just a regular human with a regular lifespan, right, Tatsuma?”

“He is. Races with long lifespans can’t become imperial ministers anyway. Beastmen can serve as generals and be awarded land, but that’s about it.”

“Oh my, how unexpected. Since they imprisoned so many beastmen, I was under the impression that the empire discriminated against other races.”

“Not really, no. They use anyone who is willing to serve the emperor. As long as they can be useful to him, beastmen, elves, or any other race are welcome. Radicals like Barry are usually shunned, even in the empire.”

That made sense. Now that I thought about it, there were a few beastmen

and mixed-race people here in the church.

“Getting back to the topic at hand, Iiro could never have pulled this off alone, even with the important position he held within the empire. He had to get help from somewhere. And those people are incredibly hard to deal with,” Shou explained.

He usually spoke with such a frivolous tone, but it was nowhere to be found now. He wore a grave expression on his face.

“Iiro has links with a mysterious organization called “Pavaria.” Their members are unknown, as is their goal. I guess you can picture them as some sort of secret society. I’ve fought them in the past, and a whole country ended up disappearing.”

“A whole country...”

That Iiro guy is linked to some crazy organization! For a whole country to be wiped off the map... It’s almost unheard of, even during wartime.

In fact, the only example I could think of in this world was the Valentine Empire, the land of vampires. The empire’s other victims had all been turned into vassal states instead.

“Well, all this could end up with the empire falling off the maps as well,” Shou continued. “But there’s still things we can do to prevent that.”

“Does that mean you have a plan in mind?”

“I do. It’s quite simple—we need to get rid of the source of those thorns. Colona, show us the data.”

“At once.”

With a clicking noise, Colona, who had been standing quietly next to Shou this whole time suddenly projected images into midair from out of nowhere.

“What is this?!” Adel exclaimed.

The other otherworlders and I weren’t too surprised by Colona’s display—they more or less looked like the status or equipment interfaces we were able to open at will, but Adel had never seen anything like it.

“According to my analysis, the source of the thorn corrosion spreading through the city is the seed was planted inside Princess Philia,” Colona stated.

“Inside Philia?!” Tatsuma roared, jumping off his chair and sending it flying back. Colona’s discovery had come as a shock to him.

“Tatsuma, calm down. Colona, please continue.” I understood how he must have felt after learning that the person he loved was in grave danger, but, for now, the most important thing was that Shou and Colona finish explaining.

“Yes. The seed in question contains a very powerful curse. According to my analysis, it will gradually transform the body of its host into a plant. I will refer to this process as ‘plantification’ henceforth. The seed also houses colossal reserves of mana, and it feeds off its host to replenish its reserves. It also has the power to control other beings by turning them into its familiars. There are two ways of saving Princess Philia. The first is to forcefully remove the seed from her body. The second is to cleanse the curse. If we stop the plantification, then we should be able to damage the seed.”

“To put it in a nutshell, we have to mess up the villain and rescue the princess —just like a fairy tale. Pretty straightforward, right?” Shou concluded.

When you put it that way, it does sound straightforward enough. I like that.

“The only issue is...there’s a magic canceler underground. We weren’t able to finish breaking the curse because of that.”

We could always invade from the sky and get the jump on them. But...that wouldn’t work, huh?

We had no other choice but to infiltrate the castle the normal way. I used the word “infiltrate,” but, to be honest, I doubted we’d be all that sneaky going through the front door.

“Shou, Tatsuma, I have a question. Do you know if there’s a place within the castle that’s outside the range of the magic canceler? It must be possible to use magic *somewhere*, right?”

If using magic was really out of the question, we’d just have to push through with brute force.

“The infirmary. I’ve seen people use healing magic there in the past,” Tatsuma answered.

“Colona, do you know anything about that?” Shou asked.

“Lord Tatsuma is right. There’s a narrow area within the infirmary where magic can be used. A magic item nullifies the powers of the magic canceler.”

“Tell me the exact place, then. I’ll turn invisible and fly all the way there.”

“I’ll explain,” Tatsuma said as he stepped up. “To think that you can even turn invisible, though... As a former adversary, I must say you’re getting scarier and scarier. I’m glad to have you as an ally right now.”

“I know, right?! I thought I wouldn’t make it when I fought him last time,” Shou said with a sigh. “He easily destroyed whole ships and even defeated Colona. She’s my strongest weapon, you know?”

“I try not to overuse my abilities when I can help it, though...” I said.

Showing off my over-the-top powers would only invite trouble. If everyone knew I could render any attack useless, use any spell in the book, and easily take topple countries all by myself, they’d consider me a danger to society.

If I played my cards wrong...the whole world could very well turn against me.

I thought back to games, manga, and novels where the plot revolved around a protagonist so strong that people strived to take them down. They’d be betrayed time and time again, suffer assassination attempts, and lose people they held dear until, eventually, they turned to evil and rose again as the Demon King or something. There was even a hero that got driven from his country after defeating the Master of Destruction.

I didn’t want to become an enemy of the people nor did I want to lose my comrades. That’s why I made a point of keeping Invincibility a secret and always pretended to be guarding against attacks.

I won’t let my loved ones be hurt because of me...

“I understand. I truly do. But I really need your help, Masaki. In exchange, I swear on my honor as the Wei General that I will keep quiet about your powers.”

“Got it. I’ll trust you on that. I know the princess is dear to you. I’ll get her out.”

“I can see how sincere you are. I will also do what I can to save her,” Adel offered.

“Asta asked me to help, so I can’t very well give up after one failure,” Shou added. “And...I need to pay those bastards back. Colona!”

“Yes, my lord. I will follow you to the end.”

I explained my plan before heading back to the nave to look for the general we had rescued earlier. After discussing things with him, he told me that he and his men would deal with the monsters in front of the church orphanage and asked me to save the empire.

The prince’s dragon would not fit inside my Room, so Prince Leon left it on the roof to protect the survivors.

When everything was settled, we entered an empty side room and I materialized the door to my Room. I wasn’t too happy about showing this trick to even more people, but it was an emergency.

Shou was a little surprised, but his curiosity soon took over, and he happily went through the door with a hand on Colona’s shoulder.

After confirming that everyone had gone through, I closed the door from the outside. The wall returned to its normal state.

It was time for my second infiltration mission. The objective? Getting rid of the source of the tree and rescuing the princess.

MISSION START!

Chapter 3

After gathering everyone inside my Room, I looked out the window. Monsters were still loitering around. A few tried to enter the church, but a barrier of some sort repelled them back.

The barrier seemed to be fairly sturdy. *Looks like it won't need much protection. If anything, the hardest part will be getting people inside the church from the outside.*

I exited the church through a back door and immediately activated Stealth. While monsters had seen me step out and rushed to attack me, they just looked around restlessly after I turned invisible.

I took off with Wing and noticed that far more monsters than I first assumed were encircling the church.

That's bad news.

Our main army would get here in five days at best, which meant that even if the survivors were able to barricade themselves in the church the whole time, they'd run out of provisions before help arrived. *We were right to rush here immediately.*

I put that on the back burner for now and entered the castle grounds. The thorny vines had spread everywhere. *What a grim spectacle*...

There was nothing left of the beautiful gardens I had once looked upon from my cell. Thorns and vines covered everything. If someone had told me this place was an ancient elven fortress, I would have no reason not to believe them.

All right... I'm supposed to head to the second floor of— Oh, right! The eastern wing. With these vines entwined everywhere, it's hard to locate anything... It should be this window, I think.

I checked the room on my map beforehand. Three enemies were waiting for me.

I can't see the full layout of the castle rooms until I enter, huh? Guess I'll just

smash my way through!

I kicked the window in and climbed through, deactivating Stealth in the process. As soon as they spotted me, the monsters rushed forward. I brought my sword down on the first one, cutting right through it before slashing horizontally through the next one. Their bodies disappeared soon after.

The third was standing a bit further away and fired thorns like one would arrows.

Right before they hit me, I braced myself and...

“Triple Impact!”

Despite the distance that separated us, I thrust my sword forward. The third strike hit the monster, but, perhaps because it was a bit too far, I wasn’t able to deal enough damage and it did not go down.

It was enough to throw it off-balance, though.

I didn’t give it time to recover and thrust my sword once more, piercing its chest.Seven Arthur’s additional damage-over-time kicked in, dealing three extra hits. The monster’s thorny body was minced to pieces and disappeared.

I looked around me to ensure my surroundings were clear before checking my map. There weren’t any enemies in the close vicinity of the room either.

I tried to activate my Room and, as expected, was able to cast the spell without any issues.

Tatsuma was right. Some kind of magic item was preventing the magic canceler from working in the infirmary.

The door flew open and Hayato, Tatsuma, Shou, Colona, Prince Leon, Adel, Akiha, and Haruka exited one by one. With me included, our party of nine was complete.

I had already told everyone that Shou was working closely with Asta-san, the commander of the demon army. Naturally, Shou had agreed to share this information beforehand.

Prince Leon was especially surprised when I broke the news. However, he had heard of Shou’s exploits in the past so he had no qualms about adding him to

the team.

As for Shou, while he had seemed very interested in Haruka's voluptuous breasts, after receiving an intense glare from the prince and an icy stare from Colona, he realized acting on it was a terrible idea and hadn't bothered her. I was amazed that he still had the guts to think about things like that in our current predicament. Rather than amazed, puzzled might be the right word, actually.

Putting that aside, it'd be great if we could find the magic item. If we carried it around, we'd have an easier time dealing with the monsters.

"There's a bunch of trinkets here. Tatsuma, do you know which one of these is blocking the canceler?"

"That one," he said as he pointed at something. "Look, there's a magic circle underneath. But if we move it from the circle, it won't work anymore. I've been told to be very careful not to touch it. You can think of the circle as a battery if it helps... Or, at least, that's how I understood it. I'm no magic item specialist."

The magic circle acts like a battery, huh? Then we can't carry it around... That being said...this thing looks just like a desk lamp. I wonder if they also used it to light the room.

"So if we can't move it," Shou started, "then I guess we have no choice but to get rid of the magic canceler."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Tatsuma, do you have any idea where it may be?"

"It should be underground... But finding the entrance to the basement won't be easy without a map. I got my hands on all kinds of maps during my time here, but the castle layout is basically a state secret."

"Naturally," Prince Leon commented with a nod. "The map to Sentdrag's castle is also very carefully hidden away in a safe."

That made sense. If everyone and their grandma had access to the castle map, the royal family would be in great danger.

However, I could see the entire layout on my map, so...this was probably a good occasion to use one of my Production Skills.

I should have some ink and paper in my inventory... Yeah, I do have enough materials.

"Hang on. I'll use Transcribe, one of my Woodworking Production Skills, to make a map. I have access to the layout of the whole area, so it should work."

"Whoa! Wait a minute!" Shou exclaimed. "How the hell do you have such a precise map?"

"The longer I hang around you, the more crazy abilities you show off..." Tatsuma said with a sigh. "It's no wonder the empire lost after becoming your enemy."

"I have to say my kingdom would be in a difficult position too..." Prince Leon added.

The three of them weren't letting it slide. They weren't wrong, though.

"It just means you should stay on Masaki's good side," Adel interjected. "If Masaki ever leaves the kingdom, I have every intention to follow him. I'm sure Youko will too."

"Don't worry. The people of the kingdom have been very good to me. Unless something huge happens, I won't leave."

I took the opportunity to throw in a little warning. While I was reassuring Prince Leon that I didn't intend to leave, I wanted him to know that I *would* if the kingdom ever did me dirty. He probably got the hint since he nodded several times.

Nevertheless, I was very happy to hear Adel say she'd follow me no matter what.

If worst comes to worst, taking Adel and Youko with me and fleeing toward a peaceful land is an option, huh?

But first, I intended to do whatever I could here. I was almost done using Transcribe.

Transcribe was usually used to copy books or furniture blueprints. Without a blueprint, building furniture with a skill was impossible. This made Transcribe a crucial skill for craftsmen. It was also fairly easy-to-learn with very few

prerequisites, so those who wanted to learn Woodworking skills usually went for this first.

Paper and ink were both expensive resources in Britalia Online, but, in this world, parchment and black ink was circulated widely, and stocking up wasn't really an issue.

"All done," I said once the map had been completed. "So, Tatsuma, where's the magic canceler supposed to be?"

"Around...here." He pointed at a spot on the map. "How the hell did you even get the secret passages down?! Especially this one, here! That one's so secret only the imperial family should know about it!"

Colona pointed at a different pathway. "My lord, this passage is also on the map."

"For real?! You even managed to draw the route we used to infiltrate the castle. It's not even in use anymore."

Oops. I didn't pay attention while the map was being made, but I guess I even got the secret passages down, huh?

My comrades were all dumbfounded by my mysterious achievement. Well, maybe not all of them. Haruka wore her trademark carefree smile and didn't seem all that surprised.

"I have a suggestion. If we use the secret passages to travel through the castle, we should encounter fewer hostile targets," Colona proposed. "How about separating into two teams? One would be in charge of handling the magic canceler while the other prepares to undo the curse. According to my data, if we let the tree feed on Philia for too long, she will be in great danger."

Her proposal made sense. Especially if Philia was running out of time. We had to hurry, especially since the vines had already spread all across the capital. It was only a matter of time before they attacked nearby towns and villages too.

"Then how should we split up our members..." I trailed off as I tried to work out what was best.

"Just saying, but I don't mind if Colona and I aren't on the same team," said

Shou.

“Are you sure?” I asked. “Wouldn’t your invocations get weaker if you aren’t there?”

“Usually they would. But Colona is a special case. The details are our little secret, though. A trade secret.”

“Trade secret”? Are you a company or what? I guess a guy who can summon an entire army by himself could be considered a corporate force.

“I can still give her orders even if we aren’t together,” he added.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll put you two in separate teams, then. Are you okay with that, Colona?”

“Of course, Lord Masaki.”

It really feels weird to have her call me lord, but...I guess it’s still better than having to order her around.

After discussing it further, we decided to split our members as follows:

Top floor team: Me, Colona, Haruka, Tatsuma, and Prince Leon.

Basement team: Adel, Hayato, Akiha, and Shou.

Akiha could heal people to some extent with her emergency kits, so we made sure she wouldn’t be on the same team as me. Adel’s health could regenerate as long as she wasn’t directly under the sunlight. Hayato could also heal himself and specialized in long strenuous fights. As for Shou, he could support them from behind with his array of summons. All in all, it was a team built to endure long battles.

On our side, we had Colona, who was great at fighting but also skilled with curses; Tatsuma, who knew the layout of the castle more than anyone and wanted nothing more than to save the princess; Haruka who was incredibly knowledgeable about plants; and Prince Leon, a powerful fighter who’d do anything to protect Haruka.

I was pretty happy with the teams. We had managed to make them fairly

balanced. While Haruka was no fighter, she was able to grow healing herbs and make herbicide on the spot which made her a reliable asset to our team.

We tried out her herbicide on the thorny monsters, and, to my amazement, they withered away and died in a flash.

There were plenty of enemies remaining on my map, but two large marks stood out. One in the basement and the other on the top floor.

I asked Tatsuma about it, but entering the basement was strictly forbidden for anyone other than the members of the imperial family, and he had no idea what the mark could be. Colona's theory was that a guardian of some sort was hidden there.

You may be wondering why the magic canceler didn't do anything to stop the thorn corrosion. The answer was simple: the thorny vines hadn't been created by a spell.

We finally split up. We slaughtered monsters on our way up while Adel and the others headed down.

There was one thing I hadn't told the others. In the center of the large red mark I had seen on the top floor...was a small yellow heart.

Back when I dealt with issues as a GM, I had decided to set a special heart-shaped mark for queens and princesses. It made them easier to spot when areas got crowded. Kings were always represented by spades.

This particularity had been kept when I crossed over to this world, which meant...that mark was most likely Princess Philia. I'd heard the empress had long since passed away from an illness, so it couldn't be her.

The worst part was that this mark was flickering between red and yellow.

I had an inkling the situation may degenerate quicker than I had expected. I focused on clearing out the monsters in front of me and quickened my pace, hurrying in the direction of the top floor.

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Amid the thorns and vegetation, a single tree stood out. It was so tall that it pierced through the ceiling and extended into the sky, tangled with countless barbed vines and covered in blood-red roses. It was certainly an ominous display.

A young woman was trapped at its center. Philia, the princess of the Granfang Empire, appeared to have become one with the tree, her lower body and both of her hands deeply embedded into it. A remarkably large rose blossomed in full glory on Philia’s chest and gave off a dangerously sweet fragrance.



Next to her, No-Face sat on a large burl, their eyes closed.

“Ah...” Philia moaned weakly, and No Face opened their eyes. A twisted smile crept up on their lips.

“It looks like some very interesting guests have decided to grace us with their presence,” they said with a little laugh. “We have the man who adores you, the Wei General... A little party from the Sentdrag Kingdom and...Shou. So he did survive. These people found their way here quicker than I anticipated. It’s no matter. Thanks to them, I won’t be too bored.”

No Face paid no mind to Philia who continued to moan in pain. They had the ability to spy on Masaki and the others using the vines, and the hooded figure wore a delighted smile as they did. Although a hood covered most of their face and left their features obscured, their mouth was clearly visible. It made them seem even eerier.

No Face observed each intruder one by one, as if to evaluate them. Their gaze went from Adel to Tatsuma, Hayato, Shou, Colona, Akiha, and Haruka...before finally stopping on Masaki.

“Iiro,” they called.

“Yes!” Iiro exclaimed, stepping out from the tree’s shadow.

He had draped himself in clothes reserved for members of the Granfang imperial family. However, the sharp silver vines that were entangled around his body and the red flower that bloomed on his chest—in the same spot as Philia’s—clashed heavily contrasted with the lavish getup. He was intent on proving himself as the new emperor and once he had decided to look the part, he went and rummaged through the emperor’s dressing room.

No Face looked at him with an icy expression, as though they were looking upon the foolish naked emperor from the folktale. As was typical for him, Iiro did not notice anything and brimmed with self-confidence in his new outfit.

Iiro’s obliviousness eventually brought another smile to No Face’s lips.

“A very intriguing fellow is here,” No Face continued. “He’s the one who fought Barry. While he was nothing more than a prototype, he did take the

medicine... I think that man is called Masaki. Were his abilities assessed?”

“No... When he was summoned, we were only able to establish that slave collars did not function on him. However, I have since received reports that he is a swordsman powerful enough to face the Leviathan and is able to fly thanks to some kind of spell. The soldiers of the kingdom say he’s worthy of the title of ‘hero.’”

“A hero, huh? For now, I will go join the Great Admiral. I’ll leave the rest in your hands. Oh, and...feel free to use this *specimen* however you wish,” No Face said, letting a small seed fall to the ground from their sleeve.

The seed cracked and a puff of black smoke seeped through. Before long, it took the shape of a person and stood up. It had crooked horns, claws that looked like small, sharp saws, and a pair of sinister red eyes.

No Face’s demonic being knelt in front of Iiro and lowered its head as if to bow.

“Oh! Is this...?!”

“I’ve squeezed every last bit of information from it already. He’s nothing more than useless leftovers at this point, but he should still be powerful enough,” No Face explained. “His name is Orthrus. Use him well.”

“I will! Thank you very much!”

“If you can defeat them, you will finally be the true ruler of this country. When that happens, the princess will also be yours...in every way you desire,” No Face said before touching the giant tree.

A pitch-dark space appeared beneath their fingers.

His powers are too unstable—I can’t see properly... He may be the real deal. Hee hee hee! I’m sure things will become truly interesting. I thought this country had exhausted its use, but I can use what is left to assess that man, No Face thought, a smile creeping on their face as they disappeared into the darkness.

Iiro was left alone, and he took the opportunity to slowly caress Philia’s soft skin with an ominous smile on his face. The beautiful girl was slowly turning into an unmoving work of art.

“Ha ha ha! How long have I dreamt of becoming the emperor? I bid my time for so long, and finally, the throne is within my grasp... Princess Philia, you too will soon be mine. I’ll shred these intruders to pieces and make them ingredients for the magnificent ceremony that will revive this country!”

Faced with Iiro’s wicked smile, Philia fought her hardest to retain her consciousness. Even as the plants fed on her flesh and fear overwhelmed her, she kept thinking of her most precious person.

I’m sure...he will come...to save me... Lord...Tatsuma... He...promised me...he would become...my...knight...

Philia continued to resist the ominous plants, clutching the treasured scarf tightly in her right hand.

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“RAAAAA!!!” Tatsuma roared as he sent several armored monsters flying.

At first glance, it didn’t seem like he was using a skill, but I felt like I had seen similar moves in the past. He looked just like a character in that one action game series where you blow away hundreds of enemies in a single strike as if they were nothing but leaves.

To think Tatsuma’s from the VRMMO Martial Gods of the Three Kingdoms... *It’s no wonder he’s so strong.*

If I remembered correctly, *Martial Gods of the Three Kingdoms* was a game that put a strong emphasis on equipment and stats. Instead of skills, players were able to unleash special techniques after filling out a gauge.

I’d never played it, simply because I just didn’t have enough time, but I’d seen plenty of ads on TV. Its main selling point was the exhilarating battles between parties of four players and large crowds of enemies. PVP was also very well developed, and there were even national tournaments.

Tatsuma was troublesome to face as an enemy, but having him as an ally was reassuring.

I used my Black Crossbow to strike down the thorny monsters that crept up the walls and ceiling as we moved forward. It was a weapon made from black

Damascus steel, and I'd kept it in my Room ever since I easily earned it from a boss fight.

I tried using Drill Banger with the crossbow, and the bolt flew right through my target, lodging itself deep into the wall. The skill seemed to work almost as well as it did with a sword. My attacks had a little less power, but the crossbow's versatility allowed me to fight from the rear.

Tatsuma and Prince Leon were our vanguards, Haruka was in the middle, and Colona and I made up the rearguard.

At first, I had been a bit worried about Haruka and wondered whether she'd be able to keep up with our speed, but she had done an amazing job so far. When I asked her about it, she told me she was wearing special shoes that allowed her to walk three times as fast.

Her equipment puts RPG items to shame. You go, farmer!

The main reason why I had been put at the back was that I had to divide my attention between my map and what was in front of me. If I wanted to use the map and system messages to their utmost, I just had to dedicate a part of my attention to them.

A few monsters crept up on the ceiling in an attempt to surprise us from behind, but Colona responded in a split second by raising her Gatling gun and shooting them down.

"Tatsuma, Prince Leon," I called out. "Enemies are coming from the two doors over there. Twenty-six of them. Be ready."

"Understood! I'll round them up! You—" Prince Leon started.

"I know," interrupted Tatsuma. "No need to spell it out. I'll finish them off."

Like I'd said, the two doors that led to the next pathway broke into splinters and twenty-six monsters rushed through.

Next to the fully-armored monsters were others wearing maid clothes and fancy outfits befitting men of the court. They were but mere shadows of the men and women who had once lived and worked within the walls of the castle.

The moment they had come through the doorway, Prince Leon activated the

skill he had been preparing.

“Dragoon Stream!”

A dragon-shaped aura surrounded his blade as he brought it down, creating a small tornado. The monsters were sucked in, and countless small cuts appeared on their bodies.

According to Prince Leon, this skill could only be used by Dragonars, fighters who were able to borrow the powers of dragons. However, much like the skills we otherworlders used, it took a toll on the user’s spirit and stamina, which meant he couldn’t overuse it.

“Peerless Advance!” Tatsuma exclaimed as he jumped.

While he was still in midair, four successive flashes illuminated the room, and he cut through the tornado. The enemies fell to the ground in pieces.

Tatsuma’s attacks had killed the momentum of the wind, and it soon vanished along with the monsters.

“Masaki, are there any others?”

“Thanks to the two of you, there aren’t any left in the next passage. We’ll eventually reach a turn and a staircase. There will be five more there,” I warned. “I’ll try to get in touch with Adel and the others. Haruka, Colona, can you cover Tatsuma and Prince Leon in the meantime?”

“Understood,” Colona said immediately. “Lady Haruka, please take care of the ones that slip through.”

“Sureee. I’ll do my best,” she said in her usual carefree tone.

Haruka was running alongside us with a sunflower in hand. I was surprised to see its seeds fly at monsters a few moments later, piercing right through their bodies and killing them on the spot.

Is she a farmer or a machine gun?

I couldn’t stop myself from pondering over the kind of game *Farmer Island* was supposed to be as I contacted Adel and the others.

<Adel, Akiha, ten monsters are waiting for you at the bottom of the staircase

ahead of you. Three are hiding on the ceiling so be careful. After that, there are three monsters down the path and five more after the corner.>

<All right,> Akiha answered using the Whisper function.

We weren't able to use Telepathy because of the magic canceler, but our player communication systems still worked, so we were still able to contact each other.

Before we had split up into two groups, I'd offered to relay enemy positions to everyone, and the results so far had been amazing—we were able to strike first and avoid getting caught off guard.

Thanks to that, we were able to advance smoothly at a pretty good pace.

The only downside was that, since my eyes were glued to my map, I had to slow down quite a bit. Still, it wasn't too much of an issue. I just caught up with the rest of the group while they were busy fighting.

I continued to look at my map while I dashed up the stairs to catch up to Prince Leon and the others.

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After receiving a System Message from Masaki, Adel and her teammates were able to preemptively strike the monsters that lay in wait.

BANG! BANG BANG!

Following the sounds of Akiha's bullets, the monsters that had crept up the ceiling fell to the ground before disappearing.

Metal Kong Warrior, a gorilla-looking machine beast Shou had summoned was also hard at work. It used its incredible strength to send a group of monsters flying with its fists, launching them into other enemies to round them up in one place.

Hayato and Adel could then finish them off with their respective Molotov cocktails and mana spears.

As for Akiha, she had lowered her magnum and was looking at her map to check whether every monster in the vicinity had properly been defeated.

“No enemy in sight. Clear,” she said after a short while.

“Great,” said Hayato. “I’m gonna go off topic here, but isn’t Masaki’s map weirdly good? How the hell is it even possible? Adel, you’ve been chummy with him for a while now, right? Heard anything?”

Amid the heat of battle, Hayato had forgotten his manners, and his speech was rather rough. While Adel was surprised by the sudden change, she chose to overlook it and shook her head.

“I’ve known him for a little longer than you have, but it still hasn’t been that long. And...he isn’t fond of speaking about his abilities.”

“I kind of get where he’s coming from,” said Shou. “He can see everything, from the position and number of enemies to the layout of the terrain. No plan can counter that. But on the other hand, if information regarding his powers were to be leaked, it could be turned against him. I can’t even imagine what people could try to do to him. To put it bluntly, people are trash.”

Everyone nodded in unison.

Even putting aside his map, Masaki’s ability to contact everyone at once was also a remarkably powerful asset.

With the ability to check the positions of every guard in real time, he could potentially find gaps in any security system and easily carry out assassinations if he ever so wished.

All of this was but a fraction of his powers, which spoke volumes about his real strength.

“Adel. I know people call Masaki a hero, but he’s still a regular guy at the end of the day. Treat him like you would anyone else, even if he is an otherworlder.”

“Why are you stating the obvious? Of course, I’m doing that.”

“Ha ha! Obvious? I guess it is,” Shou said with a smile. “My, my, we have some more guests. Metal Kong! I’m leaving them to you!”

“OOK-OOK!”

Although Metal Kong Warrior looked somewhat slow and heavy, it lunged at its first target at a formidable speed, jumping and crushing its head under its

foot. This attracted the attention of the rest of the fakes, and they all charged at the mechanical beast.

“You just activated my trap card!” Shou exclaimed as he threw a card into the air. “Black Cross of Punishment!”

Countless black chains appeared, twisting around the monsters and stopping them in their tracks. They thrashed around, trying to free themselves, but the chains did not loosen one bit.

Now that the monsters were immobile, Adel and Akiha had no trouble finishing them off with spears and bullets galore.

Hayato didn’t even get the chance to approach thanks to the relentless attacks of three people—and one beast—and was left sighing, resting his wooden sword on his shoulder.

I wonder if these guys realize how incredible they are... Especially Adel. Her ability to coagulate mana could be game-breaking depending on the way she uses it, Hayato thought.

He shot a glance at Adel but quickly brought his attention back to the path ahead.

<There are three monsters at the corner! One of them is hiding in a recess, so be on the lookout!>

After receiving new intel from Masaki, Hayato was raring to have a go and hunt some prey this time.

He smashed down the thorny arrow that came flying at him and crushed the monsters that had been hiding in the darkness.

I feel like Adel’s being held back by what’s considered common sense in this world. Once we’re done here, it might be worth having a chat with everyone to try and give her some pointers, Hayato thought as he ran past the corner.

GROWWWWWWL!!!

A large wolf monster set its sights on Shou and jumped over Metal Kong, its sharp claws at the ready. Shou wasn’t startled in the slightest. He simply took

out a card and activated it.

“Nice try, but sorry! Bouncing Shield.”

A thin membrane appeared in front of Shou and sent the monster flying.

The wolf whimpered.

“And now, for good measure... Magic card! Strength!” Shou chanted, drawing another card and brandishing it.

A faint green light enveloped his body. His magic card, Strength, was a buff that bolstered physical abilities.

With his vigor temporarily enhanced, Shou walked up to the monster that lay on the ground pitifully and kicked it. He followed up by striking it in midair with his weapon, the Cursed Sword Gram.

A dark flash of lightning ran through the blade and quickly spread to the other monsters. Soon, every monster was twitching from the dark electricity.

The monsters’ whines filled the room.

The wolf monster had fallen onto a few fake humes, pinning them in place. Akiha aimed her anti-tank RPG and pulled the trigger.

BOOOOOOOOM!!!

The explosion made the ground shake, and the air was filled with dust.

The loud crash of a wall crumbling down soon resonated through the passage, and by the time the dust had settled, the corpses of the monsters had long disappeared.

Smoke was still rising around them, and Metal Kong, which had also been busy dealing with enemies, rose up triumphantly. As for Akiha, she shoved the RPG back into her Weapon Roulette.

<Akiha here. All clear. Hayato-san, Miss Adel, how are things on your side?>

<We just finished too,> Adel answered.

<Knowing their locations has made this a breeze. Even though there are a bunch of them, they’re still restricted by the narrow pathways.>

Hayato and Adel caught up with Akiha and Shou from the opposite direction. They had both suffered some minor injuries, but since the sun was starting to set, Adel's regenerative powers were actively kicking in. As for Hayato, he could count on his special biker jacket, the Bloody Tokkoufuku, to help him regain his HP. The effect wasn't very powerful, but his wounds were closing up, albeit slowly.

"One more staircase, and we'll reach the basement. Can you contact Masaki, girly?" Shou asked.

"Yes," Akiha said with a nod. She pressed a damp towel to her eyes.

The successive battles had put a strain on Akiha's eyes, and she was making use of every moment of downtime to rest them. Shou and Hayato were both well aware of the dangerous consequences a pair of tired eyes could have for a sniper and were trying their best to ease her burden. Akiha's condition could make the difference between life and death here.

Akiha sent a Whisper to Masaki while she eased her eyes.

<Masaki-san, Akiha here. We have cleared all the enemies. We'll reach the basement soon.>

<Great. We're also getting close to the throne room. Before you get to the basement, you'll face a wall. I'm sorry, but you guys will have to figure that out yourselves.>

<Understood. Please be careful, Masaki-san,> Akiha added before closing the Whisper menu.

She reached for the flask that hung at her hip and drank a large gulp. Haruka had handed out flasks to everyone before their mission. Inside was a handmade mixture of lemonade and honey meant to alleviate fatigue.

With a wide smile on her face, Haruka had even offered one to Colona. Colona had stared back at her, puzzled, before eventually accepting and thanking her with a bow.

Akiha and her teammates continued onward, walking toward the spiral staircase that would take them to the lower level. However, they came face-to-face with a wall.

“Hmm... Did you make a mistake?”

“No. It should be here. I checked on the map Masaki gave us too, there should be a spiral staircase right here,” Akiha explained.

Hayato opened Masaki’s map to double-check, and, sure enough, the spiral staircase was supposed to be right in front of them. And yet, the only thing they could see was a wall. A regular wall with no distinctive features.

“Which means that...there must be some sort of hidden mechanism. It’s my turn to show you what I can do,” Shou said.

“Do you have a trick up your sleeve?”

Adel’s question prompted a grin from Shou, and he took out a card.

“I use machines all day. It should amount to something, right? Investigating these kinds of mechanisms is right up my alley. Come forth, O bandit of steel. Bring to light the truth that has been hidden away. Beast Invocation: Pawson!” Shou chanted, throwing the card into the air.

It shone brightly and soon took the form of a small humanoid figure.

Shou’s invocation was a Dachshund beastman that was roughly as tall as a child and stood on two legs. He wore a black overcoat with a cape attached with a deerstalker upon his head. All in all, his outfit looked every bit like a Japanese interpretation of a certain great detective’s attire.

“So... So cute...” The words spilled out of Adel’s lips. She couldn’t take her eyes off Pawson.

Pawson didn’t seem to dislike Adel’s insistent gaze but he was embarrassed enough to tilt his hat down to hide his eyes.

“All right! Sorry to spring this on you right away, but we’re looking for a passage. Could you look for the entrance?” Shou asked.

“WOOF!” Pawson started to sniff the wall.

He pressed his paws around it for a while before shifting his attention to one specific part. After knocking a few times on that particular spot, he seemed to reach a conclusion and started barking anew.

“Oh! Is it here?”

“WOOF! WOOF!”

“I see... Hey, girly, do you have anything that could break the wall here?” Shou asked Akiha.

“What? Oh! Yes, I do.”

“I’ll leave the rest to you, then.”

Akiha started spreading a white clay-like matter on the spot Pawson had pointed out.

“Akiha, what’s that?” Adel asked.

“An explosive called C-4.”

Adel couldn’t contain her surprise. “An explosive?!” she exclaimed, taking a few steps back.

Akiha let out a little laugh and took out the detonator from her inventory.

Shou and Hayato were fully aware of how this type of weapon worked and weren’t fazed in the slightest.

“Don’t worry. It won’t explode until I press this detonator,” Akiha explained.

“A-Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she reassured her once more. “I’ll blow up the wall, so please take cover over there. The noise might hurt your ears, so make sure to cover them, all right?”

Her comrades followed her instructions and walked to the place Akiha had pointed to. Akiha joined them last and checked that everyone was properly covering their ears. Even Pawson was pressing his paws to the sides of his head and laying low, ready for the explosion.

Akiha pressed the button. The blast resounded across the castle as the whole structure shook. Dust fell from the ceiling, windows shattered, and a gust of wind entered the hallway, bringing the dust back into the air.

When it had finally settled, they could see that Akiha’s C-4 had opened up a hole, revealing a staircase heading down.

“Having access to good weapons really makes everything easier. You were a great help, Akiha,” Hayato said as he patted Akiha’s head.

“Wa— Wait! Don’t pat my head so hard!” Hayato had made a mess of her hair, and Akiha ran after him while she tried to put the strands back into place. “Geez...”

Like most girls her age, Akiha seemed to take quite a bit of pride in her appearance.

“Sorry, sorry,” Hayato apologized with a smile.

Once they’d stepped through the hole, they found themselves in complete darkness.

“I’ll go first. Follow me closely,” Adel said.

“Hey, girly,” Shou called out from behind her. “Take this guy with you. Pawson can sense traps.”

“Can he? That’d be a great help. I’m counting on you, Pawson.”

“WOOF!”

Adel took Pawson’s paw in her hand. When her palm came in contact with his soft and plushy pads, her expression relaxed for a second.

Adel led the group down the steps, a lantern in hand, while Pawson, wearing a headlamp, checked for traps.

Darkness was no obstacle for Adel. While her father was human, meaning she had both vampire and human blood running through her veins, she was still a creature of the night. Pawson had both infrared and X-ray vision, and could determine his location through echolocation—suffice it to say, he also had no issues moving about in the dark. On the other hand, his fighting skills were almost non-existent. Hayato, Akiha, and Shou followed from close behind.

Since the entrance to the staircase had been closed off this whole time, the group was able to make their way down without encountering any monsters. They did run into a trap halfway down, but thanks to Pawson’s early detection, they’d been able to disable it before it caused them any trouble.

The thorny vines had spread all the way to the basement, and strange roots covered one of the walls. It was proof that the gigantic tree indeed now ruled over the entire castle.

After reaching the basement, the group soon took notice of how bare the room was. There were no ornaments on the walls—in fact, there was nothing there, besides a large iron door. A heavy atmosphere seeped through the cracks.

The moment Pawson sensed the oppressive air, he immediately ran behind Shou, whining and shivering.

“Is he scared?” Adel asked.

“Yeah. According to him, it smells of death over there. And we’re not talking about just one or two bodies...” Shou said before turning to Pawson. “Thanks for taking us all the way here, Pawson.”

The Daschund beastman looked down and let out a small apologetic whine.

Shou scratched his head. “Don’t worry, buddy. See you later, all right? Unsummon,” he chanted, raising his arm.

Pawson was shrouded in a bright light before turning back into a card. It flew back into Shou’s hand, and he returned it to his deck.

Adel looked on, flabbergasted. “I must say I’m a little surprised...”

“Are you?”

“Well, yes. The tamers I’ve met up until now all treated their summons like tools. It’s my first time meeting someone who instead treats them like friends.”

“Isn’t it natural, though? They may be machines, but they’re still alive. And they’ll do their best if I treat them well. That being said, I’m only giving love to ladies...and my dear Colona.”

“Nevermind. It was stupid of me to be impressed for a moment there,” Adel said with a sigh. “Whatever. I’ll open that door, so prepare yourselves.”

Adel checked to make sure they all agreed and turned the door knob. The large door slowly opened with a deep creak.

Although they were underground, the room beyond was strangely well lit. Light flooded from every corner of the room, but it didn't seem to have a source.

The putrid smell was even stronger with the door open, and Adel and the others had a hard time withstanding it.

THUD. THUD.

Heavy footsteps echoed as a large shadow appeared.

"That one's bad news... It's part wyvern."

Inside the room was a mad dragon golem.

Mad dragon golems were the type of monster you'd usually stumble upon in the darkest depths of a dungeon. Their mud-formed body had an incredibly high resistance to physical attacks, and even the largest of monsters struggled to take them down with brute force. As if mad dragon golems weren't scary enough, parts of a wyvern had been haphazardly attached to this one with thorny vines, rendering it even more atrocious.

The empire had taken great interest in these beasts and, through great effort and sacrifice, had succeeded in subjugating and enhancing one to use as a guardian for their magic canceler.

The part-wyvern giant trudged forward, splattering putrid mud as it took each step. It glared at the intruders, baring its sharp teeth.

Mad golems did not usually smell so foul, but the group immediately understood why this one did.

Human body parts were protruding out of its mud body here and there. The corpses belonged to the guards who had once manned the palace.

They had tried to run from the thorns that were slowly eroding the castle and had managed to survive to find refuge in this room. That was until the mad golem noticed and caught them, devouring them alive.

Despite being a protector of the castle itself, as guardian of the magic canceler, it had turned on its fellow protectors and was now ready to mercilessly destroy another set of puny intruders.

“GAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

The golem’s piercing scream resounded as it ran toward Adel and the others at a surprising speed considering its size.

“Scatter!” Adel yelled.

Akiha, Shou, and Hayato were quick to react and leaped in different directions. Adel soared to evade the attack.

The golem charged into a wall, and the sound of mud splattering against it filled the room.

The impact slowed it for no more than a second, and it immediately twisted its long neck to face the one closest—Hayato. At the same time, it swung its arm toward Adel and the others with a vigor one would never expect from such a sluggish-looking monster.

The creature opened its gigantic mouth. “GAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

A tongue made of thorny vines as large as a tree trunk flew at Hayato.

The gang leader repelled it with his wooden sword.

“Tsk! I didn’t think the huge lump would be this fast!” Hayato exclaimed.

“It seems to have absorbed too many monsters. It’s going on a rampage. This is not going to be an easy fight,” Shou called out. “Come forth! Quick Summon: Mega Dragonewt! Tiger King!”

He threw two cards over the golem’s head. A light flashed, and two iron swordsmen, one with the head of a dragon and the other with the head of a tiger, appeared. They both roared.

The two swordsmen charged the golem with great force, both aiming at its neck with their swords. They succeeded in cutting through half of its thick neck until the golem twisted it around, stopping their attack.

However, lumps of mud had fallen to the ground, exposing its weak point.

Within the mud, hundreds of vines were crawling like worms, extending toward the Mega Dragonewt and the Tiger King like as many tentacles. The two iron beasts jumped back, but it was too late. The tentacles swiftly tangled up

around their bodies and slammed them against the wall.

“Damn! They’re no match for it! Come back! Unsummon!” Shou exclaimed.

“We have to find a way! If we don’t get rid of these monsters, Philia is doomed. And if we fail to save her...a greater tragedy will follow,” Adel said.

“And Masaki-san put his trust in us!” Akiha added.

“We only have one thing to do,” Hayato started. “Bash this monster’s head in! That’s all!”

His plan was hard to argue with. Readying their weapons once more, they dashed toward the distorted golem.

In response, the golem jumped at the intruders to fulfill its duty, dripping mud with every move.

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“I just heard from Akiha. They’re right in front of the basement. Apparently, a wall is blocking access to the staircase, but I’m sure they’ll figure it out.”

My teammates all seemed relieved after I relayed Akiha’s Whisper to them. We had made sure to pick out members who were well suited to strenuous fights and could heal themselves in times of need, but there was no way to know for sure what they’d be up against, so it was good to hear that they were all fine.

“I’m happy to hear my little Akiha is all right,” Haruka commented with her usual light tone as she handed out yellow fruits to each of us. “Let’s do our best too!”

These fruits were called powerpines and looked like small pineapples. Haruka had grown them in a matter of seconds using Light of Plenty and the flowerpots she had found in the castle meant for ornamental plants.

They were the perfect combination of sweet and sour and greatly alleviated our fatigue.

In *Farmer Island,* these fruits were regarded as the perfect item to recover from exhaustion. As a result, the seeds were rare and sold at a very high price on the market.

Thankfully, their effects had been preserved in this world, and by the time we finished munching on them, the weariness of the series of battles we'd been through had completely disappeared. With these, we could fight for twenty-four hours straight. *Not that I ever intend to.*

Prince Leon and Tatsuma had been a little hesitant to taste the unknown fruit, but after taking one bite and feeling their bodies get lighter, they had come around and had made quick work of the rest.

While we ate, I constantly checked for incoming enemies on the map, and Colona stayed on the lookout. Our defenses were flawless.

My map was precise, but it wasn't infallible. I couldn't predict unusual changes in the building's layout, so Colona was a big help.

We eventually reached our goal. We were right in front of the throne room, at ease and fully rested.

In front of the door stood one fake hume, a magnificent sword at the ready. I'd seen these clothes before—the sparkling lavish garb...the fancy crown... This was...

"Emperor Aldebaran..." Tatsuma let out, clutching his spear.

I had nothing but hatred for this man, but to Tatsuma, he was the father of the princess he treasured and the lord to whom he had once sworn allegiance.

I wondered how he felt faced with the pitiful figure of the emperor.

Prince Leon also seemed to be shocked by the sorry state of the emperor he had long fought against. He brought his fingers to the hilt of his sword. However, when he started to draw his blade, Tatsuma stopped him with his arm.

"Please let me do it."

At Tatsuma's words, the prince let go of his sword and took a step back.

Stopping a prince from drawing his sword was an insult, but Prince Leon was no petty man. In this kind of situation, he'd never hold it against him.

"Let's give him space," he said.

“Yeeees,” Haruka agreed.

“I do not understand, but I will obey your order,” Colona said.

Haruka, Colona, and I followed Prince Leon and took a few steps back. We decided to watch over Tatsuma and let him fight the emperor alone.

Colona didn’t seem to understand why we were doing this, but she reluctantly stepped back nonetheless. Forcing our way into such a personal fight would be way too insensitive. I was certain Shou would have agreed had he been here.

As Tatsuma raised his spear toward the emperor, the latter retaliated with a thrust of his sword.

His attack was full of vigor. I couldn’t fathom that this man was the same old geezer who had hit me in the past. The oppressive air around him was proof enough that he had fought his way to the top of this empire with his blade.

It was such a waste for a man like him to end his days as a monster.

The tension between them was so intense that no one could ever dare to interrupt.

The next instant, a loud blast came from below. As if it were a signal of some sort, the two moved in unison.

One second was all it took to decide the winner.

Before the emperor’s sword could hit its target, Tatsuma’s spear had dug into his opponent’s flesh from shoulder to torso. The monster that once ruled over the Granfang empire was neatly separated in two and hit the red carpet. Green blood spilled out, staining the red carpet a dark color.

I couldn’t see Tatsuma’s expression from where I stood, but I had no doubt it was grim.

I approached and heard the emperor say, “Tatsuma...you...always...loyal... I...leave...Philia...to...you.”

Emperor Aldebaran was now a warped mix of man and monster, but he forced those words out before disappearing. All that was left of him were shreds of once-luxurious clothes and a sword.

Tatsuma picked up the blade from the carpet and after grasping it tightly for a while, hung it at his hips.

“Let’s go, Tatsuma. Philia is still alive beyond this door. We will save her without fail,” I promised him.

“Yes... We will!” he answered.

He glared at the door that separated us from the throne room with a strained expression before throwing it open.

Come what may. There’s no telling what awaits beyond this door, but this will be our last battle in the empire...

Chapter 4

The luxurious doors of the throne room were covered in creeping plants as if they were protecting it.

“We’ll need to do something about those before we can get through.”

We started away slashing at the plants, but they kept regenerating before we could make any progress. Colona tried using a chainsaw to clear our path, but the moment the vines hit the floor, more grew to replace them.

Our close proximity to the gigantic tree might have something to do with it.

“Well, theeeeen...how about sprinkling some herbicide on them?” Haruka offered after watching us struggle for a while.

The effect was immediate. Immediate...and rather extreme. In the blink of an eye, the creeping plants withered away. *She’s really something else. When it comes to dealing with plants, farmers are unparalleled.*

Haruka’s herbicide seemed to have worked its way to the roots, and even the surrounding vines were destroyed.

We cleared out the withered plants and pushed open the heavy doors. Inside, the throne room had turned into a jungle.

We had to push leaves and vines aside to move forward, but eventually, a large tree came into view. At its trunk was a young woman with a blood-red rose blooming on her chest.

“Philia!”

Tatsuma started to run toward her, an anxious expression on his face, but I caught his arm in time and stopped him in his tracks.

“What are y—?!” Tatsuma shouted, glaring back at me, but he was interrupted by a wooden stake flying right past him.

One more step and it would have pierced through his skull.

“I saw on my map that enemies were lying in wait. I get that you’re worried,

but we have to tread carefully...right?”

“Yeah... I’m sorry, you’re right.”

As a veteran gamer, I understood how crucial it was to remain cautious in critical situations like these. That said, if one of my loved ones had been trapped there, I might have reacted just like him and rushed forward like a headless chicken.

Now that I had stopped Tatsuma, I also had to play things carefully.

“Hey! Instead of spying from the shadows, how about you come out? Behind the left pillar, the tree, and the curtains...” I said, pointing out each area with my sword. “I know there are five of you, so there’s no use hiding.”

Five men slowly made their way out of the shadows, armor upon their chests and weapons in their hands. I could tell at a glance that the quality of their equipment was miles above Barry’s. In fact, it looked just as nice as Prince Leon’s. *Are they the thorny remains of the emperor’s elite guards?*

“You did a fine job pinpointing our locations. Bravo!” A man called out as he walked toward us. “It’s Masaki, right? You’re too strong to ignore. I should have killed you the moment we met, but I wanted to extend my gratitude. Thanks to you, I can finally take the throne.”

“Prime Minister Iiro! You bastard!!!” Tatsuma roared.

“Why, hello there, Tatsuma. It’s too bad you didn’t die along with Chogokin,” Iiro sighed. “I waited for so long... But after falling in love with beautiful Philia, I knew my life as an insignificant minister would never be enough. I bribed those I could and schemed to get rid of my enemies... I rose to the rank of prime minister for my dear princess! But you were still a thorn in my side, and now you’re the only one left in my way, Tatsuma! I’ll deal with you puny idiots and become the rightful emperor of this land!”

Did he commit all of these crimes to get his hands on the princess? He said he’d become the emperor but...

“How can you call yourself the emperor when you’ve murdered your own people?!” I exclaimed. “What’s the point of ruling over a desolate empire? Even that old geezer was better than this. Heck, I can’t feel a shred of majesty from

you! You just borrowed your power from someone else, just like Barry, isn't that right, *weakling?*"

"What?! How dare you call *me* a weakling?!"

"My bad. That's an insult to the weaklings of this world. You're just an insignificant insect," I taunted.

Iiro was fuming. The tentacles on his back were getting agitated, and, to be honest, he looked more like an octopus than an insect.

I shot a glance at Tatsuma and Prince Leon. They both seemed surprised to hear me talk like that, but they finally got the hint after they saw my smirk and raised their weapons toward Iiro.

"An insect? You should apologize to the insects, Masaki," Tatsuma said.

"Indeed. While Emperor Aldebaran was my enemy, I know he always cared a great deal about his subjects. On the other hand, I've never heard of a sovereign without them! I guess you could play pretend, though," Prince Leon added.

Good, good. Keep fanning the flames.

Iiro's shoulders were trembling. "You bastards! You're all dead!!! I'll make sure of it! Get them, my faithful servants!" he screamed in rage.

He fell for it.

We'd have to fight while keeping Haruka safe. It put us at a disadvantage, but we'd also learned a lot when we fought Barry. We'd be fine.

"GAAAH!!!"

Iiro's four servants jumped at us from different directions. Prince Leon stood in the way of two of them in order to protect Haruka. Even in a two-on-one battle, the prince wasn't truly alone. Haruka's talent shone when supporting fighters from the back.

I wasn't worried about any of my teammates. Tatsuma, who was dealing with another guard, was also plenty strong.

The last enemy swung his blade at me, letting out a strange battle cry as he

did. He was fast, but my fight with Barry had helped me get used to this kind of speed.

I could easily ward off an attack of that level.

I deflected his sword with Seven Arthur and stepped in close. I placed my palm on his chest.

“Tribanger Impact!”

I unleashed the composite skill, Tribanger Impact with my bare hand. A shock wave went through his chest, sending him flying into the bushes.

Martial God Principle greatly improved my close combat skills, but it looked like sending people flying was the best I could do bare-handed. Not that I had intended to kill in the first place.

I pretended to pursue my target by jumping into the bushes and heard some noise from within the dense vegetation.

It was Colona. While we were fighting Iiro, she had concealed herself. Colona and I had our own mission, and we couldn’t afford to waste any more time.

“Lord Masaki, this way.”

“Got it.”

I followed Colona’s instructions and advanced further into the jungle-like room.

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Growls and battle cries filled the room as Prince Leon faced the two thorn guards.

It was two against one. Prince Leon should have struggled but, he was instead pushing them back.

Even though the guards were being controlled by Iiro, they hadn’t lost any of their prior strength. They were elite guards and had trained their sword skills every day—their mastery shone with every slash. One brought his sword down upon the prince while the other swung from below.

The prince readied himself, clutching his sword and channeling his strength

into every inch of his body.

“Dragoon Force!”

The aura of a mighty dragon coursed throughout his body and strengthened it.

Dragoon Force was the very essence of a Dragonar’s arts. It allowed them to harness the powers of dragons to enhance their bodies.

Borrowing the powers of their partner dragon came at a cost, though, and Dragonars had to deal with violent aftereffects. However, it also gave Prince Leon the strength to not only stop but push back the swords of the two guards.

Behind him, Haruka wore a radiant smile as she prepared to activate her own skill.

Once the prince had pushed the guards back, they attempted to regain their balance, however, in doing so, they stepped right onto something incredibly sticky.

“How do you like my Sticky Trap?” Haruka asked gleefully.

As its name suggested, Sticky Trap covered the floor with birdlime. The substance would be enough to trap small monsters, but it would struggle to contain larger monsters.

That said, it could still buy Haruka enough time for her seeds to sprout.

“GAAAAAH?!”

The guards thrashed about in an effort to free themselves from the birdlime.

“Too late. I got you! Elemental Bind!”

Haruka’s parasitic plant had already spread its roots through the marble and now thick vines were coiling around the guards’ legs up to their thighs.

They tried to free themselves from her trap, but Prince Leon was faster. He brought his sword down at an incredible speed and cut one of the defenseless guards in two.

With the same motion, Prince Leon went for the second guard but his strike was blocked.

The guard painfully withstood Prince Leon's blows, clutching his sword with both hands, but Prince Leon wasn't the only one attacking. Haruka's vines were creeping up and engulfing more and more of his body. They had already grown along his torso.

Eventually, the vines reached his shoulders and arms, and eventually, his head. They tightened more and more, and creaking sounds started to fill the room. Ironically enough, the thorn-ridden guard was slowly nearing his death at the hands of another plant.

"How impressive, Lady Haruka!" said Prince Leon. "I didn't know you could set traps and use vines in that way."

"Actually, I can't grow creeping plants on people, but when I heard from Masaki-san that Barry's body was made out of plants and found some samples, I thought about it and figured I'd give it a try. It works like a charm, hee hee!" Haruka explained, her tone as carefree as ever as she watched her vines strangle the monster.

Prince Leon felt a chill run down his spine at the sight, but he was so charmed by Haruka's smile that he soon forgot about it. If any of the otherworlders had been here to watch this scene unfold, the first words that would have come to mind would have no doubt been "love is blind."

Haruka approached Prince Leon and whispered in his ear. "Now that we're done here, let's go save the princess."

"Y-Yes!"

Seeing Haruka's smile up close made the prince's heart throb, and he dashed toward the giant tree.

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"Schwarz... I never thought we'd settle our fight with you in this state. I wish I could have faced you while you were still in control of yourself... What a shame."

Tatsuma's adversary was one of the most renowned swordsmen in the empire. The captain of the emperor's guard: Schwarz Launderway.

If Tatsuma was a champion spear-wielder, then Schwarz was undoubtedly the most skilled with a shield.

His arm, the Igis Shield, had been left behind by an otherworlder a long time ago. Its original owner was long dead and, while he wasn't originally from the empire, his equipment was scattered around by merchants. Some pieces had reached faraway lands where they were acquired by adventurers and wealthy nobles. That was how this shield had made its way to the empire.

It was a powerful artifact once used to protect the emperor, and it had been passed down from one captain of the emperor's guard to the next.

But now, instead of Aldebaran, Schwarz was forced to wield the Igis Shield to protect Iiro.

"Schwarz! Get rid of this eyesore!" yelled Iiro.

At his command, Schwarz rushed toward Tatsuma.

The emperor's guard had always turned a deaf ear to him when he was the prime minister but now, the captain had no choice but to obey Iiro's every order. At this thought, he couldn't stop smiling.

Iiro's conceit made Tatsuma's blood boil. He blocked Schwarz's attack with his spear and followed up with a parry. However, his spear slammed straight into the Igis Shield, and a dull pain ran through his body.

Igis Shield was worthy of its renown and, as such, it didn't only block hits, it also reflected damage.

Tatsuma sustained the damage from his own blow and grimaced. He couldn't easily heal himself, which meant that attacking head-on could cost him his life if he wasn't careful.

The way Schwarz wielded the shield was top-class. When the two of them had sparred in the past, they often ended up fighting almost to the death. Over the course of their battles, no clear victor had ever emerged—they were evenly matched.

However—perhaps due to the number of times they had fought—Tatsuma couldn't help but notice that something was amiss.

He's not guarding as much as usual... I see... You're doing whatever you can to resist, aren't you, Schwarz?

Even brainwashed by Iiro's thorns, Schwarz was blocking most of Tatsuma's attacks with his sword instead of his powerful shield. They both knew that Igis Shield could only reflect damage when hits connected face-on, but Schwartz was making an effort to either avoid using it or deflect the attacks instead. This meant that, although he was being controlled, Schwarz was still conscious deep down.

He knocked Tatsuma back with his shield, but the latter immediately leaped back to soften the impact. He always reacted this way when Schwarz struck with his shield and, naturally, he also knew what would follow.

Tatsuma readied himself for the next attack, spear in his grip and legs prepared to dash.

The two of them kicked off from the floor at the exact same moment.

Tatsuma's Huanglong Spear and Schwarz's Igis Shield clashed as the loud noise of metal resounded.

CLANK.

With a metallic noise, Tatsuma's spear flew into the air.

A satisfied smile appeared on Iiro's face as he watched their fight unfold. He was finally certain that Tatsuma...that revolting Tatsuma, would finally meet his demise in the most brutal of ways.

And yet, a sword was buried deep into Schwarz's chest.

"What?!" Iiro exclaimed.

Tatsuma's spear had indeed collided with Schwarz's shield. However, the moment Schwarz had started to tilt his shield—ever so slightly—upward, Tatsuma had retreated and deliberately loosened his hold on his spear.

As a result, even though the guard captain had sent his opponent's spear flying, his sword hadn't reached Tatsuma. Moreover, Tatsuma's antics had forced Schwarz to raise his arm much higher than anticipated, creating a huge opening. The Wei General only had to twist his body to close the gap before

thrusting his sword forward.

The impact had sent Schwarz flying back with the sword buried in his chest. He was knocked against the wall and the sword dug right into it, pinning him in place.

Tatsuma had used the emperor's luxurious blade he had picked up earlier. Mithril swords could easily cut through the sturdiest of steels, so burying it through Schwartz and into the wall was child's play.

CLANG CLANG.

With Schwarz unable to hold it up any longer, Igis Shield rolled onto the floor.

However, the guard captain had a victorious smile on his face.

He had finally been able to settle the score with his rival. He couldn't speak, but he was satisfied with this conclusion, and he slowly disappeared with a smile on his lips.

Tatsuma witnessed his comrades' final moments as he caught his spear in mid-air with one hand.

"Schwarz... Hang on tight on the other side. I'll send this bastard to you in no time. It's your turn now, Iiro. I'm not going to give you an easy death!"

◆◇◆

With the dense vegetation covering the whole room working in our favor, we had been able to split tasks among ourselves rather efficiently. Not to mention, I could activate Stealth without any enemy noticing.

All right, let's use it before that guy gets up.

"Colona, I'll make us disappear with my skill, so hold onto my clothes."

"Understood."

After Colona grabbed my sleeve, I activated Stealth.

"Grr... Grrr?"

The guard had gotten up and was looking for us as he let out animalistic groans. With Stealth on, he'd never find us, though. Colona and I skirted around him. I aimed at his neck and swung my sword in one swift motion.

SWOOSH.

The guard wasn't able to block or dodge, and in a split second, his head had fallen to the ground. His body followed.

Fighting like this made me feel like an alien creeping up behind its prey, but I couldn't afford to do this often. I didn't want the fact that I could easily carry out assassinations to spread. Everyone would end up fearing me.

Naturally, Stealth had been automatically deactivated when I struck, but since there were no other enemies in sight, it wasn't an issue.

I was certain our comrades were having no issues with their missions. As for Colona and I, we rushed toward the person we needed to save.

While the room was pretty much a jungle at this point, it wasn't so large that we couldn't properly search for someone, and before long, we reached Philia.

I immediately used Appraisal on her.

Philia Dol Granfang

Race: Human

HP: 30/100

MP: 200

Status Alteration: Cursed (Plantification), Mind Corrosion

Not good. She's in worse shape than I thought. And her status alterations won't be easy to deal with.

I might have been able to get rid of them with detoxification magic, but I couldn't use spells at the moment. *At the very least, I should do something about her low HP.*

I took out a High Potion and approached Philia, but I suddenly felt something vibrate under my feet. It was Heightened Senses letting me know danger was approaching. Colona seemed to sense it too, and after exchanging a glance, we both started running.

Countless sharp stakes pierced the ground right where we had been standing.

Iiro was focused on Tatsuma and hadn't yet noticed us. So that meant this attack had come from...Philia herself! Or rather, from that gigantic tree... It'd be dangerous if it targeted us whenever we tried to approach.

I could still throw the potion at her from a distance!

I evaded the stakes that continued to come out of the ground and got close enough to fling a potion at Philia, but before it could reach her, a vine extended and struck it down.

A few drops of liquid splashed onto the princess, and she recovered a sliver of HP.

"I'll help you, Lord Masaki," Colona said.

"I'm counting on you."

I threw another potion. Just like before, the vine prepared to strike it, but this time, Colona used a small chainsaw to cut it off. The potion reached Philia successfully, healing her.

She should be able to hold on a little longer. Hopefully, long enough for us to rescue her.

Now, we could only pray and buy time for Adel and the others to deal with the magic canceler.

◆◇◆

"Hayato! Watch your feet!" Shou shouted.

The pool of mud had stretched out in a cone shape and was approaching Hayato's feet. Thanks to Shou's warning, the gang leader was able to retreat and escape the danger.

"Damn, that was close! Thanks, Shou!"

"Stay alert. I can't afford to waste too many cards right now." Shou sighed as he cut down the thorny vines that reached for him. "This monster is such a pain to deal with."

He reacted too late to the claws that came swinging at him, but thankfully, the last monster he had summoned, his trusty Buster Megalo Chimera, stepped

in and cut off the mud dragon golem's arm with its own claws. Its severed arm fell to the ground, and the countless vines squirming inside it were laid bare.

"...Though I'm sure we'll manage," he added. Meanwhile, Adel was using a sharp mana blade to slash at them.

The golem started dripping more mud as if to pick up its arm—which was now a little shorter thanks to Adel's slashes.

BANG! BANG BANG!

Akiha promptly shot at the newly formed puddles, blowing them away and preventing the golem from using them to recover its arm. Angered, it turned its thick neck in her direction.

Akiha stood there, a desert eagle in each hand at the ready.

"I've looked everywhere for the magic canceler, but I can't find it!" she cried.

"Which means...that it's inside the golem. That'd make sense. What better hiding place to hide it than within a monster that's super resistant to physical attacks? We'll need to destroy its core, but it's a tough opponent... How should we go about it?" Adel was thinking out loud and glaring at the golem that attempted to recover its arm once more.

Physical attacks couldn't pierce it because of the mud. On top of that, the resilient thorny vines that had taken over the castle were strengthening the golem. Finally, its wyvern parts had given the golem extraordinary regenerative abilities. None of them had ever seen such an atrocious chimera before.

While Adel worried about how to take down that beast without magic, Hayato started walking forward at an unhurried pace.

"You don't need to overthink it," he said.

"Right. He's hard to hit, but it's not like our attacks don't damage it at all. With our current party, we definitely have a shot," Shou added.

"It's simple—we just have to beat the shit out of it," they both concluded, charging forward like hot-blooded idiots.

Megalo Chimera and Shou's latest summon, Metal Sharkman happily followed their master, closing in on the enemy.

Adel was speechless.

“There’s no changing people like them,” Akiha said, quietly patting Adel’s shoulder. “They do have a point, though. We have to get rid of it quickly, so instead of wasting time worrying, it’d be best to just go with a straightforward approach. There’s something I want to try. Could you lend me a hand?”

“Lend you a hand?”

“Yes, please. With your help, I should be able to make it work.”

While Adel and Akiha were chatting, Shou and Hayato were facing the golem. It responded by gathering mud and vines and bringing down its huge claws.

Even large monsters would be crushed and sliced by its powerful fists and sharp claws, let alone humans. However, Shou and Hayato were no regular people.

As the heavy fist approached, Shou threw a card in the air. “Bust Shell!”

The card shone, and countless red hexagons came flying out, forming a membrane that protected the two men.

The moment the golem’s fist came in contact with it, a large detonation sounded.

The golem was taken aback and screamed in pain.

The support card Shou had used, Bust Shell, was only effective for a short while. It created a shield that exploded upon being hit. The stronger the force of the impact, the more damage it dealt, which made it perfect for the situation. As a result, the golem’s arm was blown away.

At the same time, Metal Sharkman and Megalo Chimera attacked the golem’s face, drawing its attention.

Hayato didn’t let this opportunity slip and snuck behind the monster before swinging his wooden swo—no, a traffic sign this time—in front of the golem’s remaining arm.

“STOP SIGN!” Hayato exclaimed, activating the weapon’s hidden powers.

Dormant Power Awakening was a skill unique to *Gang Town* that could

activate a weapon's hidden abilities to unleash a killer move.

For instance, bats would send enemies flying incredibly far, while Hayato's favorite, the Bloody Wooden Sword, converted a portion of the damage he dealt into stamina.

This time, Hayato had used a stop sign. As per the sign's markings, it could stop the enemy from moving for up to three seconds. More than enough time for Hayato to strike.

"Die, bastard!"

Hayato aimed for the golem's arm and brought his sign down, cutting it into two halves as neatly as if he had used a sharp blade.

The golem was released from the immobilizing effects, but it didn't seem to understand what had just happened. It kept trying to raise its arm in vain. Eventually, it looked down and saw that its only remaining arm had also been destroyed. Both of its arms were now useless.

"GOOOOOOOOOOOH?!!!" The mud monster roared out in grief and rage alike.

Up until now, it was certain its flexible body could not be destroyed. Now that two of its appendages were out of commission, it couldn't hide its confusion.

It was too slow to realize that even without its arms, it still had a powerful weapon at its disposal—its mud.

"Get back!" Akiha instructed.

Shou and Hayato responded immediately, retreating to the walls on both sides of the room. As he did, Shou unsummoned Metal Sharkman and Megalo Chimera.

Adel took their place on the battlefield, sending countless hands molded from mana flying at the golem. Each held what looked to be white lumps of clay and they rapidly stuck them on the monster.

Shou and Hayato quickly noticed the small lumps and hurriedly dashed to hide behind Akiha. The moment they reached her, a large black wall of Adel's making appeared in front of the group.

While Adel's Mana Coagulation looked like magic, there were slight differences. Magic involved drawing power from the Material World, and, to prevent anyone from doing so, the magic canceler interfered with the people's ability to open the door to that realm. However, Adel did not rely on this process. She processed raw mana with her very own skill, which meant the effects of the magic canceler did not apply to her.

Adel had never used her abundant mana to create something other than weapons, but thanks to Akiha's suggestion, she had been able to accomplish something new.

The sniper checked that everyone had been able to hide behind the wall before pressing the detonator.

BOOOOOOOOOM!!!

With the golem at its center, a large explosion rocked the basement. The vibrations spread through the whole castle and, for a second, Adel and the others worried the basement would collapse entirely.

Once again, Akiha had used C-4, a powerful plastic explosive. It had more destructive power than dynamite and could even take down a tank if several lumps were used simultaneously.

With so much explosive material, the golem had been blown into a million pieces. Nothing remained but a large crater on the floor where it had once stood.

As the dust slowly settled, Adel and the others noticed that the room wasn't lit anymore.

"Looks like we can use magic again," Adel said, casting a beginner-level fire spell to create a small fireball in the palm of her hand.

Thus far, the magic canceler had prevented them from using any magic at all, and this small fire was the very proof that communication with the mana gates had been re-established.

"You went overboard, girly," Shou grumbled, scratching his head. "Though I'm glad I could preserve some strength."

“All right! Let’s dash to the top floor!” Hayato concluded.

Now that everything had been dealt with here, Adel and the others ran up the spiral staircase to assist Masaki and his team who were in the middle of their own fight.

With them gone, an eerie silence fell over the basement once again.

◆◇◆

In a corner of the throne room, a frightened Iiro was being chased by Tatsuma.

Drunk on his new powers, Iiro had been basking in a sense of superiority until he witnessed Schwarz’s defeat. The guard captain had been enhanced by the medicine, and yet, he had still lost to Tatsuma. The new emperor didn’t feel so safe anymore.

Iiro had entered the castle as a civil officer, not as a general. He was skilled at devising plans and was a born schemer, but he had never fought anyone himself. Even with a new body and fearsome skills, he had no idea how to make use of them.

He’d been able to take down Emperor Aldebaran himself, but that was more thanks to No Face distracting him than his own abilities.

Tatsuma didn’t bother concealing his bloodlust when glaring at Iiro. “Don’t worry. I’m not fond of torture. I’ll send you off to the other side in a heartbeat!” he said, his voice thick with anger.

Iiro’s reaction was unexpected.

“HA HA HA! HA HA HA HA!!!”

“Did I say something funny?” asked Tatsuma.

“I’m not done yet!” Iiro exclaimed. “*I* will be sending *you* to hell, Tatsuma!”

The Wei General suddenly felt an ominous bloodlust behind him. Not from Iiro but someone else. He swung his spear and sure enough, it clashed with something and a metallic noise echoed through the room.

“What is this...?”

A grotesque figure with crooked sharp thorns and a body almost entirely covered in strangely high-quality pelts stood there.

It was Orthrus, the specimen that had been bestowed upon Iiro by No Face.

After stopping Tatsuma's spear with his saw-like claws, Orthrus grabbed it and thrust his other clawed hand at his opponent.

"Tsk!"

Tatsuma forcefully twisted his upper body to avoid the sharp fingertips, but a black flame emerged from Orthrus's palm.

The Wei General reacted immediately. He leaped up and delivered a rotating kick to the other's face.

Orthrus easily caught his leg in mid-air and attempted to smash Tatsuma into the ground.

"I won't let you."

The moment before his body hit the ground, a silver gleam flashed and it was Orthrus's arm that fell instead. Colona, who had been concealed along with Masaki until now, had used her Plasma Twinblade to slice off his arm.

Tatsuma managed to brace himself for the fall and, after rolling once, regained his balance.

"Thanks, you really saved me there," Tatsuma said.

"I will take this one on. Please make sure Iiro doesn't escape, Lord Tatsuma."

"He's strong... Can you manage on your own?" he asked.

"Yes," Colona answered matter-of-factly.

"GOOOOOOOOH!!!" Orthrus let out a battle cry so deep and chilling it felt as if those hearing it were gazing into the abyss.

Now that Colona had severed one of his arms, he recognized her as his enemy. He grew it right back and conjured black flames in both his palms before lunging at her and repeatedly striking. But Colona masterfully countered every attack with her Plasma Twinblade.

Orthrus could sense that he would not be able to overpower her in close

combat and leaped back to create some distance. He then conjured another black flame and began concentrating more mana into it.

That was his biggest mistake.

Colona clasped her hands together. A mechanical sound echoed in the room and two large wings sprouted out of her back.

“Machina System...launched. Third Limiter...lifted. Magic Reactor...criticality attained... All green. Target locked. Charge...complete,” Colona started, lifting the safety limitations that had been placed upon her with a detached look on her face.

With each word, more energy gathered within her hands. It soon surpassed the power of the black flame Orthrus was channeling. And by a large margin at that.



“GOOOOOOOOH!!!”

Orthrus instinctively feared what he did not know. What he *did* know was that his flame could not compare, and so he strengthened it at the cost of his own life force before finally unleashing a black ray of light.

Orthrus’s flames burned through everything, from the vines that filled the room to the roof tiles. Right as it reached Colona, she finished chanting. “Brionag...Fire!”

These words acted as a trigger. Her wings shone with a light blue hue, as though they had been illuminated by the moonlight, and a flash of light came flying from both of her hands.

Colona’s Brionag easily cut through the black flames, dispersing them. Once the darkness was vanquished, Colona’s light engulfed Orthrus himself before piercing through the walls.

“TARGET: ORTHRUS has been dealt with. Activating Cocytus System. Terminating Machina System. Resuming regular mode.”

Brionag had brought ruin upon her opponent in just one hit. Orthrus’s swift disappearance was almost anticlimactic.

“How?! Impossible! How did you defeat the monster that *they* bestowed upon me?! Now that it’s come to this...”

Iiro had just lost his trump card. He rushed toward Philia, hoping to use her as a hostage to get out of this dilemma. As long as he could get his hands on the princess, Tatsuma and the others wouldn’t be able to attack him anymore. He could still turn things around and assert his dominion over this land!

Sadly for him, his hopes were crushed.

Iiro suddenly heard someone’s voice coming from ahead.

“Dispel.”

The former prime minister pushed through the vines that obstructed his vision and saw Philia enveloped in a shining light. The tree ejected her soon after as if it were trying to spit her out.

Masaki was standing next to the girl, propping her body up so she wouldn't fall.

"I'm sorry to say this, but you're done, Iiro," Tatsuma said.

He already knew that Philia was safe. If Colona was coming out to help him fight, it meant she had already completed her mission. Philia's curse couldn't be cured with ordinary medicine. That was why Masaki and Colona, who could respectively either rely on spells from another world or cutting-edge technology, were in charge of saving her.

When Colona showed up, Tatsuma wasn't the only one to understand what had happened. While being chased by Tatsuma, Iiro finally put two and two together and figured out why Masaki had acted the way he did when they'd entered the room. He had purposefully created a situation where his attention would be on them, leaving Colona free to do as she liked, preventing him from using Philia as a hostage.

Iiro was well aware that Tatsuma had come to save Philia, and, had he used that against him, things might have turned out differently. However, he had fallen to Masaki's provocation and hadn't made the most rational choice, instead recklessly ordering his guards to attack.

It was too late now. Iiro had just lost his last card, and Tatsuma was thrusting his spear at him.

"I knew you'd try to make her your hostage! You piece of trash!"

Tatsuma stopped his spear right in front of the new emperor's eyes, but Iiro couldn't take it. He lost all strength in his body and shamefully fell on his behind.

"EEK! I-I'm sor— No, please grant me your forgiveness! I-I know! Tatsuma, I'll give you the throne, and I'll do everything I can to support you as prime minister! So d-don't kill me! I'll do anything you want! Just spare me!" Iiro pleaded, throwing himself on the floor and kneeling at Tatsuma's feet.

Despite having received great powers from No Face, it hadn't made him any stronger mentally.

"I don't need you to give me anything," Tatsuma spat out, his tone ice-cold.

“I’ll take what I want myself. Including your life.”

Iiro shrieked as the head of Tatsuma’s spear flashed before him. A muffled sound was heard. Iiro was still kneeling on the ground, unable to move any longer.

Masaki was watching the scene unfold and he stepped closer, carrying Philia in his arms.

“You...didn’t kill him, did you?” he asked.

“We have to get answers first. I’ll finish him when we’re done.”

“Good. Now, then. Here you go,” Masaki said, pushing the princess into Tatsuma’s arms. “Princess delivery. Sorry for stealing your thunder and saving her myself.”

“I’m too old to play at being a fairy-tale prince,” he answered, holding Philia close to his chest and gazing softly at her peaceful sleeping face. “As long as she’s safe, it’s good enough for me. I don’t care who saves her, so...thank you, Masaki.”

“You should be thanking Colona instead. Without her directions, I wouldn’t have been of any use.”

“I didn’t do much,” Colona cut in. “We only succeeded thanks to your diverse arsenal of magical spells, Lord Masaki.”

“Nonsense. You told me exactly which spells to use and when. I couldn’t have saved her so quickly without you. It would have taken me hours to figure out the right combination.”

Philia’s curse, plantification, was a difficult one to purge. If one attempted to treat it in one go, like any other regular curse, the patient could die.

Masaki had been hard at work from the time the magic canceler had been destroyed. Under Colona’s instruction, he had first gotten rid of the toxicity caused by the plantification state with the spell Poison Care. After that, Colona kept the corrosion from spreading while Masaki used Blood Medica to circulate Philia’s blood through her system and purge the very root of the curse. He had finished up with Dispel to lift the curse and finally turn Philia’s body back to its

former state.

Without Colona guiding him, Masaki would have just attempted to use Dispel from the start. It would have cost him a tremendous amount of mana, and he would have had to maintain the spell for a very long time for it to work. All in all, Colona's method was much better. Thanks to her, it was lifted quickly and efficiently.

"Thank you for your help, Colona," Masaki added.

"I'm glad my skills were useful," she said with a small bow.

Despite responding like a formal businesswoman, Masaki still got the impression that she was happy to get praised.

"I also used healing magic on the princess so she shouldn't have any wounds remaining. I don't know any spell that could restore her stamina, though. She needs to rest a bit more to get better," Masaki told Tatsuma. "Anyway...what do we do with that tree? Burn it?"

"I'm not sure it's a good idea. If we set it on fire, it may spread to the city. It'd probably be better to dump tons of herbicide on it and kill its root at the same time too." Haruka had appeared from out of nowhere to lend her advice.

She glanced at Philia with a large smile on her face. Prince Leon followed from right behind her and, after seeing Philia's peaceful sleeping face, nodded with the understanding that the fighting was over.

"We need to let everyone know that this battle ended with our victory," he said with a smile on his face.

The rest agreed and they all prepared themselves for the trip home, when suddenly, the castle started shaking violently—the tree was pulsating.

Chapter 5

We were finally done dealing with the empire. The only thing left to do was get as much information out of Iiro as possible. But first, a little break...or so I thought. *Why is the ground shaking?!*

The entire castle trembled violently as a thunderous roar broke the silence. The pulsations coming from the large tree were gradually getting stronger, and the structure creaked with every vibration. It didn't take long for cracks to appear in the walls and for parts of the ceiling to come crashing down on us

"What the hell is happening?!" Tatsuma exclaimed.

Haruka let out a little yelp. "I-I don't know! Shouldn't we run away?"

"We sure should! Let's get out of here!" The prince agreed.

"The castle is crumbling! Get away at once!" I exclaimed, using the System Message function to reach everyone within the castle grounds.

With this, Adel and the others would also get the message.

"Grab onto me!" I yelled, dashing toward Tatsuma and Prince Leon. "We won't make it by foot even if we run! Let's escape to the sky!"

The prince and Tatsuma—carrying Haruka and Philia respectively—both held onto me with their spare hands. After checking that Colona had also grabbed my arm, I activated Wing. Although it slowed me down a lot, I could still fly even with five people in tow.

I finally looked down at Iiro. He had a blank stare in his eyes and was slowly getting up as a crimson aura engulfed him.

"AAAAAAARGH! No! Stop! I'm losing my...consciousness...my soul... Argh! I'm losing myself! NO! Please...save...me..." His face was the picture of agony as he painfully sputtered one word after the other.

Someone or something was trying to take over.

"Iiro! Give me your hand!" Tatsuma shouted, extending his free hand toward the former prime minister.

“AAAAARGH! TATSUMA! DON’T YOU DARE! I AM THE EMPEROR!!! AAAAAAARGH!” Iiro yelled, slapping his hand away in a final moment of clarity.

His ominous aura exploded as the tentacles upon his back spread all the way to the tree before disappearing into small cracks.

I’d seen this happen once before with Barry. The only difference was the amount of power the two men wielded. I knew Invincibility would protect me no matter what, but I couldn’t stop a shiver from running down my spine.

If I were to attack now, I might be able to stop him before he could take action, but I knew the castle wouldn’t hold much longer.

It was incredibly frustrating, but fighting him wasn’t my first priority. I left Iiro and the tree behind and fled with my comrades.

After escaping the castle, I quickly noticed that the vibrations weren’t limited to the castle. The entire imperial capital was shaking. Meanwhile, the thorny vines were retreating back from the city and toward the castle, much like the ebbing of a tide.

The monsters that had been wreaking havoc upon the capital were also pulled back toward the castle. They let out chilling screams as vines coiled around them and dragged them along.

While I appraised the situation, I heard a loud noise. I scanned for its source and found a lumbering mass of iron. If memory served me right, it was Shou’s Buster Megalo Chimera. He had most likely ordered his machine beasts to break the wall so they could escape.

While it was a little over the top, this method was quick and foolproof. I would have done the same thing in his stead.

I waited for the vibrations to calm down somewhat before picking a suitable landing spot in the castle plaza.

Adel and the others rushed to join us. They were covered in dust but didn’t seem to be hurt.

“Masaki! Do you know what happened? Why is the castle shaking?” asked Adel.

“I have no idea. The only thing is that when we defeated the empire’s former prime minister, the tree started pulsating. If he’s the same as Barry, we’re in troubl—”

A particularly violent vibration cut my sentence short. Our surroundings suddenly darkened, and when I raised my eyes to see what had happened...

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAOOOH!!!”

...the imperial castle had been reduced to a pile of debris, and we were instead faced with a gigantic monster towering over us. The large tree once confined to the throne room now made up the head and torso of this abominable beast while thick tentacles covered its entire body. Entangled thorny vines made for its arms and claws.

Hang on! That thing is way bigger than Barry! It’s at least twice as big!

Our eyes were transfixed on the ridiculous monster, and eventually, it returned our gaze with large dark red eyes. I could feel all of Iiro’s hatred, fury, and jealousy through them.

“GUUUUUUUOOOOOOOH!!!”

The bestial Iiro’s roars were strong enough to make even the air around us tremor. His tentacles—each of them thick as a tree—came flying at us.

They were too large to parry but too many to dodge away from. The moment I realized this, I started gathering mana within my palms and pictured the spell I wanted to use.

“Flame Javelin!” I chanted.

Large blazing spears materialized in my hands one after the other as I repeatedly threw them at the tentacles. Despite firing a dozen javelins and somehow reducing the number of tentacles, I couldn’t get rid of them all. There were just too many...

BANG BANG BANG! BANG!

I shot a glance next to me and saw Akiha firing round after round with two large guns. Meanwhile, Adel was molding her mana into large bullets and launching them at the tentacles and Shou’s Buster Megalo Chimera took the

role of a machine gun.

Between our attacks, some tentacles managed to get close to us, but Colona, Prince Leon, Hayato, Tatsuma, and Shou cut them off before they could do much.

Even though Iiro's attacks couldn't reach us at all, his strength was clear from the tremendous damage he caused to our surroundings. Every deflected hit opened up a new hole in the stone paving.

While a large cloud of dust hid us from the enemy, Haruka started mumbling something while holding the unconscious Philia in her arms.

"Forest Shield. Mowing Tuning Fork."

It was a spell! I had never heard of Forest Shield, and I wasn't sure if she had learned it here or if it came from *Farmer Island*. The moment she'd finished chanting, a thin green membrane covered our bodies.

The second ability she cast appeared to be a skill, but I didn't know what that one was either.

"This should help recover your stamina and give you a defense boost," she explained with her usual relaxed tone. "I also used a skill that enhances your offensive abilities when facing plants. You're all plenty strong, so I never thought there'd be a need for this, but I have a feeling it may come in handy this time."

I should probably follow suit, I thought as I went through my spell list.

"Quick Bite! Protection! Magic Shell! Powered!Hero Orchestra! Magic Sword: Blaze!"

I cast spells that would improve everyone's attack speed, defense, magic defense, and attack power along with their stats. I also added a buff that would add a fire element to their weapons. After applying the last buff, a feeling of exhaustion overcame me. It was the same as when I had used up my mana to heal people. Adel noticed and placed her hand on my back. A warm energy coursed through my body and filled me with power. Adel's mana. It was just as warm as last time.

“Thank you, Adel. I feel much better.”

“Don’t mention it. I learned how to do this for you after all.”

Her hand on my back felt so nice and warm. I really didn’t deserve such a beautiful and caring fiancée.

“Such passion! Colona, we can’t lose to them, can we?” Shou joked.

“I’m fine with a crushing loss, my lord,” she answered curtly.

“Ha ha! Glad to see you’re your usual self. Although in bed, you’re more—”

“If you say one more word,” she cut in, “I’ll make sure you can’t open your mouth ever again, my lord. Could you focus on what’s important right now instead?”

“Sure, sure! Battle Flag of the Revolution. Tempest of the Rebellion,” the Machine Beasts Tamer chanted, throwing two cards in the air.

I felt even more power well up in my body. I later learned that Battle Flag of the Revolution was a straightforward attack power boost while Tempest of the Rebellion applied the temporary boon, Charge—which doubled attack power—to every party member.

The cards’ effects were just what you’d expect from a card game like *Metallic Monster*s, but now that I felt them myself, I realized all over again how amazing and unique Shou’s abilities were. I had no doubt he could take on a whole army by himself.

We’d better let Haruka take refuge. She’s from a game that doesn’t mesh well with battles, and our enemy looks tough.

“Room,” I said, conjuring a door. “Haruka, hide inside my Room with the princess. Akiha—”

“Please let me fight!” Akiha responded. “I do hate the empire, but that doesn’t mean I despise its citizens. I want to fight...to protect them!”

“All right. Then support us from the rear. I’ll entrust my back to you.”

“Will do!”

Good. She didn’t hesitate at all.

The dust finally settled, and the monster scowled at us, clearly unhappy to see us all unharmed. Saliva—or perhaps sap—was flowing out of his open mouth as he bared his thorny fangs at us.

The monster lunged with a deafening cry.
“GUUUUUUUOOOOOOOOOOOOOH!!!”

I’d never expected to fight a battle like this one when I first arrived in this world. That said, I never expected to be dragged into another world in the first place. Anyway, I would thoroughly overturn my enemy’s expectations, just like mine had been.

“GUOOOOOH!!!” the monstrous Iiro let out another roar as he brought down his thick wooden arm upon the plaza.

Now that he was that large, he was much slower. However, that didn’t mean his sheer size wasn’t an issue. Iiro was twice as large as Barry had been. If regular people were hit by his claws, they’d die on the spot. Thankfully, most of us were otherworlders, players. And not just any players—we were the cream of the crop.

Iiro won’t land a hit on us so easily, I thought. A moment later, I spotted Hayato running toward the monster with a traffic sign in hand. *Is he using that as a weapon?* He planted it into the ground in front of the monster.

“One Way Sign!”

Hayato activated his skill a second before the monster’s arm came down on us. A thin barrier emerged from the traffic sign, and, when Iiro’s attack hit it, he stopped moving on the spot.

Based on the name alone, I assumed this skill only allowed attacks to pass through from one direction. It was definitely a powerful asset, but it was bound to have a few drawbacks. For instance, I wondered how long it lasted.

“Time to climb!” Hayato exclaimed.

Tatsuma and Hayato jumped on the rubble before using the vines to climb onto the monster. Dozens of Shou’s machine beasts followed suit.

Prince Leon took off aboard his dragon while Adel and I flew on our own.

Eventually, all three of us were at eye level with Iiro.

Shou had found a hiding spot and was in the middle of doing god knows what. Colona stayed close in order to protect him.

He wouldn't run away now...right?

Iiro regained control over his body and started ripping off the vines Tatsuma and the others were climbing.

He also tried to attack us with more vines. I dodged with minimal motion and raised my hand toward the vines that were threatening to strike Tatsuma and the others.

"Flame Javelin!"

Thanks to the previous battle, I had gotten much better at using Flame Javelin. It barely took any concentration to conjure them anymore, and I could rain them down upon my enemy.

I couldn't get rid of *all* the vines targeting them but they made short work of the rest and kept climbing. Shou's beasts weren't as talented, though, and some had already been knocked down. Nonetheless, most were frantically climbing to carry out Shou's orders.

Iiro seemed to piece together that thin vines weren't all that effective, so he bundled them together to create thicker ones.

BOOM.

The newly formed vines exploded into tiny pieces.

I quickly shot a glance in the direction the attack had come from, and I spotted Akiha atop a rooftop a little farther away, aiming an RPG launcher at the monster. Akiha didn't need to get close to her opponent to work wonders.

Iiro spotted Akiha as well and flung vines in her direction, but Hayato's barrier was still up and blocked everything. While her RPG launcher recharged, Akiha picked up a desert eagle and shot the vines down one by one.

"GAAAAAAAAOOOOOOOH!!!" Iiro's roar was so loud it hurt my eardrums.

He was furious. Not only had his attack failed, but he'd also lost the vines he

had gathered. He kept roaring and roaring, piercing our eardrums in the process.

We were stuck there, our hands covering our ears in an attempt to block out the sound. *I can't let him take advantage of this!*

"Thousand Dust of the Six Realms!" I exclaimed, aiming at Iiro's throat.

The sound waves did nothing to stop the hundreds of aura weapons I sent flying at him, hitting his neck.

Iiro continued to open his mouth, but no sound came out anymore.

Looks like he can still feel pain, even like this.

With the deafening roars now silenced, my comrades were free to continue their ascension.

My last attack seemed to have pissed off Iiro, and he directed his attention toward me. His face contorted with rage, and he took another swing. His every move was as loud and powerful as a windstorm. However, Invincibility canceled all damage.

I had a feeling a direct hit from his gigantic fists would send me flying, so I made a point of dodging it. I easily repelled the vines with my sword and cut off those I could while soaring once again.

Iiro seemed to have attacked Adel and the prince with vines too, but they masterfully evaded his attacks while slashing every chance they got.

I continued to dodge and got closer to his face. I swiftly replaced Tribanger Impact with the composite skill Overtachi and prepared to unleash the latter. My sword started glowing.

Iiro might have felt the danger because he recalled all of the vines that were attacking my comrades to focus on me. Dozens of— Actually, hundreds of— ...Countless vines flew at me from both sides like a violent hailstorm. But before Iiro could land a hit, I managed to activate my skill.

"HAAAAAAA!!!" I cried, pointing my sword at the sky.

A large aura blade enveloped Seven Arthur and surged upward. Despite its size, it didn't feel any heavier than usual, and I effortlessly swung it.

The single blade of light went right past the countless vines and severed Iiro's neck from his torso. His body had been incredibly hard to pierce through.

However, my attack hadn't killed him, and it did not stop him from retaliating. He hardened the remaining vines and tried to stab me with them.

"Not happening!" Adel exclaimed, using a mana sword to cut the vines before they fully hardened and hit me.

She didn't get them all, but Akiha took care of the rest. Based on the destructive power of her bullets, it was clear she had brought out her anti-materiel rifle. Thanks to the two of them, most of the vines had been turned into a fine powder.

One of the remaining strengthened bundles of vines was getting dangerously close to me, but a beam of light blasted it away.

I was a little taken aback and looked down to see where it had come from. Smoke was rising from Shou's Buster Megalo Chimera's cannon. *I guess this is one of his chimera's skills.*

From the gap between Iiro's head and torso, I could distinctly see right through him. His head had most definitely been severed, and yet, he still managed to send his right arm flying at me with all the might of a raging typhoon.

I had been so focused on his head that I reacted too late. I wouldn't have the time to dodge. I readied myself to be blown away by the strength of the hit when I suddenly saw a large magic circle appear on the floor.

"Arise, ruler of the evil seas! Crawl out, O lord of the abyss. Fulfill our contract and lend me thy power! I shall offer thou nourishment. Heed my wish and lay waste to my enemy! Come forth, Godly Machine Invocation! Cthulhu!" Shou chanted as he threw a card in the air.

The next moment, the ground was submerged by seawater.

I wondered whether Shou had tried to summon the sea itself for a moment, but I soon noticed that only the area inside of the magic circle was now underwater.

Silver squid tentacles slowly appeared from inside the circle and before long, an enormous sea monster—just as big as Iiro—was coming out of the circle.

The being rose, splashing water everywhere. Its head was somewhat similar to that of an octopus. Its face was covered in dozens of squid tentacles, making up its living beard, and its gigantic torso was covered in wet scales, just like a sea serpent. It had claws upon its fingers and two large wings upon its back, that *almost* looked like they belonged to a wyvern. I say “almost,” because, unlike actual wyverns, Shou’s beast had jet engines built into them.

Of course, the wings weren’t the only thing that made its nature obvious. From its head to its limbs, every part of its body screamed machine.



“Is this thing a machine beast too?!” Adel asked. “It’s humongous...”

I’m just as shocked as you... How did this turn into a kaiju battle?!

“Show him the might of the Great Old Ones!!!”

I saw Shou’s beast open its mouth and felt the air tremble around me. Could it be...ultrasound? I could tell Cthulhu was screaming as it approached Iiro, but I couldn’t make out any noise. *Honestly, they’re both monsters to me.*

I assumed Cthulhu must be one of Shou’s most closely guarded secrets. It entangled its many tentacles around Iiro’s thorny vines, ripping them off one by one.

Iiro wrestled with it, unwilling to let himself be undone.

“YAAAAAH!!!” Tatsuma yelled, jumping at Iiro from Cthulhu’s shoulder.

He had jumped at the opportunity to use the sea monster as a foothold, and he brought down his lightning spear upon Iiro’s shoulder. The blow tore his shoulder into pieces.

While still in mid-air, Tatsuma grabbed onto Prince Leon’s dragon and the latter helped him reach a safe landing spot.

I wasn’t sure whether the two of them had discussed this before or not. Tatsuma jumping about was certainly reckless since he wasn’t able to fly.

Regardless, Iiro can’t be stopped by cutting off his head... That’s pretty freaky. He’s still a living organism, isn’t he?

Just like that, another head had grown in the old one’s stead, and Iiro jumped at Cthulhu. Both monsters roared, although only Iiro could be heard. Cthulhu also fought indomitably, drilling holes into the plant monster with the hardened tips of its tentacles.

Still, Iiro’s regenerative abilities were just on another level. We still had the option of slowly and thoroughly looking for his weak point, but I feared even my stalwart comrades would tire before Iiro did. Now that he had summoned Cthulhu, Shou couldn’t even stand on his own anymore. Colona was helping him up, and I could see cold sweat running down his face.

It's putting quite a toll on him. He won't hold on for much longer. Which means...we need to get rid of Iiro in one fell swoop.

"Adel, come closer for a minute."

"What is it?" she asked, flying toward me.

Some vines followed after her, but I turned them to ash with a Flame Javelin.

"I'll use a powerful spell to finish him in one go. The issue is that I don't know if I have enough mana to burn such a gigantic monster to the ground, even using everything I have. I need your help," I explained.

"I see... All right. As I said before, I learned this skill for you, Masaki. Use as much of my mana as you need. If we keep dragging this fight on, the church may be in danger too."

Adel seemed to agree with me. We had to wrap things up as quickly as possible. Yggdrasil's church wasn't all that far from us either.

As we exchanged blows with Iiro, we had gradually been pushed back to the center of the city. Even if the church had remained safe after the smaller monsters' invasion, there was no way it'd withstand an attack from such a gigantic beast.

"I'm going to start casting a large spell!" I informed my teammates using the System Message function. "Please buy me some time!"

Tatsuma, with his spear, and Prince Leon, with his Dragon Breath, took care of the vines coming my way. As for Hayato, he stopped Iiro's fist with a One Way Sign once more before taking out a spiked bat. He took a swing at the monster's arm, and it caught on fire. *Good, Magic Sword: Blaze seems to be working even when they use their skills.*

Not to be outdone, Cthulhu slashed at Iiro's torso with its sharp claws.

Iiro gave up on combining its vines in an attempt to attack me more quickly. The vines came at me in a straight line. Unfortunately for him, straightforward attacks like these were easy targets for Akiha. She shot precisely through each and every vine, and they fell to the ground one after the other.

While everyone else bought me time, I worked on gathering as much mana as

I could within my palms. I focused on using up every last drop of mana from the top of my head to the tip of my toes.

Naturally, doing something like that under normal circumstances would mean passing out on the spot. If that happened, all the mana I had gathered would disperse. Or worse, explode and put everyone in danger. Thanks to Adel, I didn't have to worry about that, though.

Her hand rested on my back and I gradually circulated the mana she gave me through my body to make it my own.

I had never gathered and condensed that much mana before. The spell I intended to use was an incantation and one that was mostly used during guild wars as a trump card to triumph over the enemy. Usually, all of the magic users of a guild would team up and cast it with their combined MP, but with Adel by my side, I'd be able to cast it by myself. As a GM, I could technically use any spell by myself anyway—I just needed help with the mana supply.

I would need to extend the spell's area of effect, though. To do so, I used a technique I'd learned in this world: imagining the spell in order to control it. I pictured a balloon and imagined myself filling it with mana up to the brim. Until it was almost ready to explode.

"Ma-Masaki..." Adel started. "What in the world are you trying to cast? This mana concentration is incredible..."

"Its original purpose was to attack castles, so I didn't want to use it, but the situation leaves me no choice."

To be fair, I was more shocked by the fact that Adel could muster that much mana without batting an eye. She always said she was bad at magic, but if she ever learned to wield it properly, she would become unstoppable.

"GAAAAAAAAAAOOOOH!!" Iiro roared.

He must have noticed that I was gathering an insane amount of mana and suddenly ignored Cthulhu, Tatsuma, and the others to charge at me.

Unfortunately for him, my incantation was complete.

"Everyone!" I screamed through the System Message function. "Take cover!"

They all got away from Iiro at once.

“Unsummon...” Shou managed to say before collapsing on Colona with an exhausted groan.

“My lord! We have to escape!” Colona exclaimed, grabbing her master and dragging him away.

Iiro was raining down hardened vines on us all, but right before they could hit any of my teammates, debris rained from the sky, and they miraculously stopped.

I cast a glance at the ground and saw a traffic sign with an exclamation mark on it. Hayato had used his skill and had thrown debris and pebbles to confuse Iiro. In the end, he had succeeded in stopping him just for a moment.

That instant was enough for my spell’s area of effect—which only I could see—to appear before my eyes. I confirmed that all of my comrades had escaped the vicinity and finally activated my incantation.

“Exharadio!”

A magic circle started extending from the very center of Iiro’s body, and a strong barrier held him prisoner.

Normally, the spell’s area of effect wouldn’t extend past ten meters, but thanks to the overabundant mana I had received, I’d been able to greatly enlarge its reach. A beam of light enveloped the whole city for a moment.

Iiro was trapped inside the barrier and had no way to escape the scalding heat. He’d be reduced to ashes. And thanks to that same barrier, the heat did not reach us. We’d only have to deal with a blinding light for a short while. On the other hand, everything within the barrier, including Iiro, would be burnt to a crisp.

When the light rescinded, Iiro had completely disappeared. It was as if neither he nor the monstrous tree had ever existed. The ground within the magic circle had turned to glass.

It was an Ultimate Magic spell that could only be used if at least thirty-six high-level magicians teamed up. And Iiro had experienced that spell's might firsthand.

There was a reason why Exharadio was called "Ultimate." For a brief moment, the temperature within the barrier had surpassed that of the sun's surface, erasing everything within from existence.

Back in *Britalia Online,* the sheer strength of this spell had compelled everyone to look for countermeasures, so it eventually stopped being used in the game. I'd been able to bring it back into this world in a way worthy of its "Ultimate" title.

"Is it over?"

"Looks...like it. What a powerful spell. I've never seen anything like it. Never heard of it either!"

"It's the last time you'll ever see it too," I answered. "I can't cast it without Adel supplying me with mana, and I don't think it's a spell that should be used in the first place. On top of that..."

"On top of that?"

"I'm dead tired."

I had squeezed every drop of mana from my body, and I felt incredibly weary. I collapsed on the spot, my arms and legs sprawled out. Adel sat down next to me and rested my hand on her thighs as a way of showing her appreciation for my efforts. I enjoyed the cushiony feel of her soft thighs against my skin while I looked at the sky. The aftermath of Exharadio had pierced a hole in the clouds. They were quickly scattering away, leaving a gaping hole in the middle. Before long, I found myself gazing at a clear night sky with not one cloud left in view. The stars were dazzling.

I could hear dozens of footsteps steadily getting louder and, in the distance, the cheers of survivors.

The beautiful stars and joyful cheers finally indicated the end of the battle. *What a fitting spectacle*, I thought.

Chapter 6

“All done,” I said.

“Thank you so much!”

If you’re wondering what I was doing while we waited for the main army to arrive... Well, I set up a field hospital and started healing people, as always.

I didn’t really have a choice, did I? Iiro messed up the city and injured more than twice as many people as Barry.

Thankfully, the church of Yggdrasil was still standing, and we were able to set our base there. I rested for a full day after the battle and spent the next four days healing anyone and everyone.

A few doctors had survived the catastrophe, and I left them in charge of the sick while I dealt with the wounded. Healing magic couldn’t fix illnesses, so there wasn’t much I could do for them myself.

“Good work today, Masaki,” Adel said, bringing me a cup of coffee. “You’re finally done, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, at long last. It already irked me with Barry, but I really wish our enemies would stop hurting their fellow countrymen.”

I had left my Room open, and everyone was free to come and go to get clean water and other beverages. That being said, I had hidden away the beer dispenser in my storage. I’d seen the way the priest had looked at it when he’d first visited my Room, and I couldn’t forget his greedy eyes.

I understand the feeling, but priests shouldn’t be drinking, right?

That aside, I had finally healed the very last patient, and during the past few days, the Pharmacist Guild had been hard at work making potions and medicine, so we now had more than enough to go around. I could now leave comfortable in the knowledge that the doctors would be able to handle the rest.

The citizens had begged me to stay, but I refused. I hadn’t forgotten what this

country had done to me. The Granfang Empire had forcefully summoned and tried to enslave me. Considering how they'd treated me, I didn't have any obligation to help in the first place, but I was aware that its citizens hadn't done anything wrong—if I turned a blind eye to their suffering, I felt I'd lose my humanity. That's why I decided to do what I could while waiting for the main army to arrive.

I'd done my part. Now the survivors could organize and rebuild the city.

Besides, I had a lot on my plate right now.

Shou had already gone back to his capital lodgings, but, according to him, an organization called Pavaria was at the root of the events that transpired here. He didn't know who they were or what they were planning, but the last time they fought, a country had been wiped off the map.

Speaking of Shou, while he'd fought valiantly a few days ago, he had now secluded himself to, and I quote, "flirt with Colona." Not that I actually believed that.

I asked local scholars about Pavaria, but none had even heard of the secret organization. Asta-san would most likely be the only one able to answer me.

I was also curious about the Great Admiral. Why did they abandon their fleet, and where did they go?

I took a sip of the coffee Adel had poured for me and let out a sigh. The bitterness hit the spot.

"How long before the main army reaches us?" I asked her.

"They'll be here soon," she answered. "Akiha spotted them from the city walls."

"That's good to hear. After we meet up with them, we can finally go home. I can't wait to get some rest."

"I'm not sure that'll be happening," Adel said.

What? It's still not over?!

"The king will distribute rewards to those who distinguished themselves. There will also be a victory banquet to celebrate the soldiers and let the people

know that the war is over for good. Since you contributed the most, you can expect great rewards, Masaki," she explained.

Rewards, huh?

"To be honest with you, I don't really need any of that. I'm more than happy with the gorgeous residence I got."

"So there's nothing you want? Considering everything you've done, the king should make you count or even marquis. Not to mention give you more land."

Wait! If I become a count, I'll be on the same level as Count Alan, right?! I only have vague memories of the way this all works, but if I'm not mistaken, a marquis is even higher in rank than a count... I so don't wanna get a fancy title...

"I can't just say 'no thank you'...right?"

"No can do. You played a key role in ending the war that ravaged most of the continent. If you refuse your rewards, how can those who did less than you accept them? It'll be better for you—and for everyone else—if you just accept whatever the king offers you."

"You're right... It's going to be a pain either way, but I might as well pick the least annoying option," I agreed. "Do you think I'll get to pick what piece of land I get?"

"I think so. The empire will naturally fall under the Sentdrag Kingdom's dominion, so there's more than enough to go around. As long as you don't pick a territory that already belongs to another noble, it should be okay. Do you have a place in mind?"

"Yeah. Hang on, I'll show you," I said, taking out a map of the continent from my inventory.

I had borrowed it from the imperial castle. It wasn't as detailed as my own, but it would be enough to show Adel the land I was thinking of. I'd make a more detailed one later—it should be easy enough with my skills and personal map.

The place I liked was located between the kingdom and the city of Lurf, and I had a feeling Adel would love it too.

"Around...here," I said, pointing to the area on the map. "Do you think the

king will agree?”

“What?! But here is...”

“No good?”

“No, no... It should be all right. After all, the lord of this land has already passed away... It was my father.”

...Seriously? Did I pinpoint her father’s land just like that?

“Masaki,” she continued. “Why did you decide on this place?”

“To be perfectly honest, the first thing that attracted me was the hot springs. I spotted them while we were flying over it. I’m a big fan, and the sea isn’t far either. On top of that, this was part of the Valentine Empire, wasn’t it? I thought that would make you happy. I had no idea it was your father’s land, though.”

“I see... I know it’s only a coincidence, but...thank you,” Adel answered after a while, tears welling up in her eyes. “I’m happy you chose this land. I thought I would never be able to go home.”

Adel was a knight and, as such, she always acted strong and confident, but learning that she’d be able to go back to her birthplace must have filled her heart with joy.

I caressed her hair and used a handkerchief to gently wipe her tears. For a while, we enjoyed each other’s company in silence. I waited for her tears to stop and for her to regain her composure before standing up to pour her a cup of coffee.

Coffee, much like delicious meals, was best enjoyed with loved ones, not alone.

I miss Youko.

“I still don’t know whether the king will allow it or not, and I don’t know the first thing about managing land, so I will most likely leave everything to administrators. But are you okay with that?” I asked Adel.

I’d only ever managed properties in video games. Winging it was all right in a virtual world, but I wasn’t about to try something like that when the livelihoods

of real people was at stake. *This isn't a game, it's real life.*

"I don't mind," she assured me. "There are plenty of lords who don't manage their estate or lands themselves. Some of them are just like you. They're not confident they'd do a good job and leave everything in the hands of butlers and local administrators."

"They must think it's better for skilled individuals to handle it all rather than risk messing everything up by getting involved."

"Exactly. That being said, some nobles just can't be bothered and know nothing of their domains at all. You could say they're lords only in name."

I'm sorry, Adel. It's true that I don't know anything about administration, but I also can't be bothered to learn. Oh well, I'm sure someone who's used to dealing with the territory will do a much better job anyway. It'd be a shame if I got involved and made life harder for the people of the fief.

"Well, then, if we're both in agreement, I'll try to bring it up with Prince Leon when I see him next. He'll be able to pass on my request to the king, so it should make things easier," I said.

I'll take the chance to beg him not to give me another title. Being in a position of power is just not for me. I should also ask him to avoid bringing me into politics. I don't want anything to do with it, and I don't want to be instrumentalized either.

<Masaki-san, the main army just arrived.> While I was lost in thought, Akiha suddenly contacted me with the Whisper function. <Jirou-san wants you to come and give a full report on the situation. And...Youko is very, *very* excited to see you.>

I covered one of my ears with my hand before answering her. It was the signal we had decided upon to show the people around us that we were in the middle of a discussion using Whisper or Telepathy.

<Got it. I've finished treating patients, so let them know I'll be there in a minute.>

<All right.>

“The main army just arrived,” I told Adel after finishing up my conversation with Akiha. “Jirou wants me to give a report, and...Youko’s here too. Let’s go meet them.”

“Yes. I can’t wait to see Youko back in good health. Let’s go!”

Adel and I rushed toward the hall in which they were waiting, hand in hand.

Youko had tagged along with the army, and she seemed to be doing well. As soon as she spotted me, she dashed and jumped into my arms.

“Ha-Hang on, Youko.”

She hugged me with all of her strength and inhaled loudly right in front of Adel. “Aah... I missed your scent, Masaki. And your warmth.”

Youko really has a fetish for smells, doesn’t she?

It wasn’t the first time she’d done this. Sticking close, and resting her head on my shoulder, and happily sniffing me was kind of her thing.

I felt her soft chest squish against me, and my heart jumped.



I ran my fingers through her hair and gently stroked her face for a while, but after five minutes, Adel started getting a bit jealous.

“Youko, it’s still the middle of the day,” she admonished.

“Oh my, does that mean I can do whatever I want at night, then?”

“You... You know that’s not what I meant! Anyway, get away from him, will you?”

“Noooooo! Just one more hour,” Youko whined.

“That’s way too long!” Adel snapped.

“Girls, please don’t forget we’re in public... Everyone’s shooting daggers at me!”

I could see the envious stares of all the men in the room boring into me, but Youko refused to let go for ten more minutes.

◆◇◆

We left the generals and their accompanying government officials in charge of wrapping things up in the empire and returned to the Sentdrag Kingdom triumphantly. While Tatsuma had been captured during the previous battle and was technically still a prisoner of war, his help had been paramount in saving the continent. As a result, the other prisoners of war brought forward a petition to plead for his release, which was readily accepted.

He was to become my subordinate. Officially, it was so that I could watch him and make sure he didn't cause any trouble going forward, but the real reason he'd been assigned to me was that Jirou thought he'd have an easier time working with another otherworlder.

We'd brought Philia along with us back to the kingdom, but she had yet to awaken. According to the palace doctors, the cause was the mind corruption she was subjected to. They didn't yet know how to cure her.

As for Shou, he'd disappeared from his lodging before anyone had noticed, leaving only a letter behind. It read: "Let us meet again soon, Akechi-kun." *Since when are you a phantom thief?!*

I tried asking Asta-san about it, and she told me that Shou always pulled stunts like this. Before he'd set off to god knows where, he went to see her to get his reward, and apparently...a little extra? When Asta-san mentioned that "little extra," her face turned red, so I decided not to push for more information.

I decided to employ both Akiha and Haruka. That way, the sisters would become my retainers before anyone else could try to snatch them away. Prince Leon was very intent on making Haruka his princess, but since he wasn't sure if she returned his feelings, he had yet to make a move. He still looked overjoyed whenever he was in her presence, though.

I was sure Haruka would do amazing with her agriculture skills (which honestly just felt like cheating) and knowledge from here on out. She told me her next project was growing vanilla pods on top of her usual crops. If she succeeded, she would bring about a confectionery revolution. *I can't wait to have vanilla ice cream again*.

On the topic of sweets, Haruka had already succeeded in growing sugarcane,

sugar beets, and cacao beans during her time with the empire. It wouldn't be long before they were distributed throughout the kingdom too. I had nothing but respect for her achievements.

Asking the prince to put in a good word with the king had helped, and, as I'd hoped, I was awarded the title of count—and not marquis—and received the Bernstein family's former land along with a hefty sum of money. The king also agreed to pick out trustworthy officials and administrators from either the former empire, the Sentdrag Kingdom, or one of their allies to send my way. Finally, as the prince promised, an announcement was made to explicitly confirm that I wouldn't take part in politics in any way, shape, or form, even if I was a hero to the people.

The fact that some nobles grumbled at the announcement was comforting. It had clearly been a smart move to take the initiative and make sure the king was on board.

The prince later told me that my decision not to enter the political world had helped him convince the king to not make me a marquis. I was very thankful to him for going the extra mile for me, and I decided I'd help him out with courting Haruka if I ever had the chance.

Youko was awarded the Order of Three Dragons for defeating Chogokin and taking over his robot. From what I understood, the Order of Three Dragons was one of the most illustrious decorations in this world. We sent news to Youko's family in Yamato and, after a few days, I received a letter along the lines of "please take care of our daughter going forward." Thankfully, they blessed our union. Once things calmed down, I hoped to go visit and greet them properly.

The rewards had been given out, and it was now time for the victory banquet to begin.

Despite my brand new title, the number of nobles and merchants offering me their daughter's hand in marriage had greatly decreased thanks to my two fiancées. At the same time, Tatsuma's presence was working wonders at discouraging people from applying to be my retainers. I understood, though, the man *was* intimidating.

As a result, however, most of the attention had shifted to Akiha. What about

Haruka, you ask? Well, with the prince glued to her side, everyone instinctively knew to back off.

They were currently together drinking wine, both with wide grins on their faces. He was a handsome guy, she was a beautiful woman—they made quite the picture.

A few ladies were gazing enviously at them from afar, and, when Haruka suddenly took out a little jar, Prince Leon gestured at them to come closer.

The girls were beyond themselves at having been noticed by the prince and hurried to their sides. But when they took in the scent of the jar Haruka was showing off, their eyes widened.

Inside was a perfume of Haruka's making. She had made it with the plants she'd grown, and it was of much better quality than what the nobles of this world were used to. Or so Haruka explained to me later on.

The elegant floral scent charmed the jealous ladies on the spot, but Prince Leon was too entranced by Haruka's proud smile to notice.

After Haruka had distributed small bottles to each of the ladies, it was clear that they no longer had any intentions of standing in the way of the two lovebirds. According to Akiha, her sister didn't do this sort of thing on purpose but... *There's no way, right?*

"Masaki-saaaan!" Akiha called out, hurrying to my side.

I was busy feasting when she arrived. She looked a little uncomfortable. Behind her was a herd of handsome young nobles. I assumed they were trying to court her.

Akiha had traded her usual military uniform for a gorgeous dress woven by one of the kingdom's most renowned designers. I'd gifted her high-quality accessories and jewelry to match.

She was just as beautiful as the other noble ladies in the room tonight, but as far as I was concerned, she was a little sister to me and nothing more.

She took a deep breath as soon as she reached me and drank a large gulp of water.

“This is tiring me out quicker than battle,” she said, breathing a little heavily. “I never dated anyone when I lived in Japan, so I have no idea what to do with so many handsome guys talking to me.”

“I know *exactly* how you feel,” I responded. “Don’t worry, Akiha, you’re one of the prettiest girls here. I’m sure these guys agree.”

I took a glance at the group of men, and, sure enough, they were green with envy. Although a few of them did nod along.

“You...really think so?”

“Why would I lie to you? Take a breather, have a drink, and get some food.”

“Th-Thank you, Masaki-san.”

Her blushing face was really cute. *Is that how it feels to have a little sister?*



I couldn’t keep myself from raising my hand and patting her head. She smiled and seemed at ease.

“Hey!” she yelled a second later. She seemed to have realized what was happening. “What are you patting my head for?!”

“I don’t know, my hand moved on its own. Sorry.”

“You should have at least warned me first...”

So if I warn her, I can just do it? I don’t get her.

The dancing began while the two of us were eating.

All right, time to run away.

I had never danced. Ever. And I had no intention to start today. Akiha seemed to be of the same mind and hurriedly left the main room with me.

We both retreated to the terrace and stumbled upon a group of demons. Members of the demon tribe all had small horns and pointed ears, so they were fairly easy to spot. Their general, Asta-san, was standing in the middle, surrounded by her comrades.

The moonlight accentuated her beautiful curves, and she somewhat reminded me of a princess.

“Oh my, Sir Masaki, Lady Akiha,” she greeted us. “No dancing for the two of you?”

“I’ve never danced in my life, so I ran away,” I told her plainly.

“Same,” Akiha added.

“Ha ha! To think even the great Sir Masaki, slayer of dragons, is bad at something.”

“Of course I am. I’m not superhuman.”

Admittedly, I could do a lot of things, but I was far from omnipotent.

“Then all it takes to defeat you is to bring you to a dance floor?” she teased.

“Please stop. I beg you.”

“It was a joke. Although I wouldn’t be against dancing with you. You’re quite

the interesting man," she said with a little laugh.

Akiha let out a little yelp from beside me and her eyes flitted between the two of us.

"I'm an engaged man, so you may as well give up."

"I don't mind. I seem to remember your lips tasted quite sweet. May I have another taste?"

"You can't!" Akiha interrupted her before I'd even managed to formulate an answer.

I mean... Yeah, she can't, but why is Akiha the one getting her panties in a twist about it? And what in the world is Asta-san thinking? Is she a succubus or something? Even so, it doesn't make it okay to ask for a kiss like that, right?!

I was pretty puzzled about the whole situation, and I let out a huge sigh when Adel suddenly came over from the ballroom.

She was wearing the dress she had taken a fancy to when we were organizing my inventory.

"What are the two of you doing out here... Oh, were you in the middle of something with Lady Asta?" she asked.

"We sure were," Asta-san answered. "In the middle of a little tryst, you see."

"What?!" Akiha all but squealed.

"We're not! Please stop with the weird remarks," I told Asta-san firmly. "Anyway, were you looking for me, Adel?"

"Phew... I'm glad to hear it wasn't true... Oh, right! I wanted to dance with you... Or are you not up to it?" she asked, looking up at me with puppy eyes.

I can see her cleavage from this angle... Daaaamn... Where did she learn to act so cute?



I let out yet another sigh. “I guess it would be better than staying here. All right, I’ll go.” I turned back towards the demon general. “Well then, if you’ll excuse me, Asta.”

“Hmm... Masaki-san? If it’s all right with you, will you dance with me next?” Akiha asked sheepishly.

“Yeah, sure.”

She probably just felt guilty that she was the only one to get away without dancing. *I’m sure we’ll manage even if we’re both beginners.*

“Please excuse us, Lady Asta.”

“Go ahead,” Asta-san said with a little laugh. “I’m looking forward to our next meeting.”

“You don’t need to look forward to anything,” I retorted.

I still wondered why Adel was so polite to her, but for now, retreating came first. I didn’t want her to blurt any more dumb stuff. *Fleeing is winning. That said, I’m running headfirst into another perilous situation...*

I took Adel’s hand and led her to the ballroom. My footwork was pretty clumsy, but thanks to Adel taking the lead, we managed to finish the song together. Next was Akiha’s turn. And she was surprisingly good! She later told me that she had taken dance classes as a kid. *So I’m the only true beginner in the end!*

The banquet continued until late into the night.

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A few days after the victory banquet, inside the king’s office...

King Laurent, Prince Leon, Jirou, and Albert, the prime minister, had gathered together for the first time in a long while. Upon the wall was a selection of beautiful antiques surrounding a flag picturing Bahamut, the wind deity to whom the royal family of Sentdrag devoted their prayers.

“Leon,” the king started. “You fought valiantly. It’s regrettable that Aldebaran lost his life in such a way, but who would have thought such events would

transpire in the empire?”

“Indeed. Without Masaki, I wouldn’t have made it back alive. And the empire...the continent would have been in grave danger.”

“I see... We must thank the gods for bringing Sir Masaki to our door... Had he joined forces with another nation, this whole affair may have had a very different outcome.”

Most countries were on the lookout for otherworlders, but Laurent knew that most would only ask them to protect their own territory. Had Masaki fallen under their control, the tide of the war would never have turned in favor of the kingdom.

Other countries were willing to use up to half of their military budget to acquire the necessary materials to summon an otherworlder and force them to serve, but one such nation had been brought to ruin as a result. They’d lost most of their armed forces when their troops had decided to follow the two otherworlders who walked away: Tatsuma and Hayato.

The Sentdrag Kingdom was one of the only nations strong enough to stand up to the empire. They led the fight and inspired their neighbors to take up arms and resist along with them. Jirou and Hayato had led their troops to many different locations, and as long as they fought in land battles, they were able to successfully repel invaders.

When Masaki arrived in the kingdom looking for support, the king had no intention of forcing him to join the war. However, when he heard that Masaki wanted to take revenge on the empire, he couldn’t help but rejoice at having gained a powerful ally.

Albert listened to Prince Leon’s report on the events that occurred in the imperial capital, flabbergasted. It reminded him of Masaki’s feats with the Leviathan.

“Is he really that powerful? I did hear that he triumphed over the Leviathan without sustaining any injuries but... Prince Leon, Lord Jirou, please be frank with me. What do you make of his strength?”

“I think he’s still hiding a lot, but from what I know, he can make himself

invisible, fly, and easily face a few hundred men alone. The magic he wields is powerful enough to lay waste to an entire castle. He also has a skill that allows him to track the number and position of every guard within a certain area. I wasn't able to gauge his full potential, but he's certainly a force to be reckoned with," Prince Leon answered.

Albert couldn't stop his face from tensing up, and he felt cold sweat run down his back when he thought about the man's strange abilities. He'd always felt like Hayato's endurance and Jirou's infiltration skills were potential threats, but Masaki was something else. Even if the man was their ally for the time being, his existence was frightening.

"To... To think he'd be *that* incredible," he finally said. "We should be thankful that he decided not to get involved in politics. That belligerent faction would never have let go of him otherwise. We should still be careful not to publicize this fact too much. We don't know what other countries might be thinking."

"I've had my men investigate and found that a few nobles are already plotting to make use of Sir Masaki. Others are unhappy with his achievements and have set out to ruin his reputation. My men have already caught a few agents. They've since interrogated them and located the ringleaders. I'm sure these aren't the last ploys we'll see, so I'll make sure they monitor Sir Masaki's surroundings closely."

Jirou's job was to stay in the shadows and investigate. More often than not, it meant keeping an eye on his allies as well as his enemies. There were always plenty of unscrupulous nobles in every era and every country. Jirou and the king had been holding off on punishing agitators to avoid adding more confusion during troubled times. But now that the war had come to an end, it was time to judge—or simply dispose of—the liabilities.

"Good, good. We're truly lucky that Sir Masaki does not wish to be in a position of power and considers the well-being of the people to be a priority. We may have to rely on his help again in the future, and I ask that you do not make him our enemy. While there are still a few threats that need to be dealt with, we're finally at peace for the first time in years. Let us endeavor to make it last. Not for the nobles or for the royal family, but for the people of Sentdrag," King Laurent concluded.

The members of his council all nodded in agreement and braced themselves for the domestic troubles that were sure to arise in this new post-war era.

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Back at the royal banquet, which had recently reached its conclusion...

An old gentleman and a woman with pointed ears—Asta—were sitting behind black-lacquered windows in a carriage drawn by behemoths, on their way back home to the land of the demon tribes.

Knights mounted on dark unicorns were posted on every side of the carriage, ready to protect Asta.

“Good grief! You didn’t need to bring such an excessive escort. I can take care of myself,” she said.

“Your Highness, you know I could never allow that. Ever since you headed to the battlefield without warning, His Majesty has been so worried he can barely eat.”

“I did leave a letter.”

“You bound the general who was meant to lead our troops and stuck a piece of paper on his forehead! How could you call that a letter?! As a princess, you should—”

“Yes, yes, it was my bad. Hear me out, though. I found them. Among all the otherworlders, I found the *real deal*.”

“Is that true?! Who are they?!”

“Masaki, the famous hero. I made sure to check with my Devilish Lips. That said, I wasn’t able to learn *everything* I’d hoped to learn about him,” Asta said, tracing a finger over her red-painted lips.

Devilish Lips was one of Asta’s unique skills. It allowed her to read the skills, memories, and physical abilities of anyone she kissed. However, Masaki’s Invincibility and Immune Status had blocked her skill.

“To think even your special skill wouldn’t work on him... But how can you be sure he’s the one, then?”

“Because it *didn’t* work, obviously. I couldn’t check his skills and spells because Devilish Lips was blocked, but I do know what blocked it. He must have a skill that prevents status alterations. And... While it was mixed with other flavors, his lips definitely tasted like the real deal.”

“Mixed with other flavors? That’s unheard of.”

“I could have made sure if I’d gotten the chance to taste him some more. Sadly, I can’t come on Adelheid’s fiancée too strongly now, can I?”

“Sir Masaki is engaged to Miss Adelheid? You can’t be too pushy, then. We have strong ties with the Bernstein family, and we cannot forget our debt to them.”

“I have something else to tell you. Shou came to me with a report. Pavaria is on the move.”

“Good gods!” the old man exclaimed. “The second we get back, I’ll have the intelligence force look into this.”

“Please do. We have to prevent the empire’s tragedy from repeating elsewhere. I’ll talk to His Majesty myself.”

“Understood!”

Asta turned her back to the old man and pressed a finger to her lips. She thought of Masaki as she gazed up at the starry sky.

He’s such an interesting human. He saved Adel even though she’s a vampire, and instead of fanning the flames of the war, he ended it. I should let them *know about him... Hee hee! If Adel hadn’t claimed him for herself, I might have stolen him away.*

More than a week had passed since Masaki and Asta had shared a kiss, but Asta felt the taste lingering as the carriage sped off toward the land of the demons.

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A man walked down a path lined by iron walls.

The lone man—the Imitator—wore a torn black suit covered in sand, and each of his steps echoed on the iron floor, making his presence known. At the

end of the pathway, which was lit by a non-magical force, was a large steel door. The man opened it and came face to face with a young man wearing a naval uniform. He was sitting lazily on a leather chair, a glass in his hand.

“Oh, you’re back! So, how was it?! Amazing, right?!” the young man asked.

He was showing off, and the Imitator let out a sigh in response. But he was indeed impressed. A gigantic steel battleship, dozens of smaller vessels standing guard around it, and supply vessels to complete the fleet—it was hardly a usual sight.

“It is amazing, I’ll give you that,” the Imitator admitted. “How many enemies did you take out? Wasn’t it just a heavy cruiser a while ago? You said it’d take a while to turn it into a battleship, didn’t you, Great Admiral?”

“I fought mostly monsters. It looks like the Leviathan knows who tried to control it, and a bunch of sea creatures attacked. Not that I’m complaining. It gave me the chance to grind,” the Great Admiral said, gulping down his glass of alcohol— Or rather, gulping down his glass of juice in one go.

He sighed happily, and the sweet aroma of *ramune* wafted in the air.

“Did you finish things up on your side too? How about a drink?” he asked the Imitator.

“I should refuse, but...sure, go on then.”

“How unusual! Happy to have you join me,” the Great Admiral said, taking out a bottle of *ramune* from the fridge and tossing it at the other man.

The bottle flew in a perfect arc, and the Imitator caught it without even bothering to look. “I can only drink this here, so I may as well indulge from time to time,” he answered, downing half of the bottle in a single gulp.

“Oh, by the way, *that thing* came by earlier. We’re moving on to the next part of the plan. *It* also asked that we bring this to the mainland. I hear it’s all that remains of Iiro,” the young man said, putting down a little packet on the table and shaking it a little.

As he did, whatever was inside squirmed. It was alive.

“It’s so unpleasant to look at. Put it away, will you?”

“It *is* creepy. I’ll throw it into the safe.”

“Sounds good. It’ll be a pain if it starts wreaking havoc on the ship, after all. Good grief, *they* asked for a cup of tea, and yet *they’re* already gone...”

“A cup of tea? Who was going to pour? You?”

“No way. Especially not for *them*.”

“Ha ha! You sure hate *that thing* a lot, don’t you? I guess I do too. I left the rest to other people, so let’s head back to the mainland.”

“All right.”

The Great Admiral approached a pipe that was sticking out of the wall and cleared his throat. “Attention crew. Prepare to sail. The route is—”

Under the Great Admiral’s command, his battleship, the Dragon’s Wrath, and its escort armada set out on the seas of the other world in which they now lived.

Deep under the fleet lay the lifeless bodies of the countless sea monsters that had attacked him earlier. By now, they were no more than fish feed.

Chapter 7

“Mmm... Is it morning?”

A ray of light peaked through the curtain and roused me from my sleep. I rubbed my eyes and slowly tried to get up.

Huh?

“Mmmm...”

What?! I can feel something soft against my... Oh, it’s Adel.

I’d somehow grabbed Adel’s chest while asleep. She seemed to be in a deep slumber and showed no sign of waking up. *Phew.*

Memories from the night before started flowing back. After the banquet, I had returned to my residence and took a bath. There were no employees around at the time so I carelessly threw on a shirt and bottoms and headed back to my room when...

“Ah, Masaki!” Adel stopped me.

“Good timing,” Youko added.

“What are the two of you doing here so late?” I asked.

Adel turned bright red. “Well...the thing is... You know...” she hesitated, pointing at me.

Youko was also a bit red. “Come on, say it,” she urged her.

“But...” Adel retorted.

The two went back and forth but took a while to give me a straight answer. In the end, Adel looked down, her cheeks somehow an even brighter shade of red, and Youko took a deep breath, deciding to say whatever they had to tell me herself.

“So, Masaki. The war is finally over and...we’ll be together forever from now on, right?”

“Of course, we will. At the very least, I have no intention of leaving the two of

you. If someone tries to break us apart, I'll destroy them with everything I have. Even if I have to fight an entire nation...no, the whole world."

"You'd fight the world for us? I love the audacity. Anyway, what I—" Youko started.

"I...I'm so happy," Adel interrupted.

It was a bit of an embarrassing thing to say, but I meant every word. I wouldn't let anyone take the women I held dear from me.

"We both are," Youko agreed. "But what I'm trying to say is that... I know that you care about us a lot, Masaki, but we're hoping for...more than words. We want to *feel* your love."

Feel...it? I wasn't made of ice—if they came to my room in the middle of the night, blushing like crazy, I was bound to react. We'd been putting this off for a long time. While we had no choice but to do so because of the war, I was nearing the end of my restraint.

"I understand," I said after a pause. "Are you both...certain you want this?"

"We are," Youko answered immediately.

"Yes...please," Adel added.

The two of them must have been holding themselves back as much—no, even more—than me.

I invited them to my Room. No sounds would be heard from outside.

"It's...my first time...so...please be gentle," Adel asked.

"Actually... Me too..." Youko continued. "You'll be gentle, right?"

"I'll be as gentle as I can," I said softly before pushing them down on the bed.

The three of us went at it for the whole night. I held myself back at first, but with two gorgeous girls egging me on, I succumbed to my instincts.

Adel was amazing. While we were doing it, she begged for my blood. I disabled Invincibility and let her bite into me. She got even more into it... That was bad for my heart.

Not to be outdone, Youko squeezed me dry in her own ways. She kissed me

vigorously and even used her tails to stimulate my body.

It was too much. I stopped holding back altogether and made full use of my physical ability boost. We went at it faster and harder than before, pleasuring my fiancées with all my strength—that is, until they could move no longer. *I ought to apologize for going overboard later.*

The artificial morning sun inside my Room shone upon Adel's porcelain skin. On my other side, Youko had a healthy glow, and when the sun hit her iconic golden tails, it almost looked like they started sparkling. Although she used to have one tail, two more had grown a while back for some reason. Getting her hands on Exmizer had worked wonders.

Adel and Youko both slept peacefully with soft happy smiles on their lips.

I need to protect these two, no matter what, I thought as I caressed Adel's cheek gently. She let out a cute little whine. It was completely at odds with the way she usually behaved, which made it all the cuter.

I tried to get up, but Youko clung to my arm and wouldn't let go. I couldn't stop my heart from exploding when I felt her soft chest press against me. I almost let myself go wild again, but I had important things to do today, so I reined myself in.

It was interview day. I'd be meeting with potential administrators for my new fief. But first, I needed a shower.

I forgot to mention it before, but my fiancées were using magic as a contraceptive until the wedding. When they told me that, I realized all over again how incredible magic could be.

I was in charge of making breakfast today and I decided to try making it Japanese-style. I served egg rolls, rice, bread, miso soup, little sausages, sunny-side up eggs, and salad.

If I dared say so myself, it was a culinary success. Akiha stared at me while I was eating. Maybe she wasn't a fan of the egg rolls. I usually added some sugar to mine, but I knew that some people liked it with dashi instead. *I'll make both next time*.

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For a few days, I interviewed people at my residence.

There were those applying to run my fief, be my butler, or even serve as my maids. From what I understood, they'd all been handpicked, and yet, there were more than three hundred of them. Needless to say, I couldn't hire everyone.

Jirou was proficient at getting information on people, and he helped Adel and me screen out the applicants who weren't suitable.

"These people are no good," Jirou started. "They have links to a gang of thieves. Oh, and this one was recommended by a noble who's currently suspected of embezzlement... I'll get to the bottom of the matter and deal with him accordingly."

Jirou's information network *really* came in handy.

Apparently, he had quite a few ninja-like subordinates. To be honest, I could always see a few of them following him on my map, hiding out on roofs and other inconspicuous places. Or, at least, I assumed they were his subordinates.

"Thanks to Jirou, we managed to cut down the number of applicants by half. It would appear that many of them took the Sentdrag Kingdom's intelligence department too lightly," Adel said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Lady Adel. It makes it all the easier for us if our targets aren't careful," Jirou answered. "This woman here isn't right either. She's trying to seduce you—I suspect an ulterior motive."

With Adel and Youko around, I was pretty confident she'd never succeed... Still, I didn't want her to spoil the mood, so I wouldn't be hiring her regardless.

I brought Jirou a cup of coffee and continued to listen to his report. When he'd finished speaking, the number of eligible candidates had dropped to around fifty.

"Still fifty even after all this? I guess having a chat with each of them one by one would now be the best approach," I said.

"I agree" replied Jirou. "An investigation is never perfect. A few bad apples may have slipped through."

“I’ll check the rest with a skill of mine,” I assured him. “I can use it to look into moments from a target’s past.”

“Was there skill like that in Britalia Online?” he pondered. “That’s reassuring.”

Sorry, but there isn’t. Although I guess something similar does exist.

In the description of the Eyes of the Dead skill, there were a few lines of flavor text that said something similar. But its actual effect had nothing to do with being able to see into an opponent’s past. It simply meant that if you were killed, you could see through your assailant’s eyes for a short time. It was a pretty good PVP skill since you could track your opponent’s movements for a while.

Naturally, what I would actually be using was Log Analysis.

We had already asked applicants to write down their work history, desired position, and strong points, so I would be focusing on their personalities and attitudes during the interviews.

My very first requirement was that we mustn’t discriminate based on race. Beastmen, demons, and mixed-race people lived together here in the Sentdrag Kingdom, so most locals were tolerant, but that wasn’t necessarily true of foreigners. For instance, I’d heard that in one of the neighboring countries, humans were considered to be the superior race. *I can’t believe they don’t understand the appeal of animal ears and tails. Look at Youko’s tails! They’re all soft and warm. Three bundles of joy.*

Since I’d heard discriminatory comments in the past, I wanted to use Log Analysis to make sure the people I would hire were safe picks first.

“And I think that concludes our interview. Thank you for your time.”

“Thank you very much!”

I said farewell and reached out my arm. Since I was their prospective boss, I assumed no one would refuse a handshake. And if they did, I’d fail them just to be safe.

I was still very influenced by the standards of my old world, and I was excessively polite with every applicant. *I guess it’s better than talking to them*

too casually. I don't wanna get a bad reputation, so I'll just roll with it.

As expected, a few bad apples had slipped through Jirou's extensive search. The worst had been recommended by the royal families of neighboring nations.

For instance, one was a former head maid who had a habit of stealing things. She was strict—sometimes even verbally abusive—with the younger maids and would confiscate their makeup or supplies for petty reasons. Apparently, most of her coworkers would call her "the ogress" when they thought she couldn't hear them. She was good at her job, though, so she'd never been fired. The people of the palace probably didn't know about her kleptomania.

She sold everything she picked up at her family's shop. *Honestly, she could make it as a professional thief.*

She was on her best behavior in front of her superiors and always insisted on taking inventory by herself, so Jirou hadn't found anything during his investigation. Even after she quit her job at the palace, she hadn't been caught and had continued to make a living selling her spoils for a while. She probably thought she could make some easy bucks here too.

Unfortunately for her, she had touched my hand, and I now knew about every single item she had stolen along with where she'd sold them off to. I told Jirou about it and, in a few days, she'd be behind bars.

Some of the other applicants were voyeurs, and others would sell information on their masters. Obviously, I failed them all. If they tried to spy on Adel or Youko, I'd kill them myself.

I eventually ended up hiring the remaining eighteen suitable candidates. I would pay them with my annual noble's pension.

As a count, I now received a hundred thousand flan—roughly the equivalent of ten million yen—each year. On top of that, I was given the Sentdrag medal and an extra five hundred thousand flan—or fifty million yen—a year for saving the kingdom from the Leviathan. That made for a total salary of six hundred thousand flan a year. I would also receive ongoing tax revenue from my fief. And that's not to mention the reward I'd received after the war ended—a whopping thirty million flan. That was the equivalent of three billion yen!

I had already used some of it to improve the pirate ship. It now had a kitchen. To make drinkable water readily available, I'd given them a water magic crystal, and to cook their food, I'd given them a far magic crystal. According to Youko, these magic crystals were particularly rare—and expensive—stones made up of mana. Lohas wouldn't have to turn his Flame Blade into a makeshift stove anymore.

Since they were a part of my reward, I didn't need to balk at the price and was happy to make good use of them on the ship.

That being said, I was currently thinking of importing some more using my own money.

All right! Now that the interviews are done and over with, let's head to my new fief!

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The former Bernstein territory.

According to Adel, lots of travelers stopped there to enjoy the land's signature fresh fish and hot springs.

At first, I was very surprised to learn that the people of this world also shared a hot spring culture, but after thinking about it, I'd seen large baths in the palace as well. If people enjoyed bathing, it made sense they'd also love hot springs. In my old world, bathing culture dated back to the Roman Empire and was widely popular.

Jirou told me he'd visited the harbor six years ago. According to him, it was pretty similar to the Japanese city of Atami. I could somewhat picture it. *A seaside city with hot springs... Sounds nice.*

Apparently, the harbor city didn't have a name of its own and was simply known as the Coral Port, in reference to the name of the region it was located in—Coral. Since it was now time to start a new chapter, maybe renaming it to Atami would be a good idea.

While I pondered, our ship was sailing toward Atami (prospective name). Joining Adel, Youko, and myself aboard the ship were the members of my crew, Tatsuma, the Kisaragi sisters, and my new carefully selected employees who

would soon start working on my estate.

Prince Leon was also eager to travel with us, but he had princely duties to take care of. He had promised to contact us immediately if Philia's condition changed, so Tatsuma felt he could take this trip without worry. I truly hoped she would wake up soon.

I noticed a few things after spending this time at sea with everyone.

"Urgh...I feel sick..."

"H-Hey! Are you okay?"

"Can't take it any— Urgh..."

Tatsuma's seasickness was no joke. He was emptying the contents of his stomach into the sea every few minutes.

On the other hand, Haruka was enjoying herself. "Ah! I missed the smell of the ocean!"

"Me too. It's so relaxing," Akiha added.

"Did the two of you grow up by the seaside?" I asked.

"We did," Haruka answered. "We used to go swimming all the time when we were little. Are you sure I can't take a little dip?"

"Of course not! The ship's still moving!" I exclaimed.

Apparently, since the Kisaragi sisters were born in a seaside town, they were great swimmers. They could even fish. I lent Haruka a fishing rod to see what she could do and she pulled up a small tuna-like fish.

"I maxed out my fishing skills in *Farmer Island*," she explained with a big smile, brandishing the flopping fish. "I'm glad to see it still works here."

So Farmer Island *had a fishing skill, huh?*

Now that we were at sea, it might be a good opportunity to spend time fishing. We should also prepare the tuna-like fish while it was still fresh and have it for lunch. I'd bought soy sauce and miso (both exported goods from Yamato) in the Sentdrag Kingdom before leaving, so I might as well pickle and serve it on rice for lunch.

I brought Tatsuma to my Room so he wouldn't have to suffer anymore, and headed back to the deck to gaze out at the sea. I saw a city in the distance. *It must be Atami (prospective name).*

Now that I could see the harbor, I noticed a few soldiers standing in a neat row wearing the uniform of the imperial army. *I guess these guys were in charge of managing this land when it was under the control of the empire.*

The Bernstein territory attracted tourists and was prized as a health resort. The empire must have wanted to keep it intact in order to exploit these perks, and so they apparently invaded with minimal bombardment. Imperial war tactics usually involved arson and plunder, but Tatsuma told me that such brutal tactics were limited here.

Sadly, some unscrupulous soldiers and mercenaries ignored orders, so some parts of the city had still been damaged. Those people had been judged for their war crimes and sentenced accordingly. Slave collars had been placed around their necks, and they had been forced to rebuild the city with no way to run.

On the topic of slave collars, we had found large quantities in the empire and the Sentdrag Kingdom was now strictly controlling how they were used. They were revolting instruments, but they still had their uses. *I guess it all depends on the morality of those who use them.*

As for the soldiers who'd managed the city up until now, they were earnest people who'd worked hard to take care of everything and treated the citizens well. They also knew the city best so I wanted them to continue working here under my command. Naturally, I'd sent word ahead of time.

Their reaction had been quite enthusiastic.

"Really?! That would be amazing! I won't lose my job, yes!"

"I'm so glad to not become this city's enemy! Phew..."

"I can still face my family!"

According to Jirou, who'd arrived ahead of us to investigate and inform them, they had wept and rejoiced. He hadn't expected them to suddenly start crying, and, for once, the ever-composed Jirou had been at a loss for words.

I mean, unemployment does suck...

A turn of fate had let these soldiers keep their jobs and enter the kingdom's army. They were now waiting for us to arrive, lined up properly.

We docked, and when I disembarked, they saluted me with reverence.

One of the soldiers, who wore a slightly different uniform, took a step forward. "I'm glad to see you here, Count Toudou. I hope your trip was pleasant."

This was Ludrig von Braun. He had short blond hair and a little bit of stubble—he seemed to be a little older than me. From what I understood, he was the commanding officer of the troops stationed here and the acting administrator.

He was good at his job, and I intended to leave the government of my fief in his capable hands.

We had him show us around, and there were indeed still some traces of bombardments here and there. Some houses had been either partially or completely destroyed.

Inside the abandoned buildings, I could see cookware, crockery, and even stuffed toys that must have been treasured by their little owners. I wondered if their inhabitants were still alive. If so, I hoped they'd be able to return to their homes someday.

I felt eyes on me, and I turned toward the people they belonged to. It was the citizens of this city. They were nervously shooting glances at me from afar. *Were they assuming I was yet another soldier from the empire?*

As we kept walking around, the look in their eyes eventually changed. They seemed afraid at first, but their expressions changed into one of amazement, soon followed by joy. They started approaching us.

What are they looking at? Oh! I see... Adel.

An old man came running at us. *Don't overdo it, gramps!*

"Lady Adelheid! Welcome home!" he cried.

"Everyone... I'm sorry for failing to help you when you needed it most..." she responded.

“It’s not worthy of mention, Lady Adelheid!” the man reassured her. “Nothing else matters as long as you’re safe. We’ve heard many rumors about you... Could this man beside you be your rumored fiancée?”

“Indeed,” I answered in her place. “My name is Masaki Toudou. I will be taking over this land as a count from today. I may not be as great a leader as Adel’s father, but I promise to do what I can. I’m glad to meet all of you.”

“W-We are too! I apologize for my discourtesy! I did not know you were a count... Count Toudou, please take care of this land from now on!”

“I don’t mind. Leaving that aside, I want you to let Ludrig know of issues you may have. Along with a report of the damage this city has suffered,” I said before turning to Ludrig. “You’ll be much busier from now on, but I hope you can bear with it for a while.” I turned toward one of the members of my entourage. “Administrator... Hmm... What was your name, again?”

I had already met him during the interview process, but the new administrator was such a withdrawn person that I had already forgotten his name.

“Yes, sir. I’m Jimmy. Jimmy Wieland, sir,” he introduced himself again, his voice tense and feeble.

“Oh, right, Jimmy. You’ll be working with Ludrig. It’ll probably be hard work, so hang in there.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, sir,” he answered before turning to Ludrig. “Nice to meet you, Mister Ludrig.”

“A pleasure to meet you too, Simmy.”

“Hmm... It’s Jimmy...” he timidly corrected Ludrig.

Did we really pick the right guy for the job?

Jirou and I had decided on him together, so I wanted to believe in our judgment but...I did have a few doubts. My lips curled into a strained laugh at the thought. Still, we made our way toward our new residence—the place Adel had spent her childhood.

We saw more aftermath of the war on the way—damaged houses, hollowed-

out roads, and owner-less shops. It was a different kind of tragic spectacle from what we'd seen on the battlefield, but it was clear that the horrors of that war had reached this city too.

I'd never seen anything like this anywhere other than a TV screen in my previous world. Now it was all within reach.

"We did what we could to limit the damage, but some other units didn't quite...agree. I'm sorry..." Ludrig said. He sounded guilty.

"It's all right. It'd be delusional to expect a whole army to agree on something. And I'm sure needless destruction was limited thanks to you and your men."

"Thank you so much for your kind words. It means a lot to us."

Ludrig wore a very apologetic face as we walked. Tatsuma also looked around solemnly, likely reflecting upon his own actions.

Just like me, he had been forced to become accustomed to war after being transported to this world.

I shot a glance at Adel who was walking next to me. She looked equally sad and frustrated as she saw what had become of her beloved hometown.

I wasn't surprised. I'd despair too if the city I was born and raised in ended up becoming a warzone.

I took her hand and squeezed it gently.

"Masaki?" she asked, looking at me with a surprised expression.

"We'll rebuild. I don't know how everything looked before, but we'll make it the same—no, even better! Everyone here will be able to live a fulfilling life," I told her. "So please, don't make that face anymore, Adel."

"Y-Yeah. You're right. If I look down, I'll just worry the citizens even more. I have to pull myself together. It's especially important in moments like these, right?"

We walked for a while in silence. "If you still feel down..." I finally said. "Come to me when no one's looking, all right? I'll listen to your worries."

“Thank you,” she answered with a bright smile.

Seeing her like that brought a smile to my face.

I wondered when I’d last smiled so freely. It must have been...the last time we’d gotten some time to rest and relax. And that was quite some time ago. After that, we’d fought battle upon battle. It was so bad at times that I could smell blood for days on end.

I used my free hand to grasp Youko’s. Her tail twitched, and she almost jumped into the air. She had been so engrossed watching the scenery that I had startled her.

What was she looking at for her to be so surprised?

“Oh my, sorry. I was so focused on that lovely smell...”

“That would be the smell of tea, this land’s local specialty, miss,” interjected Jimmy meekly. “The best leaves are even sent to the royal family.”

“Tea, huh?” I said. “It doesn’t smell like black tea, though. It smells kind of nostalgic...like green tea.”

“Is green tea popular in your home world too, Masaki?” Adel asked.

“It is. I didn’t think I’d get to drink it again after coming to this world. I’ll have to give it a try—it smells almost identical,” I explained.

Miso, soy sauce, and even green tea existed in this world. How strange... Why are those things the same when everything else is so different?

I wonder if a stubborn otherworlder had tried to recreate them after being summoned by Yamato. Japanese people can be persistent when it comes to culinary pursuits. After all, we’re the ones who mastered the art of eating poisonous things like fugu and fly amanita.

Not that I had any intention of trying them in this world!

We walked along the tea plantation for a while, and eventually, a large mansion came into view. It was the mansion Adel grew up in...and where my late father-in-law and mother-in-law once lived.

As we got closer, I started to get a sense of just how big it was. It was at least

twice as large as the residence I'd been given in the capital. It made sense, though. Space was limited around the capital, so it was impossible to build huge residences. In the countryside, however, there was more than enough space to go around.

Feudal lords received lots of taxes, so naturally, their mansions tended to be on the bigger side. That being said, the Bernstein residence wasn't all that extravagant. If anything, it felt rather sober and dignified. They must have tried to make it fit in with its surroundings. The unassuming white walls and red tile roof blended perfectly with the surrounding greenery.

Another building stood beside the main mansion. By the standards of my old world, it was a little larger than a house. It looked more like a small apartment block.

According to Adel and the others, this building housed the retainers that did not have homes of their own. We decided to settle Tatsuma and the others there. As for the maids and butlers, they would live in their dedicated quarters within the main mansion.

After entering the mansion, I was shown to the lord's office. I did look around a little at first, but the residence was largely barren. Almost every piece of furniture and object of value had been confiscated by the empire. I was promised that everything that belonged here would be returned as soon as it was found, but for now, there was next to nothing.

I sat down on the black sofa in my new office and asked, "I looked around while we walked, but what other areas sustained damage during the war?"

Ludrig set down the map and documents he was holding onto the table and began to explain the layout. We then discussed the aftermath of the war in depth and brainstormed ideas to bring the city back to its former glory.

The plan was to use the knowledge and skills we otherworlders had to make sure the population of this fief would lead a good life. And it all started today.

Our first step would be to renovate the roads and repair the villages and towns. The war had destroyed many of the region's thoroughfares and the path on which the final battle had been fought was in a particularly terrible state. Large craters had opened up all over the place, giving a hint as to how violent the fighting had been.

The weapons had all been disposed of by now, but if you wandered a little further out of town, you'd find human bones scattered about. We intended to retrieve them all and send off the deceased properly by building a memorial monument on the city outskirts. We had no way of knowing whose bones we were picking up, but it didn't matter to me. No matter which side they had fought for, everyone deserved a proper burial.

We also planned to have Haruka plant her unique golden sunflower seeds there. They were beautiful flowers, and large quantities of oil could be harvested from them. She hadn't tried her hand at it yet in this world, but she'd also learned in *Farmers Island* that if she kept bees nearby, they would produce an even higher quality of honey. Apparently, it was the honey's golden hue under sunlight that gave the sunflowers their name.

These flowers would be both practical—as the oil and honey could be sold for a profit—and meaningful. It symbolized everyone's wish for the deceased to have a bright and happy future in the afterlife.

We needed many workers for the repairs, so we decided to temporarily hire both people from the slums and citizens who had lost their jobs because of the war. We also hired some military engineers from the Sentdrag Kingdom. Since we needed tons of materials as well, we took the chance to order them from the kingdom and asked the engineers to bring everything with them.

I made a point of helping out with my magic wherever I could. I was currently casting a spell in one of the territory's abandoned quarries. I had heard that this part of the region once flourished thanks to its healthy mining industry, but the stone had gotten harder as they continued to dig, and their yields became less frequent.

I focused my mind. I needed to create a slab that was ten centimeters thick, four meters wide, and eight meters long.

“Stone Wall!” I chanted, and a massive stone slab appeared.

At first, I tried using that skill in an area surrounded by soil, but it produced only poor-quality slates that would break on the spot. This spell was originally meant to be used to create a temporary defensive barrier, so it was only natural that the slates it produced broke down easily.

I was at a loss until Youko offered some advice. “The efficacy of spells that produce stones or clay is usually based on your surroundings. If you want to create stone, it’ll be much sturdier if you do so in an area with lots of stones. On the other hand, you’ll have an easier time crafting clay in a swamp.”

I followed her advice and tried to picture the stone slab emerging from the stone wall of the quarry. And that’s exactly what happened. It was made of the sturdiest stone, and even after hitting it a few times to check, it did not break.

All right.

It’d most likely be pulverized if I tried to use Seven Arthur, so I instead used an orichalcum sword that was in my storage instead. I made a horizontal cut, and my blade sank into the stone like it was a block of tofu.

Some might feel like it was a waste for an orichalcum sword to be used for such menial work, but I didn’t really care. I’d just use whatever I had laying around. I also intended to make full use of the ores I had gathered over the years. Making mithril hoes, for instance, sounded like a pretty good idea.

I finished cutting the stone and told the workers to store the slabs. I had given them ruby rings that enhanced their physical strength, so while they’d still need to work together to carry them, it should be a manageable task.

I had promised that they’d get to keep the rings when the work was finished, so they were all pretty fired up. I had huge piles of rubies lying useless in my storage, so I could afford to give some away without much worry.

The only issue was that, if I gifted too many people precious stones, their value would crash, so I still had to be careful. That was why I couldn’t just hand them over to temporary workers willy-nilly. Instead, I added a condition that they’d only be able to receive the rings if they accepted another job for me afterward. However, it turned out that they were simply thankful to have more

work lined up.

With that, we wouldn't be lacking in manpower.

As soon as the slabs had been taken away, I activated Stone Wall again and continued to create more. Once I had finished making a decently-sized pile, I told the workers that we'd be taking a break. After using so much mana and swinging my sword around for hours, I was starting to get tired. And the best way to fight tiredness was to have something sweet and sour.

I took out a few lemon pies from my inventory. I had made them myself with honey and lemons Haruka had grown. My cooking skill was maxed out, so my dishes were of an even higher quality than those of the maids. If I spent too much time cooking, though, I wouldn't have time to do much else, so I decided I would cook and bake in moderation and hire a professional to take care of most meals henceforth.

I called the workers over and started distributing slices of pie to each of them. They seemed to be a bit surprised and hesitantly brought the dessert to their mouths.

The moment it hit their tongues, though, they all erupted in joy. "What the hell?! This is so good!"

"It's sour...but also sweet?! There isn't sugar in this, is there??"

"Are you an idiot? It has to be honey. Honey! This is the best I've had, though!"

"Ah! This is what makes life worth living, guys! Now I can work 'til I drop dead with no regrets!"

Are you sure the pie is that *amazing? Also, please don't die. I don't wanna become an abusive boss, thank you very much.*

While they were raving, I took two slices myself and a big glass of water to wash them down with. The moment I finished eating, the ground started shaking. I turned and saw the cause of this little earthquake running toward me with heavy steps.

"Masaki! I've finished leveling the ground!"

“That was faster than I thought. Could you carry those if you’re free, then?” I asked, pointing her toward the stone slabs.

“Yeeees! And save me some pie for later!”

The source of the tremors was Youko. Or, to be more accurate, it was the Exmizer robot she was currently riding. Even though she wasn’t an otherworlder like its previous owner, she had started working with Exmizer after signing a Shikigami contract with it.

Apparently, one of the main reasons she’d been lacking in mana for so long was because her body took a long time to adapt to her new contract with Exmizer. The contract process itself was incredibly draining, and she had been stuck in bed for the whole duration of it.

Now that the hard part was over with, moving the robot didn’t require that much mana, and, since we needed all the help we could get, she had decided to put it to work.

And boy, was it convenient.

Thanks to Exmizer’s size, filling in the craters had been a speedy process. Youko followed up by having it then stomp about to level the ground.

Exmizer picked up more than a thousand stone slabs, loaded them onto a sled we’d crafted from logs, and dragged them along our newly built road. The robot then proceeded to unload the slate and arranged them neatly to form the road’s next segment.

I don’t know your actual name or face, but thank you, Chogokin. We’re putting your robot to good use.

Exmizer was hovering above the road. It was sturdy, and the robot should have been able to walk on it without damaging it, but Youko and Exmizer wanted to be extra careful.

According to her, using Exmizer wasn’t all that different from using any other golem. That was largely thanks to the fact that the robot had been kind enough to explain all of its functions and abilities.

There was something strange about seeing a huge combat robot do

construction work, but I had seen giant robots do laundry and laserbeams being used to boil bath water before, so I wasn't all that surprised.

Now that I had rested, it was time to cut some more slabs. While I worked, I thought about Haruka, who was likely working hard in the fields.

The lemon pie really was good. I should make some for everyone else next time.

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While Masaki was hard at work producing and cutting stone slabs, Haruka and Tatsuma—who accompanied as a bodyguard—were touring the surrounding villages that had survived the war.

"I did expect it to some extent, but...there really aren't that many men around," observed Haruka.

"Well, most of them got conscripted to fight in the war. Not to mention, this area was occupied. Only disabled or older men would be left," Tatsuma answered.

"Makes sense."

"Are you sure this is going to work?" asked Tatsuma. "I'm probably not the right person to say this, but the villagers must still be terrified of empire soldiers."

A group of former imperial soldiers wearing Sentdrag armor followed behind the two of them. Haruka had been the one to suggest the change.

"A new appearance is the first step," she had said with her usual carefree tone. "Since the villagers have a very bad impression of the empire, we should just dress them up in Sentdrag colors. At least they won't be scared at the sight of them anymore, right?"

When she had handed each of them their new sets of armor with a blinding smile, the men hadn't been able to keep their eyes away from her ample bosom. After that, they were happy to change into their new uniforms.

Today, Haruka was wearing a light white dress embroidered with orange flowers—it was very appropriate for the warm spring-like weather.



After a while, Tatsuma and Haruka entered the village. It was rather small, and no one was guarding the doors.

The villagers were surprised to receive unannounced visitors, and they were particularly wary of Tatsuma—a man who looked like a general, but whom they had never heard of before. However, when they saw the group of soldiers following the two otherworlders, they sighed with relief.

“I can’t believe it... They were so scared of us before,” one of the soldiers whispered.

“I told you so! You need to change what can easily be changed first,” said Haruka. “Where was the mayor’s house supposed to be, again?”

Another soldier pointed it out for her. “I-It’s this way.”

“Thank you very much.”

Haruka’s soft expression was enough to make both soldiers blush. They looked away and awkwardly scratched their heads.

She’s such a nice lady. I wonder if she has someone already... Should I try hitting on her?

Dang, her boobs are huge... I so wanna marry her...

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Meanwhile, Prince Leon was in his office back home in the Sentdrag Kingdom dealing with reports about the necessary postwar repairs.

He wished he could have stayed with Haruka, but as a prince, he couldn’t just ignore his duties. He did have siblings, but his sister was fourteen, and his brother was barely ten. He was the only adult and had to conduct himself accordingly.

He dipped his quill into the ink and was about to start writing when an unpleasant feeling suddenly ran through him. He glared in the direction of the Toudou territory from the confines of his office.

“I can feel it! Unsavory men are trying to approach Lady Haruka! I need to go to her!” he exclaimed, jumping from his chair.

“What you actually *need* to do is sign these documents,” his aide said, dumping yet another pile of papers onto his desk.

The prince just collapsed on his chair, disheartened.

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Unaware of the prince’s struggles, Haruka was paying a visit to the village’s mayor.

“Thank you very much for taking the time to visit us. I am ever so sorry that we do not have more to offer to such esteemed guests.”

“There’s no need for apologies. If anything, we’re sorry for the sudden intrusion. Thank you for agreeing to see us,” responded Haruka.. “I know this is rather abrupt, but I need you to tell me everything you can about this village’s fields. I’d also like to know about the workers, if possible.”

“Oh? Are you the one I should brief, young lady? Not that fine gentleman over there?” he asked, gesturing at Tatsuma.

A bunch of children had gathered around him, but Tatsuma turned away from them for a moment to answer. “I’m just here as a guard. She’s the farming expert here, so you can trust her,” he said. He handed a small wooden object to a child. “Here you go.”

“Thank you, mister!”

“I want one too! Make one for me next!”

“Me too!”

“Don’t push, and wait your turn,” Tatsuma scolded gently.

“To think you would even look after my grandchildren,” said the mayor. “I’m sorry if they’re bothering you.”

“I don’t mind. This is what my father used to do for me, so I just feel like this is me giving back,” the Wei General answered.

Tatsuma started to craft another wooden animal with his blade. He came from a family of carpenters and had grown up surrounded by timber. Whenever there were scraps available, his father would make little wooden bears and cats

for him, just like he was doing now.

With these happy memories in mind, Tatsuma was happy to relax his guard, busying himself with making kittens and puppies for the mayor's grandchildren.

Naturally, children were crazy for such trinkets and couldn't wait to show them off. Before long, almost all the village kids had gathered around the Wei General.

"Well, if you say so," the mayor said before addressing Haruka again. "So...you want to know about the fields. I think it'd be easier and quicker to just show you. Would that be all right, young lady?"

"Of course," she readily agreed. "Ah, you guys can take a break," she told the soldiers. "Tatsuma-san is perfectly capable of protecting me."

They nodded and started looking for a nice resting spot. They all knew how strong Tatsuma was. The only reason they might go along is to watch him get rid of any thieves or monsters that might dare approach.

Haruka and Tatsuma followed behind the mayor and studied each field. They also went to see the families that managed them.

Considering the size of the village, the fields were on the larger side, and it turned out they were the village's main source of income. Up until the war, that is. The scars of war were apparent here too.

While most of the young men were away fighting in the war, the fields had been turned upside down by roaming monsters. Many soldiers never came back, and most of those who did were unable to work anymore.

As a result, the village was a gloomy sight, and many started to despair. This had taken a big toll on the children of the village. They could sense something was wrong, and Tatsuma's little wooden figures had brought a bit of joy back into their lives.

Even after having taken in the sights and atmosphere of the village, Haruka was still in high spirits, and she returned to the mayor's house with a bright smile on her face.

The old man was astonished—even after seeing the village's grim state, the

girl was unfazed.

She stepped into the house, let out a long sigh, and drank the glass of water that had been placed in front of her. Her thirst quenched, she took out the map of the village Masaki had given her and spread it out on the table. She designated rectangular areas with her pen and started scribbling.

“I have a pretty good idea of the situation now,” she said. “All in all, it looks like the damage was worse than we expected. It’s all right, though, we can fix this.”

The mayor looked absolutely puzzled—it seemed he had no idea what she was talking about. “What?”

Haruka’s smile didn’t falter as she retrieved some seeds and seedlings from her item box and lined them up on the table next to the map.

“Could you please gather the villagers, Mister Mayor?” she asked. “I would like to discuss the way farming activities will be handled going forward. To put it bluntly, I’ll be building a farm here.”

The mayor acquiesced and went to get all fifty villagers. They assembled in front of his house and looked equal parts curious and worried as they wondered what this announcement could be about.

“I made sure to gather everyone as you asked. What did you want to tell us?”

“It’s nothing complicated,” Haruka answered, her tone light and casual as always. “We’ll just make a change to the crops you grow.”

“Is that it?” A burly woman asked, cradling a baby in her arms. She had five other children in tow and was known in the village for having a large family.

“Yeeeep,” the otherworld farmer answered. “The harvest season has just ended, so the timing is just right, isn’t it? I’m thinking of going with these,” she said, opening up the little pouch that rested on the table she had brought out. There were black and yellow grains inside.

The burly woman picked up some of the grains and rolled them between her fingers. “I’ve never seen seeds like these...but at the same time, they remind me of something.”

“I’ve improved them a little, but these are just grass seeds. I’m sure you’ve seen them many times,” Haruka explained.

“Grass seeds?”

“Exactly. They’ll grow into this,” she said, taking out a clover she had picked off the side of the road.

Indeed, the villagers did see clovers like these every day. However, they’d always thought of them as nothing more than weeds.

With Haruka declaring that she wanted them to grow weeds, the villagers now looked at her with anxiety and suspicion. The farmer didn’t seem to mind and continued to smile.

The soldiers hesitated. The villagers looked like they might get hostile—would they need to step up to help Haruka? When they saw that Tatsuma hadn’t budged, though, they decided to stay put.

The atmosphere in front of the mayor’s house had taken a turn for the worse and, after staring at the seeds for a while, the burly woman spoke up again. “And? What would be the point of growing weeds?”

“These seeds are a bit special and will produce clovers that are much more nutritious and produce much more nectar than normal. You can also eat them—I promise they’ll be yummy when boiled, hee hee. Besides that, they’ll do wonders as fertilizer and animal feed. With all that nectar, I’m also thinking of raising bees to produce honey here, but that won’t be for a while.”

“Bees? Honey?!”

“I want to try honey at least once...”

“I haven’t had something sweet in years!”

“I also wanna try it...”

“It’d be great to have fertilizer too. Then we can grow better stuff.”

“Right.”

The villagers perked up at the mention of bees and fertilizer. Haruka knew she had managed to seize the attention of her audience and carried on.

“We’ll start beekeeping once the village has recovered somewhat. The first step will be to plant the clovers. Then, once they’ve grown, we’ll buy livestock—starting with chickens. Masaki—I mean the new lord—promised to cover the costs, so you needn’t worry about that.”

The villagers cheered. Peasants usually didn’t concern themselves with nobles or the lord of their domain. They never saw them anyway. Adel’s father, the previous lord, had been so busy taking care of the large Bernstein territory that he had never attempted to start new projects in this particular village. On the other hand, Masaki was taking the initiative, and its inhabitants were overjoyed at the prospect.

“Oh, I should mention that these seeds are for royal sweet corn, and I also have golden wheat seeds and warm sugar beet seeds. You can harvest sugar from those. These here are seeds to grow count potatoes—they’re soft and delicious,” Haruka explained, taking out seed packets one after the other. “All of these seeds are exclusive. Not even Lurf has them, so you can eat or sell your produce on the market. All of my seeds are resistant to diseases, and if you use fertilizer, you won’t have to worry about the fertility of the soil. Although you still have to water them a lot, all right? I’ll let you know when to plant and harvest each of these so that everything will go smoothly.”

The villagers’ eyes were glued to the seeds Haruka had displayed. Only the mayor seemed uneasy.

“We’re very happy to hear the lord has shown us such consideration, but...we don’t have enough manpower. As you can see, the young able-bodied men were all taken away... Without more workers, growing all these plants is nothing but a dream.”

The mood soured. Haruka was right—if they could grow all of those seeds, they’d be able to live a better life. But only women, children, disabled and sick men, and old people remained in the village.

Haruka’s gentle smile didn’t falter one bit. She took the mayor’s hands in her own. “Don’t worry! If we ask Masaki, we can heal everyone. And he’ll send workers if we need them. I told you I would build a farm here, right? You just have to become my workers, and everything will be all right. What do you say?”

“Yes?”

The mayor’s answer sounded more like a question, but Haruka happily shook his hand.

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With most of the roads repaired, we headed home for the evening.

When we arrived, Adel—who had stayed back to take care of the paperwork—greeted us. Apparently, she had assisted her father with his work many times. She had been so efficient that she’d already reviewed all the forms before we’d arrived back home.

While the new chef served dinner, we all reported our day’s progress.

Oh my, we’re having pot-au-feu tonight. He makes it just like they do in Japan.

The chef used high-quality, locally-sourced sausages and vegetables, and the whole meal ended up being delicious.

We only had dark bread, so I used Upgrade on it. I went a bit overboard with one of the loaves, and it turned into a yakisoba sandwich.

Thanks to Youko, a third of the stone slabs had already been laid out. We just needed to mix volcanic ash and water to make concrete and reinforce them.

In the city, the people had been hard at work tearing down the collapsed houses in order to build new buildings in their stead. Akiha and Tatsuma had been a big help. The Wei General, in particular, had experience helping his parents with construction work ever since he was a kid, and even as an adult, he had been working in the construction industry until he ended up in this world—basically, he was a pro and knew a lot of helpful tips and tricks.

On top of that, he’d just come back from protecting Haruka. I realized I was asking a lot, but, as it turned out, Tatsuma wanted to see the state of the surrounding villages, so it was like killing two birds with one stone.

Something must have happened there since Tatsuma later came to me asking us to rebuild every village in the area once we had finished restoring the main city. That was my intention all along, but I was glad that he’d come to me of his

own volition to discuss this.

The building Tatsuma was currently in charge of erecting would be a crucial part of bringing tourists back to the territory. It was a Japanese-style inn designed to make full use of the city's natural hot springs.

The project required both manual labor and magic, so I'd asked my crew to help out. Peddle was apparently doing some splendid work thanks to his earth magic.

Tatsuma's high stats made moving logs feel like they weighed nothing, and, although he couldn't carry as much, Barbarossa had taken to imitating him. He hurt his lower back in the process, though, and was soaking in the hot springs to recuperate. *He always has to go overboard with these things, doesn't he?*

Meanwhile, Akiha discovered that she could weld metal parts together by using the flames that her military vehicles produced.

She wasn't used to this kind of work, but she was doing her best to learn.

I decided to leave things to the experts, so Haruka was in charge of everything related to agriculture. That being said, I panicked a little when she told me her plan. I hadn't expected she'd suddenly want to grow clovers and raise chickens.

"Haruka, are you sure that's the right place to start? They're still using a semiannual crop rotation, so shouldn't we aim to increase productivity by introducing the Norfolk system first?"

I didn't know much about farming, but I had read about this method plenty of times in light novels. I'd looked it up online out of curiosity, and the gist of it was that, in return for a slightly lower production rate, you could keep using the fields throughout each and every season. It also made it possible to more easily raise livestock by including a fodder crop. The invention of the Norfolk four-course system had pretty much been an agricultural revolution.

"I already implemented that system in Lurf. At the time, food shortages were a main concern, but now that the war is over, it's not as pressing. Army stocks will soon flood the market. When that happens, most grains and cereals will lose their value. After all, when I was in the empire, I grew wheat, rice, and potatoes that produced at least twice as many yields," she explained.

I see. Now that there is no food shortage anymore, bumper harvests will only make foodstuffs incredibly cheap. As I thought, Haruka was the main reason why the empire had enough food to go around during wartime.

"I can help with fertilizer and manure production," she continued. "And, even when we start to grow the local farming industry, we should produce different kinds of products so as to not compete with Lurf. Oh, and I think dairy cows and chickens are probably the best livestock to raise here. There are plenty of egg- and milk-based dishes that would be perfect to serve at the hot springs inn, and although I only saw a few, there are chickens and cows in the village."

"Then we'll first need to purchase quite a lot of poultry, huh?"

"There's no need, hee hee. I didn't want to show it to anyone in the empire, but I have plenty of emerald chick eggs in my toolbox. I just need to use an incubator to hatch them, and we'll have plenty of chickens ready to lay the finest eggs."

An incubator, huh? I guess it makes sense for a farming game to have something like that.

If we could prepare the right environment for the eggs to hatch, then we might be able to manage it even without an incubator. If that worked...we could distribute those emerald chicks to every village. *And even cook the eggs in the hot spring... Damn, I wanna eat rice with a raw egg on top... And a nice, cold bottle of milk right after coming out of the hot water.*

"There are plenty of former soldiers now that the war is over. If we hire them, we can fix our issues with manpower and have them guard the villages," Haruka added.

"Farms tend to attract monsters and stray dogs," said Jimmy, who had been sitting in on our meeting. "If we have former soldiers in the villages, they'd be able to deal with those. You've put a lot of thought into this, Lady Haruka." He turned to face me. "Sir, I believe we should follow Lady Haruka's plan. The only issue will be the initial costs and funding the villagers' salaries..."

He seemed to like Haruka's proposal, but he broke into a cold sweat thinking about the budget. Up until now, a large chunk of this territory's tax revenue was taken by the empire to fund the army, so there hadn't been much to work with.

However, I had plenty of money that I didn't intend to use on anything else.

I should cover the costs. There's no point in me sitting on such a big pile of money anyway.

"It's not an issue. I will cover the initial investment," I declared. "We won't get anywhere if I just hoard every penny. Is there anything else you need, Haruka?"

"Actually, there is. Could you make me some sturdy hoes? If they could break through stone, that would be even better," she said languidly.

"I'm not sure it's hoes you're looking for, Onee-chan," Akiha interjected.

Right. I've never heard of anyone breaking stones with hoes before, but I'll make what she wants.

"Would mithril hoes work for you? I have piles of old mithril coins to work with."

"Don't tell me you're actually going to make them, Masaki-san!" Akiha exclaimed.

A few people snorted.

Sure, I'd have to make Haruka's hoes from scratch, but that wouldn't stop me. It was a good opportunity to get the villagers to like me by providing them with the best tools. They'd never expect me to send mithril tools. *I'm kind of looking forward to their reactions.*

Right after we finished eating, a few of my new employees pointed out that the meals I cooked were tastier than what we'd eaten tonight. The chef seemed a bit depressed, and I felt bad for him. It was a bit unfair to compare a regular chef with someone who maxed out his cooking skills.

After dinner, I headed to my Room to put together the blueprints for Haruka's mithril hoes. I couldn't just immediately start making them—the Smithing skill required me to first have a proper blueprint to use as a crafting recipe. Then I would need to register that recipe by creating the end result over and over to raise my proficiency to the max. Only then would I be able to make perfect weapons—or farming tools for that matter.

Once a recipe was registered, I could easily mass-produce it in a very short amount of time. If a weapon normally took several days to make, I'd only need a fraction of that time.

However, the mass production process also had drawbacks. For instance, if I tried to mass-produce a cooking recipe, I'd only ever get average-tasting dishes. That was the biggest flaw of this skill—my creations wouldn't turn out bad, but they wouldn't be great either.

I noticed this when I was brewing potions during the war. If I didn't rely on the mass production process and made every single item by hand, my proficiency level would kick in and the end product would be of much higher quality. Compared to the ones I mass-produced, the potions I had made with care were far more effective.

After trying to mass-produce meals, I'd been able to confirm this applied to every type of recipe.

That being said, I would be crafting farming tools this time. They didn't need to be all that special.

Using mithril, a metal that didn't wear easily, was already more than enough. To be honest, the hoes may even turn out more powerful than most run-of-the-mill weapons.

I used a regular hoe as a model, used Transcribe to sketch a blueprint, and then used Smithing to create mithril hoes before breaking them back into their raw components. It was a good way to save on materials while improving my proficiency.

Smithing was a lot like a rhythm game. You had to match the rhythm of your hammer coming down to the movements of your other hand. If you succeeded, the metal would instantly take on the desired shape.

It was already past one in the morning by the time I had finished raising my proficiency to the max. I hadn't stayed up that late in quite some time...

Still, I tried making a mithril hoe (mass-produced version) to see what kind of specs it would have.

Mithril hoe: A luxurious noncorrosive hoe made of mithril. It can break through stone.
STR +5 Attack +30

As expected, it was thirty times more powerful than the steel swords the Sentdrag or imperial soldiers used. If a trained blacksmith made one with the same material, it would probably be even more powerful, but a +5 strength boost was already huge for farmers.

I had a feeling our soldiers would probably cry if they ended up being weaker than villagers armed with hoes, so I intended on mass-producing stun batons for them. It'd increase their attack by forty and apply stun as an additional effect, so they should work just fine for maintaining public order.

I ended up making both the hoes and the stun batons before stepping out of my makeshift smithy and heading to the main room in which the kitchen was located. There, I found someone nodding off on the sofa.

I could only see her profile, but I immediately recognized Adel with her beautiful silver hair and porcelain skin.

Was she waiting for me to finish? I shouldn't have stayed up so late.

Getting too engrossed in my work was a bad habit I couldn't quite rid myself of, although the same was true of a lot of Japanese people. *I need to work on this.*

I picked Adel up in my arms, careful not to wake her, and brought her to my bedroom. When I entered, I saw that Youko was already sleeping soundly.

Working with Exmizer all day must have tired her out. The sound of the door creaking open wasn't enough to disturb her slumber. I put Adel to bed next to her and headed to the bathroom. All that work had made me sweat.

On my way there, I noticed light seeping through the cracks of one of the doors. If I wasn't mistaken, this was...Akiha's room.

I pricked up my ears and heard a strange scratching sound. It sounded like someone was writing something.

I still felt a bit bad that she didn't like the egg rolls from the other day, so I decided to go make her a late-night snack. Now that I thought about it, I also

felt like having a little something before going to bed.

I went back to the kitchen and quickly fixed us some corn soup and sandwiches. Needless to say, I used Quintessential Flavor so the taste was guaranteed. I was certain Akiha would enjoy it.

I walked up to her door and knocked a few times.

“Akiha, I made myself a late-night snack. Want some?”

“M-Masaki-san?! W-Wait! Hang on!”

I heard a muffled sound through the cracks of the door as if something had fallen down. It was followed by a little whine of pain. Did she hurt herself?

I hurriedly opened the door to check on her.

“Akiha! Are you...all right?”

“Ah... M-Masaki-san... I-I’m not always dressed like this! Ouch...”

Akiha wasn’t wearing her usual military uniform. Instead, she had traded it for comfortable loungewear. She seemed embarrassed and was trying to hide behind a pillow.

“For what it’s worth, I think it looks pretty cute.”

“Eh? Y-You don’t think I look plain wearing this?”

I wasn’t sure anyone would think that. Her reddish brown hair looked great against her long white shirt, and her bottoms suited her figure. She wasn’t wearing any makeup, but, as far as I was concerned, that was a plus.

“I don’t. If anything, it’s refreshing to see you in something different for once. More importantly... Are you okay? It sounded like you knocked your head pretty hard.”

“Y-Yeah. I’m fine...”

“That’s good to hear. By the way, what are you doing up so late?”

“I was busy with this,” she said, showing me the blueprint of a bicycle. “I was wondering if there was anything I could do to help you, and...I thought that making bicycles might be a good idea. What do you think?”

“Bicycles, huh?”

While I pondered, Akiha’s tummy made the cutest noise. She wrapped her arms around it and flushed red.

“Let’s eat first, shall we?” I offered.

“Okay...”

Akiha’s room looked almost the same as it did before she moved in. There were only a few trinkets—and heavy weapons—here and there. It didn’t really feel like a girl’s room—probably because of the aforementioned destructive weapons lying around.

“Thanks,” she said, as she brought the soup to her lips. “I was just getting hungry.”

“I get you. I’ve also been working late. By the way, I never knew you wore glasses.”

Akiha was currently wearing a pair of glasses. When I first entered her room, she wasn’t wearing them. They probably fell down when she knocked her head.

“My equipment allows me to see pretty well even without them, so I usually don’t need to.”

That made sense. Likewise, Immune Status had fixed my bad eyesight.

“On top of fixing my vision, my usual clothes also enhance my physical abilities, but...I always feel on edge when I’m wearing them. I can decompress a lot better with this outfit. And it reminds me of home... It’s the only thing I was able to bring with me.”

I see the war has left a deep impact on her.

She’d been forced to fight in this war for far longer than I had. And I’d heard she even had to kill someone with her own two hands.

“I’m sorry for not noticing all of this before, Akiha. I should have been more attentive.”

“What?! Why are you apologizing?! You didn’t do anything wrong, Masaki-

san. I just didn’t want you to see me wearing these plain clothes so I— Argh! I really should have bought some new ones!”

“There’s no need. I told you already, but you’re plenty cute like this. And I’m glad I got to see the real you.”

Akiha looked surprised. “Really?”

“Why would I lie to you? I don’t know what’s so hard to believe about that. You’re really cute, Akiha.”

“No... I... Y-You...” she stuttered. “Please don’t say stuff like that too often!”



She probably wasn't used to people complimenting her appearance, and she hid her reddening face behind her pillow.

She said not to say stuff like that "too often." Does that mean I can compliment her from time to time? She'll probably get even more embarrassed if I ask, so I'll just stop here. We shouldn't be making too much of a racket in the middle of the night anyways.

Despite her complaints, Akiha looked happy and finally showed me a smile. *Good, she seems to be doing better.*

After that, we ate sandwiches and talked about the possibility of bringing bicycles into this world and what materials we could potentially use to make them. Speaking with a fellow Japanese person really put my mind at ease in a way chatting with Adel or Youko couldn't.

Once we were done eating, I figured it was about time I took a bath and stood up to leave.

"Hmm..." Akiha stopped me. "Could we...have another chat sometimes? I feel much better after talking to you."

"I'd love to. I always welcome cute girls, you know?" I said before stepping out of her room.

"G-Geez! Good night!" she blurted out, slamming the door in my face.

It seemed like Shou had been rubbing off on me. Though I wasn't quite the crook he was. At least I didn't try to lay my hands on her. Not that I would. I had no intention of betraying Adel and Youko.

After leaving Akiha's room, I finally got to enjoy my long-awaited bath. We had a natural hot spring in the bathroom, and its familiar scent wafted through the air, making me a little nostalgic.

"Aaah. Feels so good... This is exactly what I needed... "

Late-night baths were a luxury, and I was enjoying every minute of it. I could feel my fatigue leaving my body as I thought about what to do from tomorrow onward.

When we were working on the roads, we were attacked by some boar-like monsters, so we had some extra meat. *Should I make a stew... Or maybe ham? I'd have to cure it first in that case, wouldn't I?*

I only had very vague memories of the process, but I had a feeling it needed to be kept for four days at three...or maybe five degrees celsius. I felt it was a pretty good idea, although I should probably get a second opinion from Haruka. Curing meat was hard work, but it shouldn't be too time-consuming if I used magic to fill a room with ice.

And then, I'd go to the quarry again— No, wait. I'd heard there was a former iron mine a little further away from the city with even sturdier bedrock. I'd better work there tomorrow.

Thinking about what to cook and what work I had ahead of me had already become a habit.I really needed to do something about these workaholic tendencies of mine.

The cool morning air was still damp when Haruka and I set out on horseback toward the village where she wanted to create her farm.

It was my first time riding a horse, but my mount was very obedient. It was almost like it knew I was a beginner and was trying to help me out. After a while, I got used to it and started riding faster.

Having learned how to ride at her agricultural university, Haruka was incredibly skilled. Despite having picked a very unruly horse, she'd tamed it in no time.

We spent the peaceful early morning hours on horseback. Like most nobles—or so I assumed—I had gone to bed way too late the previous day, and I was dead tired.

I yawned.

"Masaki-san, are you sleepy? Did you stay up late?" Haruka asked.

"Yeah. I got too into crafting, I guess. I should have stopped at the hoes, but I also tried making weapons for the guards. Before I knew it, it was the middle of the night."

“It happens,” she responded. “Are the weapons made of mithril too?”

“No. I used steel, tourmaline ores, and mulberry wood on them.”

In Britalia Online, precious stones all had magical attributes and powers. The weapon I’d made this time was based on a rod that could only be crafted by using Smithing, Woodworking, and Alchemy skills. First, you had to add steel ends to a cylinder made of sturdy wood. Then, you’d add a polished tourmaline to the top. Every time you hit an enemy with the rod, a small bolt of lightning would go through their body, and there was a chance it could stop their movements.

It wasn’t as strong as a police officer’s stun gun, but it would at least shock your adversary a little. It was roughly one meter and eighty centimeters long, so it was easy to use defensively while staying outside of your opponent’s range.

I was considering adding the forked head of a sasumata, a historic Japanese polearm used for restraining criminals, to it, but I would have to discuss that with the blacksmiths of Atami. I would have done it myself, but Jimmy and Ludrig stopped me, saying I shouldn’t steal the artisans’ jobs.

In the end, we settled on letting me cook from time to time, as well as craft ornaments and pieces of clothing to boost physical abilities. I had plenty of useful skills, but I wasn’t allowed to overuse them.

I’ll send some mithril and an anvil to the blacksmiths as an apology. Then they’ll be in my debt, and I’ll be able to request whatever I like from them.

“It’s good that you’re focused on rebuilding the region, but don’t push yourself, all right? Adel and Youko will get worried,” Haruka warned me.

“Right. I’ll be careful.”

The villagers were overjoyed to receive the mithril hoes we’d brought them.

“I feel stronger when I’m holding it! Surely it must be my imagination,” one of them said.

Nah, it’s not. That’s the strength boost for you. It directly improves your physique, so it’s only natural you’d feel like that.

They gave the hoes a test run. It dug into the soil like it was a soft block of tofu, and they easily crushed the stones and stubble into pieces as they tilled the ground.

Yup. At this point, they're definitely lethal weapons. We're gonna need to carve serial numbers and manage the stock very *carefully.*

I had asked Adel to distribute the stun batons to the guards. Tatsuma was in charge of training them, but he'd be busy today with mending broken buildings with the carpenters, working on the inn, and building a footbath. In spite of all the work he'd been handling recently, he never showed us how tired he really was. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself. *I guess he likes building just as much as fighting.*

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Two weeks had already gone by since we started working on rebuilding the territory.

It was still early in the morning, and I stepped out onto the balcony to gaze at Atami from afar. I could see steam rising upward. All that vapor came from the hot springs.

I wanted to check our progress on the whole area so I opened my map and zoomed out until I could see all the villages scattered around the vicinity of Atami. The main road now branched out to reach every village and continued all the way to Lurf. I could see carriages, merchants, and adventurers traveling along this brand-new path.

Up until now, people needed to make many detours on their way to Lurf, and the trip would take over two days. Thanks to Youko's efforts, the situation was completely different today.

"GO EXMIZER!!!" she'd shouted, pulverizing a gigantic rock almost as tall as a mountain in one go.

She had cleared a straight path to Lurf by getting rid of every obstacle—including uprooting a large bamboo forest that was so dense that people couldn't cross even on foot. Thanks to her, half a day was now enough to get there.

Naturally, we hadn't wasted the bamboo. She'd brought every last bit of it back to Atami so that we could put it to good use.

I put my map away and went back inside. At the same time, Adel entered the room with a cup of coffee in hand. It hadn't come from the coffee maker that was inside my Room—we'd bought this coffee in the city.

Although we *could* get infinite coffee for free in my Room, we agreed that it was necessary for us to spend some money on luxury goods to stimulate the economy and decided that coffee should be one of those goods.

"Good morning, Masaki. You're up early."

“Yeah. I contemplated going back to bed, but I didn’t want to sleep through my long-awaited day off,” I explained. Adel handed the cup to me. “Thanks for the coffee.”

I took a sip. It did taste a little different but not in a bad way.

“What do you want to do today, then?” she asked.

“I haven’t had a day off in so long. I can’t seem to decide,” I answered.

While I had made sure that everyone else got two days off a week—or at the very least one and a half days—I had spent the past two weeks working from dawn till dusk. Besides working on the roads, I’d been busy putting together proposals for different projects, visiting villages to heal people, making accessories to enhance the workers’ physical abilities, and a bunch of other things, so I hadn’t been able to rest yet.

Thanks to my skills and equipment, I wasn’t all that tired physically, but it was starting to take a toll mentally. That was why I had decided to take today and tomorrow off before I burned myself out.

When I told Jimmy as much, he gladly accepted my request that he take over my duties. Apparently, he was planning on offering anyway, since he was starting to get worried.

“Can you take some time off today, Adel?”

“I did half of today’s worth of paperwork yesterday to make sure that I could.”

I still remembered how high the piles of papers on her desk were when I swung by to deliver a cup of coffee to her yesterday. She’d managed to get through everything *and* start today’s work on top of that?! *Talk about impressive.*

Adel was a beauty, a skilled fighter, and—as I recently discovered—incredibly efficient when it came to desk work too. *She ticks all the boxes, doesn’t she?*

“Would you like to go out then? From what I hear, the work in the city is almost done, and the footbath is already operational.”

“A footbath, huh? I can’t say I’m not curious about what that’ll be like. Do you

think Youko would come with us?”

“That...sounds unlikely. She drank until she passed out last night, so I’m assuming she’ll be down with a terrible hangover today. And sadly, I can’t fix that even with my magic.”

Since she had today off, Youko had drunk herself under the table for the first time in a while. On top of the beer she usually chugged down, she’d opened up bottles of wine and fruit liqueur—a specialty of her hometown.

I had joined her for a few drinks myself. The fruit liqueur she introduced me to was so sugary that it basically tasted like juice. It was easy to drink, but the alcohol content was also pretty high so Youko had ended up flushed red and giddy in no time.

After five glasses, I must admit I had also started to get a tad tipsy. I could usually down ten beer mugs without issue, but that liqueur hit a lot harder.

I went to check on Youko, but, just as I had predicted, she was nursing her hangover in bed. *Guess we’ll just bring her a souvenir. Not alcohol, though. No hair of the dog here.*

I traded the Cloak of the Azure Dragon I always wore for a beige jacket and matching pants. I also threw on fake glasses to make sure people wouldn’t recognize me while we were out.

I was the lord of this territory, after all. If I attracted a crowd, we wouldn’t be able to enjoy our outing.

Adel changed into a discreet tunic that didn’t show off much skin. She added a black cardigan on top and tied her long hair into a ponytail. She completed her outfit with a wide-brimmed beige hat.

Now that I thought about it, it was my first time going out with Adel alone. I was way too old to get all jittery about a prospective date, but I was elated nonetheless.

I left my work to Jimmy, and Ludrig saw us off as we left in a carriage. Thankfully, nothing unexpected happened—like us being attacked by a group of bandits or monsters—and we arrived in Atami fairly quickly.

“I’ll get in touch when I want you to pick us up this evening,” I told the coachman.

“Yes, sir,” he answered with a polite bow before leading the horses and carriage into the city.

During the day, his job was to carry people from Atami to the surrounding villages and vice versa. At night, he’d go back to the estate, so he’d get us home while he was at it.

After we entered the city, Adel and I ran into a group of adventurers and people from the slum, all holding either brooms or dustpans and brushes, who were working to clean up Atami. A few of them were yawning, though. We gave a shallow bow to show our appreciation as we passed them by.

A little further, I spotted an adventurer bundling all of the trash in one place. He looked incredibly sleepy—it probably hadn’t been long since he picked up this job—but he was still doing fine work.

We walked past him and noticed the streets were pristine. Not a piece of rubbish in sight.

“This was your idea, right?” Adel asked. “I didn’t know what to think when I first heard we’d entrust the city’s cleaning to the slum dwellers and the Adventurer Guild, but in the end, this policy is popular with everyone, citizens and adventurers alike.”

“People tend to gather in clean cities. And since we’re trying to boost tourism too, cleanliness is crucial.”

Workers would collect garbage in the mornings and evenings. I’d asked the Adventurer Guild to offer up the two-hour mission up to its members for a reward of ten flan (more or less a thousand yen) and a half-price coupon for the hot springs. Ten flan could get you two meals—as long as you didn’t try to eat at a luxurious restaurant. The additional perk of being able to visit the hot springs for cheap made the job quite popular.

The people who lived in the slums were also eager to work. To them, working meant being able to live without relying on thievery. I considered distributing food to help them, but I was afraid it’d promote laziness if I overdid it, so I

focused on finding them places of employment instead.

Most of the people I employed spent their salaries in Atami so the money went back into the city businesses, and—indirectly—into my pockets, which made this system easy enough to sustain.

I'd also given iron plates to every permanent resident of the city. It allowed them to use the hot springs facilities at half the price all year long. Naturally, it was strictly forbidden to buy or sell this plate. If someone lost it, it could be replaced at cost.

Carrying out a census to put this policy in place had been the hardest part. It took *a lot* of manpower, and we'd only recently finished. Now that we were done with the survey, though, it was very practical. We knew the family structure and place of residence of everyone in town.

"The city is looking much better nowadays..." Adel said, a thoughtful look on her face. "I'm sure merchants and nobles will also have a better opinion of it now."

"Nobles do seem to care about appearances first."

"You do know you're also a nobleman, right?"

Good point. Although that new reality still hadn't sunk in.

After walking for a bit, we reached Atami's market. Dozens of different stalls were lined up, and housewives, adventurers, and artisans alike were busy looking through their wares and making purchases.

In front of one of the stalls were a few bamboo baskets placed over the hot springs' natural vapor. Eggs were being steamed inside.

"Welcome, welcome! We have super-fresh steamed eggs here! Come try one!" the man behind the stall shouted in my direction.

"I'll take two," I said as I approached him. "Are they salted?"

"Sure are! Two steamed eggs coming right up!"

I handed him a few coins and accepted the eggs. The shell was a peculiar light-green color. *I see Haruka's emerald chicks have been put to good use.*

Adel and I then bought ham sandwiches and some milk at other stalls. The ham had also been steamed with the hot springs' vapor and smelled divine.

We walked around until we found a calm spot to eat, and I gave Adel her sandwich before starting to peel an egg.

"It's so nice to have ham and eggs in the morning," she said, taking a bite of her sandwich. "It's making me feel so nostalgic..."

"Did you used to eat steamed food a lot?" I asked, handing her an egg.

"Yes. When I was a child, I'd often spend my pocket money on steamed fish and shrimp. They cooked them in little baskets just like these." She pointed at the stall we'd bought eggs from. "Steamed eggs are a first for me, though." She took a bite. "They're pretty good too."

"Right? Looks like it was a good idea to focus on hatching chicks first. I can't wait to have a nice bowl of rice with a raw egg on top."

Adel was surprised. "Y-You eat eggs raw?"

"Sure do. Don't worry, though. I asked Haruka about it, and apparently, emerald chicks' eggs are very resistant to bacteria. We won't get sick even if we have them raw," I said before pausing. "I don't know if you'd like it, though. We can always soft-boil them if you prefer."

"I do like soft-boiled eggs, but I'm getting curious about the original version of this dish of yours. Make it for me next time."

"Of course."

I finished my egg in three bites and gobbled down the sandwich before taking a big gulp of milk.

I'd also gotten reports with praise for the cows Haruka had given to the villagers. They produced large quantities of high-quality milk.

In my previous world, we used to pasteurize milk to avoid health issues, but although this process didn't exist here at all, everyone seemed to be doing fine.

They have monsters and dungeons here, so people's stomachs being a bit sturdier would hardly be the strangest thing about this world.

The milk here tasted much stronger than the stuff I was used to drinking. Now that we had a stable supply thanks to Haruka, I had gotten in the habit of drinking a glass after my bath every day.

Once we were done eating, I took Adel's hand and the two of us started walking around the market.

Plenty of men were staring at us—mostly at Adel's chest, actually—and casting envious glares in my direction. If eyes could kill, I'd probably be long dead.

"That girl's fine."

"I so wanna date her..."

"What do you mean 'date'? You gotta marry girls like that."

"Dang, look at her tits."

"Make it make sense! Why is such a babe dating a dude like him?"

Hey! That was mean! Who said that?!

To be honest, I was more bothered by the guys staring at Adel's chest and making crude comments than by the one who criticized me. It was starting to get a bit stifling so I walked faster to get out of there.

We exited the market and reached a large street where the buildings of the different guilds were standing side by side. There were also plenty of shops where the people of Atami came to buy daily necessities.

This street was the beating heart of Atami, and now that most people had awoken, it was bustling. Some were shopping while others just stood around chatting.

Now that the town's reconstruction was almost complete, some noblemen were also taking a stroll through the city streets. *Hang on, one's actually walking straight toward us.*

His butler was following behind him, an absurd number of shopping bags hanging off his arms and a potted clover in his hands. It looked like carrying that pot was his life's mission.

The noble didn’t notice me or Adel at all and walked right past us before entering yet another shop. It was a place that sold jewels, and a little sign in front of the entrance read “Selling power stones.” Power stones were currently crazy popular with nobles and adventurers alike, and the shop was absolutely crowded.

“The clovers and ores are selling like hotcakes. I didn’t think they’d be so popular when you first brought it up. I must say I’m surprised,” Adel said.

“Those kinds tend to be superstitious, you know? Actually, almost everyone wants to get their hand on mysterious powers and charms.”

“And you even put some around the mansion. I’m used to seeing polished gems everywhere, but I didn’t often get to see ores and unprocessed crystals before that. It’s somewhat novel.”

Manufacturing gems to make jewels or accessories was a thing here but admiring ores wasn’t. Even so, as soon as I said that the power stones could help purify their surroundings, people got interested.

I had some placed all around the mansion so that visitors would get curious, and it worked like a charm. They couldn’t tear their eyes away and even asked if they’d be allowed to touch them.

While the ores most likely didn’t hold any special powers, I was sure the placebo effect would be beneficial nonetheless. You couldn’t underestimate the power of the human mind, after all.

To be entirely frank, I used to be very much into healing crystals and other gems at one stage in my life, so I knew enough to explain the concept to others.

The shops allowed people to place orders even if there wasn’t enough of the item in stock, so they and the surrounding mines were making tremendous profits. I’d heard the miners and shop clerks were all overjoyed.

Since power stones all had to be used in different ways to release their purifying benefits, stores could also sell the various articles needed to complete those rituals.

As for the four-leaf clover pots, I had advised general stores to advertise them as good luck items that would bring happiness to the buyer. They only cost

between one to five flan (a hundred yen to five hundred yen) so they were flying off the shelves.

The particularity of these clovers was that they had many different uses. They could be eaten, used as aromatic herbs, *etc.*

Thinking about ways to liven up the economy like this made me feel more like a businessman than the lord of a territory. Regardless, it was good to see everything going well.

While the stores were doing well these days, the Adventurer Guild was absolutely *booming*. It also served as a city hall of sorts where people could complete their resident registration, enquire about job opportunities, or seek support and advice.

Depending on what their problem was, they also had the option of commissioning the guild. For instance, they could get adventurers to slay monsters for them or gather materials.

Adel and I peeked inside and saw dozens of adventurers looking intently at the bulletin board that listed the different commissions.

There was an ancient dungeon not too far away from Atami, and several requests entailed going there to slay monsters. The loot could be used for construction so these adventurers were high in demand.

I needed some stuff too, and I considered leaving a request of my own, but I eventually decided against it. Going to the dungeon myself sounded much more interesting. *I mean...dungeons! That stuff's right out of a fantasy story!*

"That reminds me..." Adel started. "Did you make an adventurer card, Masaki?"

"An adventurer card?"

"You need one to accept commissions from the Adventurer Guild, but it can also be used as an identification card so it's very handy. Wouldn't it be easier for you to walk around incognito if you had a fake identity?"

So you need an adventurer card to take on commissions... You don't need one to put out a request though.

“Right...” I said after a pause. “I can’t go around saying I’m a count, can I?”

I still had many things I wanted to investigate but couldn’t do as a count. I was curious to see if I could find otherworlders in hiding, and I was itching to know more about Pavaria, the organization Shou had mentioned. If we left them alone, they’d eventually bring about more trouble.

I could disguise myself, but having a whole other identity would make things much easier.

“The Adventurer Guild has connections everywhere, even beyond this continent. There’s no harm in getting a card. Youko and I both made one under fake names.”

“That makes sense... I’ll go make one, but not right now. I want to take it easy with you today.”

“All right,” Adel answered with a smile.

I could feel people staring at me again from both inside and outside the guild’s building, and I was about done.

I took Adel’s hand in my own and started crossing the road. We walked right past a party of female adventurers. They reeked of blood and sweat. *I guess they came right from the dungeon.*

What actually caught my eyes, though, was something else—the large axe that the girl wearing the nicest armor was carrying.

That’s...the Flydragon Axe, isn’t it? It looks the exact same, even down to the colors.

It was exactly like a unique weapon I’d seen back in *Britalia Online*.

When I was still a player, one of my friends loved this axe dearly. I had very vivid memories of her happily throwing it around. *Just to be sure, I’ll use Appraisal.*

Flydragon Axe: A battle-axe crafted from the wing of a pterosaur. The Flydragon Axe chooses its wielders and will always find its way back to the hands of its master.

Rarity: Unique

STR +10 Attack +50

Unique ability: Boomerang (After you throw this weapon, it will return to your hand.)

"Hey, you there, do you need something?"

Oops, did I stare for too long?

"Oh... Hmm, no, sorry. I was just thinking your weapon looked quite unusual."

"Ha ha! So you were looking at my axe, not me? I got it from a fascinating girl when I was down south in the Beastmen Kingdom. Let me tell you, it's quite the strange weapon! It comes right back to my hand even if I throw it! I'm doing much better in dungeons now," the girl explained.

"I see... If you don't mind me asking, what did that 'fascinating girl' look like?"

I knew one such "fascinating girl" who wielded an axe. She had stopped logging in very suddenly three years ago. Could it be...

"Well, she had jet-black hair, just like you. I remember she had a very pretty red feather in her hair—which was styled in twin tails, by the way. And...hmmm... She was wearing a lovely golden pelt over her clothes. I asked her what monster she'd killed to get it, but she wouldn't tell me!"

Black hair and twin tails... That was exactly how she'd worn her hair that one time I saw her at an offline gathering.

I also had an inkling as to where that pelt and feather came from. She'd dragged me to fight those bosses over and over again until they dropped them. It had to be Fenghuang's Feather and Nue's Pelt.

I couldn't be certain, but every hint was pointing in the direction of my former guildmate. *Did she get transported here too?*

"Are you planning on looking for her? I can only advise against it," the adventurer girl said. "The Beastmen Kingdom is basically in ruins after falling to the empire. You look so scrawny that you'll definitely get yourself killed if you try to go there now!"

I wanted to tell the girl not to judge a book by its cover, but with the way I was dressed right now, I couldn't blame her for mistaking me for a regular

citizen.

“I see. Thank you for the warning. I’ll head there when the situation calms down, then. Sorry for holding you up,” I answered.

“It’s no problem. I was just wary since we tend to get approached by sleazebags trying to hit on us around here. Like them,” she added, pointing at a group of men hovering around the Adventurer Guild.

A woman-only party must run into guys like them plenty of times.

“Anyway, we’ll take our leave,” she said before taking a few steps and stopping again. She turned back to face me. “By the way, may I suggest you pay more attention to your girlfriend instead of weapons in the street? You’re on a date, aren’t you?”

She and her friends laughed as they entered the Adventurer Guild building.

“Masaki, have you ever seen that weapon before?” Adel asked as soon as they had left.

“Hmm... I’m not sure talking about this here would be very wise. Let’s go somewhere else. The footbath was built pretty close to here, wasn’t it? Let’s talk there.”

Adel nodded. “Sure.”

We held hands again and walked to the rest area where the footbath had been built. It was almost noon but the place was bustling. I spotted a familiar spear in the crowd.

Isn’t that Tatsuma? Is he taking a break?

There weren’t that many people in our immediate vicinity, and Tatsuma was a fellow otherworlder. Including him in the conversation would be for the best.

“Yo, Tatsuma. Taking a breather?”

“Oh, hey, Masaki. Yeah, I started my lunch break a bit early. You’re off today, aren’t you? Got something you needed?”

“Actually, I was just about to tell Adel something important, and I figured you might want to hear it too.”

Adel and I sat next to Tatsuma and took off our shoes to enjoy the footbath. I then caught Tatsuma up on my conversation with the adventurer.

“The Beastmen Kingdom...” Tatsuma repeated. “Are you really sure that weapon comes from *Britalia Online*?”

“Couldn’t be more sure. Both its appearance and effects match the Flydragon Axe from the game. I used Appraisal to confirm it, and even its item name checks out.”

“Why does this weapon interest you so much, Masaki?” Adel asked. “The fact that it’ll come back to the wielder after being thrown is pretty interesting, but surely that doesn’t warrant all of this.”

“I can’t be certain yet, but...there’s a good chance the person who gave that adventurer the axe is one of my friends. I haven’t been able to get in touch with her since three years ago, and the description she gave fits to a T. It had to be her...”

“So that’s why you were asking her so many questions... I’m relieved.”

“Relieved?” I asked, looking into Adel’s eyes.

She brought her hand closer to rest against mine and averted her eyes, flushing red.

Cute.

“You were so eager to talk to that girl that I thought you might have taken a liking to her,” she admitted.

“Where are you getting these silly ideas from? I’d never do something like that when I have such gorgeous fiancées.”

“I-I see... I’m so happy to hear that.”

My lovely fiancées were already way out of my league. Why would I ever cheat on them?

“Did you two lovebirds come here to flirt?” Tatsuma interrupted, resting his chin on his hand with an exasperated look on his face. “We’re in a public place, and, in case you forgot, I’m right here.”

Uh oh. I was so busy basking in my happiness that I forgot about him for a moment there. I'll be careful to keep the flirting to the confines of our home from now on. Sorry, bro.

"By the way, Tatsuma. You went back to the Sentdrag Kingdom the other day, didn't you?" I said, changing the topic. "How's the princess?"

"Sadly, she's yet to awaken. I got her to drink the High Elixir you gave me, but it didn't do anything. Her physician says that the burden on her psyche must have been greater than we first anticipated... I'm sorry for wasting such a precious item."

So even the most potent elixir I could craft wasn't enough... I knew Tatsuma had been holding onto the hope it'd heal her for good, so it must have been hard for him. We'd still made some progress, though. At least, we now knew that restorative medicine wasn't going to cut it.

"I don't mind. We had to try." I paused. "I really hope she wakes up soon."

"So do I," he agreed. "Oh! Look at the time. My break's over, so I'll get back to work. If you guys have some time to spare, you should go see Akiha. She's done with you-know-what."

"For real?! Great."

That was fast. She must have found a suitable substitute for the material we didn't have. We should go check it out.

"Masaki, what was he talking about?" Adel asked after Tatsuma had left.

"Oh, right, we have yet to send a report your way. Akiha is trying to make a horse substitute."

"A substitute for horses? Is that even a thing?"

"Yep. It's called a bicycle. It's a vehicle that's powered directly by the person riding it."

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Akiha was busy at work inside one of the workshops owned by the Carpenter Guild. She wiped the sweat off her forehead as she made some final adjustments to the bicycle she'd built.

She used to travel to her vocational school with a bicycle she'd put together by herself, and she had a pretty good idea of how bicycles were made.

She'd designed it with the idea of cycling over vast wastelands in mind, so the final product looked more like a mountain bike than a regular one. To make sure the bicycle would be flexible, light, and durable, she'd opted to use bamboo for the frame and had modified existing carriage wheels to make them smaller and thinner. For the chains, she had simply asked the Goldsmith Guild for help, and they had easily provided her with what she needed.

The most difficult part had been finding an appropriate substitute for the rubber part of the wheels. In the end, it was the leader of the Carpenter Guild that had found a solution for her.

Back when he was an adventurer, the guild leader had found himself stranded in a dungeon without food. He had ended up grilling hole worms—serpentine earthworm-like monsters.

Adventurers often had to resort to eating monsters while inside dungeons, so it was not such an unusual occurrence. However, he discovered that when hole worms were grilled, their skin would turn incredibly elastic.

In the end, he hadn't been able to fill his stomach—although he later discovered that if you boiled them after removing their skin first, they were fairly tasty.

He invited Akiha to have some with him, and she politely—but firmly—declined.

After Akiha explained the properties of rubber to him and mentioned that she was looking for a substitute, he went to get hole worm skins from the Adventurer Guild and processed them so they'd fit around the wheels. When he heated them up, they started stretching while releasing a peculiar yet fragrant scent.

Once he had finished, the hole worm skins were just as elastic as rubber. Needless to say, this discovery was sure to play a big part in the further development of wheels in this world.

At first, Akiha had been very hesitant to touch the finished product—it was

made from worms, after all. She spent some time convincing herself that it was nothing more than regular rubber, and, after some effort, she was finally able to touch this new material. Thankfully, on top of being flexible, it was also tough enough to be used on wheels.

While she'd struggled to touch the newly made worm rubber at first, she eventually got used to it and started pulling at it to check how sturdy it was.

To apply the skins to the wheel, the guild leader used an adhesive that became even stronger after being heated: steady slime fluids. Hole worms and steady slimes were both monsters that appeared naturally in dungeons.

Akiha had learned to adjust the temperature of her flame to obtain the perfect elasticity-to-sturdiness ratio. Now she was a true expert, and her first prototype was almost complete.

"I'll try riding it, so don't come too close," she warned the people around her.

"A-All right..." they answered meekly.

Akiha wiped off her sweat with a clean towel and braided her long and shiny reddish-brown hair to keep it out of the way. She was dressed pretty casually—a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of camouflage pants.

She stepped out of the guild's building. The moment she was outside, a bunch of men tried to approach her. Her casual clothing showed her upper arms and her ample bosom—that was as large as Adel's—and that was easily enough to unintentionally draw people's attention.

She let out a deep sigh. These men all worked in the neighborhood, and it wasn't the first time they'd come to chat her up. She'd already turned them down as sternly as she could several times.

They weren't about to give up, though. "Why hello, Miss Akiha. Are you still working on that thing the lord asked you to?"

"Indeed, and I'm about to do a test ride. Could you go away?"

"I can ride it for you!"

"No thanks. You don't even know how to ride a bicycle."

"Then how about we grab lunch when you're done?" another man asked. "My

treat, of course.”

“I’ll pass.”

“I know!” a third one exclaimed. “How about I take you to the footbath then? It opened recently, I’m sure you’re dying to try it too!”

“I already tried it before it opened to the public so there’s no need.”

“Please insult me, Miss Akiha!” a voice came from the group.

“What the hell? Which bastard said that?!” another man admonished.

Akiha had been refusing every proposition with a stone-cold expression as she attempted to extricate herself from the group of men. When she heard the rude request, she turned in the direction of the strange voice, but the person who had spoken was nowhere to be found.

Either way, she had just made her way to a spacious—and empty—area to try out her bicycle when she spotted two familiar silhouettes in the distance—Masaki and Adel. They were still about a kilometer away, but as soon as she saw Masaki, Akiha’s face lit up and she tried to tidy up her appearance.

Akiha’s equipment had made her sight much better than it was in Japan. On top of that, her skill, Hyperopia, made her even better at discerning distant objects.

The skill and equipment she had been forced to use during the war now helped her gaze at Masaki’s face.

However, when she looked at Adel, her heart ached.

She continued to fix her hair and clothes in an attempt to distract herself from the sharp pain she felt and rushed toward Masaki, pushing her bicycle along.

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Now that we had enjoyed the footbath, our next stop for the day was the workshop Akiha was borrowing. Tatsuma had informed us that she had completed her bicycle prototype, and I was dying to see it. We left the Adventurer Guild and headed toward the Carpenter Guild which was located a little bit further from the main street.

This part of town was home to most craftsmen and artisans. The Blacksmith Guild and Goldsmithing Guild buildings were in the same area.

It was lunchtime, and tons of people had filled the streets, entering and leaving restaurants. Adel and I tried to distance ourselves from the crowd, and when we finally found an open space, I saw Akiha rushing our way with her bicycle. She wasn't riding it but instead pushing it along.

As soon as she arrived, she told us she'd been looking for a quiet place for the first test ride.

"Great! I'm glad to see you actually managed to make one," I said.

"I knew bicycle frames could be made out of bamboo, so I decided to start with that. I ended up getting a lot of help from the Carpenter Guild along the way, though."

"So this is the so-called 'bicycle'..." Adel remarked, looking intently at the foreign object. "It's much smaller and thinner than I expected. Can a person truly ride it?"

"Of course. Bicycles are made for one or two people to ride at a time, but they can handle the weight of up to seven adults. You'd need to be a great acrobat to pull it off, but it's technically possible," I joked.

Actually, I wasn't sure anyone but a team of professional gymnasts could pull that off. Even if they somehow could, a bamboo frame might not be sturdy enough in the first place.

"I see... If it's that sturdy, then a single adult wouldn't have any issues. But why would you even think of replacing horses, Masaki?"

"The main reason would be to increase the mobility and speed of the guards and soldiers. And when it gets democratized, most people will be able to move about without needing to own a horse. Bicycles can't outspeed a horse at full gallop, but they're still much faster than walking," I explained. "Akiha, could you do a little demonstration?"

"Sure. Here I go!"

Akiha got on the bicycle and immediately started pedaling. She headed left

for a while and made a sharp turn to her right before riding circles around us. She had no issues controlling it, and you'd never guess she was using a hand-made bike from the way she moved.

She'd even succeeded in adding brakes, and, after a while, she made a sudden stop. The bicycle seemed to be able to handle the abrupt shock without any problem. She also managed to do wheelies and jump over small bumps on the road. *Akiha sure is good with a bicycle.*

The only thing was that...with her thin shirt, I couldn't help but notice the way her ample breasts swayed up and down. I didn't want her to see me staring at her chest so I did my best to look at her face and only her face.

After a few more minutes of testing the bike's limits, Akiha rode back toward us.

The thin layer of sweat on her body shone under the sun and gave her a healthy glow. *This is why sporty girls are popular.*

Since the sun was high up in the sky, and the weather was gradually warming up, it was only natural for her to sweat a little. *I'll invite her to the hot springs later.*

I'd never asked Akiha her age, but her small stature and baby face made her look especially young.

"You did an amazing job there, Akiha," I said. "Do you think it's ready for mass production?"

"I think so. I didn't notice anything off, so it should be all right. I also made sure the size of the bike was optimal."

"The size?" Adel asked.

"Oh, right, I hadn't explained that yet," Akiha answered. "I adjusted the size so they'd fit inside an item box."

The inventories—or item boxes—that we used weren't exclusive to otherworlders. While they did cost a pretty penny, anyone could buy magic items with that function. The regular item box had a volume of two cubic meters, and its weight limit was two hundred kilograms.

Save for equipment and food, an item box was the most useful item for an adventurer to have, and most saved up to make it their first big purchase. You'd only have a shot at becoming a first-rate adventurer after buying an item box of your own.

Akiha had made sure the bicycle she built wasn't longer than two meters. Since it was made out of bamboo, its weight also wouldn't be an issue—by the looks of it, it couldn't be heavier than ten kilograms.

"That makes sense..." Adel pondered for a while. "If people can save themselves the trouble of carrying it around, they'll be all the more interested."

"Introducing alternative means of transportation was something I wanted to do as soon as possible," I said. "It'll benefit us from a military standpoint, and it'll be good for the economy."

If I remembered correctly, bicycle infantry was a thing even in my previous world. Bicycles barely cost anything to maintain, and whenever they weren't needed, you could just cram them inside item boxes.

The two main means of transportation here were horse-powered carriages, horse riding, and walking. People like Prince Leon who could ride dragons were the exception.

If bicycles got democratized in my territory, they'd surely spread to the rest of the country—and to other countries even—in no time.

Realistically speaking, mass-producing bicycles was also much easier than trying to introduce cars here. I didn't even know how to get my hands on aluminum.

"They'll end up looking like granny bikes, but we can also add baskets to the front and back so people can carry things more easily," Akiha added.

"And we can try to prevent accidents by introducing regulations early on. Atami's in the middle of being remodeled, so we can also add bike lanes while we're at it," I remarked.

I'd probably need to ask Jirou to help me write a proper set of regulations. Once we had a production schedule in place, I'd go pay him a visit in the royal capital.

While we were thinking, I started getting hungry. It was time for lunch. I had brought something with me for the occasion. *I'll need to thank Haruka later.*

"Are you hungry?" I asked before turning to our resident sniper. "Akiha, would you like to have lunch with us?"

"Eh? Hmm... Are you sure it's all right? I wouldn't want to intrude on you and Adel..." she answered, shooting a sidelong glance at the vampire.

She probably thought Adel wouldn't want her to eat with us since we were on a date.

"I don't mind," my fiancée answered without hesitation. "The more the merrier, right?"

I knew she'd say that. She was a generous person and wasn't the type to mind this sort of thing. I also thought having meals in a large group was nice.

"If you two are sure I won't be a bother then...sure, I'd love to. Did you have a place in mind? Though I think most restaurants will be crowded at this time."

"I'm pretty sure we'll find space for a barbecue," I said. "Let's just buy what we need first."

There was a vacant plot of land close to the bars and restaurants. It was where I'd held my last barbecue, and it seemed to have worked out.

Buying smoked meat, vegetables, or fish before grilling them outside was a pretty economical way to enjoy a great meal, and adventurers—as well as people who just enjoyed outdoor activities—were quick to copy me.

Charcoal was a thing in this world, and we had recently been using the bamboo we acquired to produce bamboo charcoal. Hopefully, it'd also help people limit their expenses in winter. Hot springs alone wouldn't cut it.

We stopped by a shop and bought chicken, seafood, pork (or, to be more accurate, bullfog meat—they were monsters that looked like wild boars), onion-like and bell pepper-like vegetables, and a few other things. Then, we headed to the barbecue space. There were already quite a few families and groups of adventurers gathered there.

There was a small charge for the coal, but besides that, you could use the

facilities for free so it was pretty cheap to eat here.

We found an empty barbecue in a corner and settled there. The people closest to us were a family with small kids, but I doubted they'd be a bother.

"All right then, let's start cooking the mushrooms and veggies. We'll do the meat and fish afterwards," I stated.

We skewered the veggies and set them on the grill where there wasn't too much charcoal. Then I started cutting the meat and fish into small pieces. I hadn't brought a kitchen knife along so I was making do with the mithril knife I usually carried. It was a little too sharp, and I almost cut through the chopping board in the process.

It was time to reveal my trump card, and I took out a very special vegetable from my inventory.

It was sweet corn. They weren't quite in season yet, but I was craving some so I'd asked Haruka to help me out. She was a bit reluctant to do so, but she grew some for me with her skill. It tired out the soil, though, so I couldn't ask her to do things like that too often.

She insisted that next time I wanted something out of season, I should bring her a potted plant. She'd smiled at me like she always did, but I learned for the first time how frightening a smile could be.

Putting that little traumatizing moment aside, I started spreading the soy-based sauce I'd made on the corn and put it on the grill. Its appetizing smell soon reached us.

The trademark sizzling sounds of the barbecue made my stomach growl. Some pieces of meat, fish, and vegetables were done so I started placing them on the girls' plates.

I'd made another homemade sauce to go with the meat. It had ginger and garlic in it, and the smell seemed to pull the girls in. Random trivia: Adel was perfectly fine with garlic. From what I understood, the only reason that legend existed was because many people disliked the strong smell of garlic. If vampires had been a Japanese invention, they would definitely have picked sun-dried fish instead.

“Neither of you dislike fish, right?” I asked.

“I’m not fussy with food,” Adel stated.

“I’m also totally fine with fish,” Akiha added.

The fact that they weren’t picky made things easier. Although I probably should have checked *before* buying the ingredients. If I ever cooked a barbecue for people again, I’d make sure to check ahead of time.

I picked up a meat skewer while I was cooking and took a bite. It was a bit tougher than Japanese pork, but I had tenderized it before grilling so it wasn’t hard to chew. The meat juice was slightly sweet and filled my mouth, deepening the flavor of the bullfog.

The monster we were eating was probably on the larger side. I could taste the fat with every bite. *I picked well.*

I then ate a piece of bell pepper. It had cooked long enough to get rid of the bitterness, and it was a perfect accompaniment to the bullfog meat.

I cleansed my palate with some cabbage-looking vegetables. It was perfectly crunchy, exactly like the cabbage I was used to eating in Japan, but the taste itself was slightly different. *They must be similar plants.*

The chicken and mushrooms were starting to look good, so I put some on each of our plates, and we continued our meal. The chicken meat also came from monsters that were quite similar to poultry, although Haruka had suggested that we start raising a docile species of flightless birds for meat in the future.

If she succeeded, we’d get to eat a wider variety of meats. *A win in my book.*

I went ahead and toasted some bread on the grill. *If I had some onigiri at hand, I’d grill them too.*

After a while, the long-awaited corn was finally ready too! I cut it into three so that each of us could have some.

I opened my jaw and started chewing it down. The sweet taste of corn made my tastebuds rejoice. It was even better when paired with the saltiness of the soy-based sauce.

Since it had just been harvested, the sweetness was even more pronounced. *I can't wait for the harvest.*

"How sweet." Adel seemed to be surprised at the taste. "It doesn't quite taste like the usual sweetness you'd find in desserts, though."

"The corn my sister makes is especially sugary," Akiha explained. "I recall her telling me it was almost as sugary as fruit."

"Well it tastes amazing," I said. "One-third wasn't enough, I'll grill another one. Oh, and you both have sauce around your mouths. Might want to wipe that off."

They were both startled and immediately reached for tissues. They must have been so engrossed in the taste that they didn't notice. *Not that I don't totally understand.*

We were getting through the meat and veggies and soon, we'd created an empty space on the grill. I'd been waiting for that.

I set an iron plate over it and heated it up in one go with my magic. I was getting pretty used to adjusting the power of my spells by now, so, thankfully I didn't accidentally go overboard this time. Once, while smithing, I'd mistakenly melted the iron I was working on back into a liquid.

I put wheat flour noodles on the plate, tossed in some onions, and poured soy sauce over it before mixing.

Satisfying sizzling sounds and the smell of soy sauce wafted through the air. The noise and smell somehow caught the attention of the family next to us.

After that, I added small pieces of meat and vegetables and swiftly mixed everything together with a fork and knife.

I was making yakisoba, a Japanese barbecue staple.

"Masaki-san, you're a yakisoba master!" Akiha exclaimed.

"Actually, I once worked at a food stall during a festival. If I had eggs, it'd be even better."

"I should really learn how to cook too, shouldn't I?" Adel sighed.

“You don’t cook, Adel?” Akiha asked.

“Well... The chef always cooked at my estate so...I never really got the chance to learn. I did try a few times after becoming an adult, but it turned out horrible.”

It was true. Adel was absolutely hopeless at cooking. I had tried to teach her once but... How do I put this... It was better for everyone that she stayed far away from the kitchen. She had burned the outside of the meat while the inside stayed raw, charred vegetables to a crisp, and let a hot pot boil until it overflowed.

I had given up on teaching her after that day. On the other hand, Youko had traveled alone for a long time, and she was a fairly good cook. Her stews were particularly delicious.

“It’s all right. It’s sweet that there are some things that even you can’t do, Adel. I like that clumsy side of you too.”

“You...really do?”

If we were in Japan, it might have been an issue if my wife hadn’t been able to cook. But in this world, it didn’t really matter—we had a chef at the mansion anyway. That was why I didn’t mind. Not to mention that she was a noble lady—it was normal for her not to cook.

“If you ever feel like trying your hand at it again... Would you like to learn how to make desserts? I’m pretty good at it so I could teach you,” Akiha offered.

“Desserts?! Yes! I’d love to learn!”

“Hmm, so you’re good at baking, Akiha?”

I had a pretty large cooking repertoire, but when it came to baking, I only knew a few recipes. I usually stuck to cookies and pancakes. I could still use my skill to make any recipe I wanted, but they’d only turn average.

“I am. I always make my sister a cake for her birthday.”

She could even bake birthday cakes? *Impressive.*

“If you’re good at baking cakes, could I ask you to make one for me?” I asked. “I’m really starting to miss the taste.”

“Of course! We’ll do our best to make you the best cake there is. Right, Adel?”

“Y-Yes!”

Cake huh...? How long has it been since I last had a slice? Oops! I almost overcooked the noodles.

I offered a serving to Akiha and Adel first and was about to fill my own plate when I heard a loud sigh from behind me. I turned to see what was going on and let out a surprised yelp.

A bunch of people had gathered around us and were eyeing my plate with envy. Some had even brought their own plates and packs of noodles. The smell of yakisoba had drawn in a crowd.

A man walked up to me. I had a bad feeling about this.

“Excuse me... Would you mind cooking me a plate too? I’m happy to pay you, of course.”

“What?”

“Please! My kids are dying to taste your cooking!”

I looked down and was faced with two kids staring at me with their plates and forks in hand. Their eyes seemed to be yelling out, “Gimme some.” I looked around and most of the people who had gathered had that exact same look in their eyes.

Even if I say no, they’re not going to let me eat in peace, are they?

“Sure... Let me finish my meal first, though.”

“Of course! Thank you so much!”

“Thank you, mister!”

“Would you please cook for me too?” another man asked.

“And me!” a woman yelled from afar.

I started eating in a hurry, and Akiha came up to me.

“Masaki-san, are you sure you don’t mind?” she whispered in my ear.

“I’m not sure I can avoid them at this point. I don’t want to bother you two too much, but could you bring me some more charcoal when you’re done eating? This won’t cut it.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem,” Adel and Akiha answered in unison.

I hoped to end our meal nicely with a helping of yakisoba, but I never expected this to happen. *Good grief. What kind of people ask their lord to cook them yakisoba? I wore a disguise so they couldn’t have known...but still!*

I ended up having to fry yakisoba for a full hour. *Kids eat a lot, you know? Ha ha ha... Damn... There go my hopes of having a nice relaxing time here.*

Now that I was finally free from yakisoba hell, we decided to rest for a while in the shade.

“I’m dead tired...” I whined, sitting down.

I had run out of homemade soy-based sauce after an hour which had—thankfully—put an end to my cooking show. Some guys had come up and asked when I’d be there the next time, but I told them it wouldn’t happen again. I wasn’t about to open a yakisoba stall.

I was a bit sad about using up my homemade sauce, with the amount of food I was cooking, it was unavoidable.

I’d made that sauce by mixing soy sauce with honey, fruits, and vegetables that I’d boiled until they lost their shape. It had taken me a long time to get right, but now that I had the recipe down, I could make it pretty quickly. Especially if I used my skill Fermenting.

“They worked you to the bone, didn’t they?” Adel quipped. “I never expected so many people to show up.”

“It was hard to keep them orderly,” Akiha added. “It was kind of funny to see the burly beastmen lining up properly when most others wouldn’t, though.”

Strangely enough, even a few beastmen had gathered to taste my cooking. I’d assumed they might dislike this kind of dish because of their developed sense of smell, but as it turned out, I was completely wrong—beastmen tended to prefer strong flavors.

Speaking of, I had heard the united forces and the Sentdrag Kingdom’s forces were currently down south in the Beastmen Kingdom’s former territory. They were helping them regain full control of its land and taking care of the remaining belligerent empire factions.

At the same time, prisoners were being returned to their countries of origin. Some beastmen wanted to explore this continent and became adventurers instead of returning to their homeland. They had set off to visit places that did

not discriminate against beastmen—and Atami was one of them.

A man with a squirrel tail had told me several times how much my yakisoba reminded him of the food he was used to having at home, and he bought quite a few servings.

They must have pretty good sauces in the Beastmen Kingdom too, then. Since I also wanted to go look for my friend, it would be worth visiting once my own territory was back in shape.

“It’s been ages since I’ve spent that much time cooking. My arms are sore,” I complained. “I feel like taking a dip in the hot springs. Let’s go, Adel. Akiha, would you like to come with us?”

“Me too?” she asked, a bit surprised.

“All that biking must have tired you out. And I’ve been thinking of inviting you to the hot springs for a while anyway, so this is the perfect opportunity, isn’t it?” I explained. “By the way, I’m afraid the smell of yakisoba seeped into your clothes so I’ll make sure to buy you two new outfits. I ended up earning some extra bucks just then, so I might as well spend it, right?”

“Eh? A-Are you sure?” Akiha asked.

“It’s no problem. You don’t mind her tagging along, Adel, do you?”

“Of course not. I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of clothes Akiha will pick.”

Was she interested in Akiha’s fashion sense because she came from another world? *I guess girls will be girls, no matter what world they’re from.*

Before heading to the hot springs, we looked for a clothes shop. There were a few benches in front of the shop we ended up picking where some men—presumably the fathers and boyfriends of the girls inside—were waiting. They looked bored to death as they stared into nothingness. *Urgh. Our worlds really didn’t need to be* so *similar...*

“We’ll try to make it quick,” Adel said before pushing the shop door open.

“Sorry for making you wait.” Akiha followed her in.

“I hope you two have a good time.”

It would have been a bit awkward if I'd followed them into a women's clothing store, so I waited for them out front. Not to mention I stank of yakisoba.

I found a free spot to sit. Next to me was an older man—I assumed he'd come here with his daughter. As soon as I sat down, he shot a knowing glance my way.

I understand your pain, mister, I thought.

I had nothing to do so I let my mind drift away. Girls always took a long time picking out clothes, didn't they? Maybe I should have gone to the hot springs ahead of them... But I can't just leave without saying a word to them about it. *I'm so bored.*

I looked around and spotted a small booth on the side of the road manned by an elderly man. I was free anyway so I decided to go have a look.

"Hello, young man. I sell odd trinkets from foreign lands," the old man explained. "Take a look at this here dragon horn. It can cure all kinds of ailments. And this piece of wood comes straight from a hidden elven village. It's very fragrant, I'm sure you'll agree! This stone here will lead you to iron veins. Just for you, I'll make it nice and cheap, heh heh heh!"

Talk about shady.

I used Appraisal on the first item and it turned out to be an antler horn. The piece of wood was plain old agarwood. He wasn't wrong about it being fragrant, but I very much doubted it came from an elven village. As for the stone... Well, it was just a magnet. *Brings back memories. I remember making a magnet back in science class.*

There was no point in buying a magnet when I could just make one if I ever felt like it.

I continued to check every item with Appraisal, but they were all similar junk.

I picked up a black stone around the size of my fist and was surprised by how light it was. It didn't look hollow, but it was still as light as pumice.

"How much for this stone?" I asked.

“Oh, this? I found it in the desert. Someone told me it fell from the sky. An impressive story indeed. But it’s been sitting there for ages, and it takes up a lot of space, so I’ll let you have it for just five flan.”

“Great. I’ll take the piece of wood too.”

“You got it. Thank you for your patronage, young man.”

Now that I was done with my shopping, I also had to perform my duty as a lord.

“By the way, Mister...” I started.

“Need anything else?”

I stepped a little closer and dropped the volume of my voice so that only the old man would hear me.

“You need a license to set up a stall here. And trying to fraud people out of their money is a pretty big offense too. I’ll let you off with a warning today, but...I don’t approve of crooks in my territory.”

“What do you— Could you be—”

“Today’s my day off, and I didn’t bring the chains,” I cut in. “But there won’t be a next time. Consider yourself warned.”

“I... I understand.”

“Good. How about you enjoy the fine hot springs of Atami instead of scamming people next time?”

I had no intention of admonishing the guy longer than needed, and I went back to wait in front of the clothing store. As soon as I left, he packed up his goods and hurried away.

I’d spent a bit too much on the piece of wood, but it did smell pretty good. I figured it was worth its price in the end. As for the stone, Appraisal informed me that it was in fact a meteorite. It was made up of thirty percent meteoric iron and sixty percent tektite—a precious stone. There were some other minerals mixed in, but it was those that caught my attention.

Someone must have picked it up in the desert and sold it to that old man.

In the end, I got some pretty good things. I can't wait to grind the stone. It'll make for some nice jewelry for Adel and Akiha once processed. And I'm sure Youko will love the fragrant wood.

Adel and Akiha emerged from the shop right after I came back.

They were both holding shopping bags. It looked like the man I had exchanged a look with earlier was still waiting for his daughter—or his wife? *My condolences.*

"Sorry, we ended up taking longer than expected."

"It's all right, I know girls tend to take their time shopping. If anything, I'd say the two of you were quicker than I expected."

"Oh? Then you won't mind if we stop by another shop to look at lingerie?" Adel teased.

"Please spare me."

I couldn't take any more today. And I was especially against tagging along to a lingerie shop. What if Adel tried to bring me inside with her? *A true minefield.*

"Don't worry, it was a joke. Come on, let's get going," she said.

"Yeah. Even though my arms are feeling a bit better, I still want to soak in the hot water for a while."

While I was enjoying my mansion's private hot springs every day, I had yet to visit the public hot springs of Atami.

I had a hand in the reconstruction so I knew what to expect, but I was sure experiencing it myself would help me see it in a new light.

Atami's public hot springs were divided into two main parts. On one side was a stone bathhouse that had been built years ago. On the other was a new Japanese-style bathhouse built to replace the broken parts of the facilities. It looked more or less like a sentou—a Japanese public bath.

I had even ordered tatami mats from Yamato to complete the aesthetic, but they had yet to arrive. I couldn't wait to see the resting area when it was finished.

We also intended to use tatami mats in the Japanese-style inn we were building, so we'd made a large order through a company called Echigo—one of the largest shops in Yamato. Speaking of which, I had been surprised to hear that name again—the same as the former Japanese province.

Apparently, that company had been founded over a hundred years ago. I also bought miso and soy sauce from them.

The reason I was able to purchase things from Echigo despite never having set foot in Yamato before was actually Jirou. A long time ago, he had helped them uncover an intricate plot designed to run the company to the ground. After that, they had decided to start offering their services in the Sentdrag Kingdom.

All in all, it was very convenient for me.

I was certain that part of the reason Jirou helped them out was to secure a supply of miso and soy sauce. I understood. I'd have probably done the same in his shoes if I was deprived of miso, soy sauce, or rice in this world. *Food was serious business to me.*

Anyway, the place Adel, Akiha, and I were heading to was the sentou.

Most of it had been built using wood, and stones had only been used where it was absolutely crucial. As a result, it became somewhat of a novel sight among the people here, and the place was booming.

At the entrance were curtains—one leading up to the men's area and one leading up to the women's area. There was no mixed bathing.

We were planning to add a mixed pool on the other side of the building, though. We figured families and couples might want a large space to spend time together, so while we'd greenlit the project, it was still under construction.

"Well, then, I'm going this way. See you both later," I said, walking toward the men's area.

"See you," Adel answered.

"Take your time to relax, all right?" Akiha added.

Wooden buildings were so unusual in this world that the sentou was absolutely crowded. From the looks of it, the citizens of Atami weren't the only

ones to appreciate its unique scent, and people from every part of the Sentdrag Kingdom, as well as beastmen, had come to enjoy it.

I undressed quickly and wrapped the towel I had just bought around my waist. As I stepped into the bathing area, the thick steam obscured my view. When I was finally able to scan my surroundings, I noticed that the hot springs were filled with all kinds of people.

Hot springs were a place of relaxation, and we had firm rules. Quarreling here was strictly prohibited. Anyone who tried to pick a fight would immediately be thrown out, no questions asked.

Since the red-light district was located next door, we had to be strict to avoid issues.

A large Siberian husky-like wolf-man with thick fur was washing himself. Now that his fur was wet, the great big dog suddenly looked twice as small, and I almost couldn’t stop myself from letting out a little laugh.

Most beastmen shed hair easily, so they had to brush their fur before washing and entering the bath. There was no way around it—we had to keep things sanitary.

We even had a few employees that specialized in brushing beastmen fur. Most of these men and women actually worked in the brothels of the red-light district the rest of the time. That being said, the fact that they were used to dealing with beastmen—and their hair—made them perfect for the job. On top of their salaries, they also got free access to the hot springs.

They were incredibly popular with beastmen and half-beastmen, and thanks to that, some visited this place more for the brushing services than for the actual hot springs.

In typical Japanese fashion, I washed myself quickly before entering the bath. I felt little bubbles enveloping me as I settled in the water.

One thing of note was that the water here was carbonated. I had checked its specificities with Appraisal, and it was supposed to help with a bunch of health issues including fatigue, hypertension, arteriosclerosis, joint pain, bruises, cuts, burns, chills, and infertility.

From what I'd heard, natural carbonated hot springs didn't exist anywhere else. Even in Atami, only this sentou had water like this. Its characteristics were somehow different in every other place. *Strange but amazing.*

While I enjoyed the fizzing and the warmth that enveloped my body, the beastman from earlier came to sit next to me. He had entered the water so carefully that he hadn't made any waves at all.

He turned to look at me. Had he noticed me almost laughing?

"I say! These hot springs are marvelous! While it may be my first time taking a dip, this experience has been utterly *delightful*."

Hang on... This guy... He speaks like an old-timey gentleman! Why does a Siberian husky speak like that?!

"Y-You're right. It's also my first time in a fizzy-water bath, but it *is* amazing."

"Quite. Quite. I daresay I must prolong my stay in this city..."

Looks like someone's gonna be staying here for a long *time.*

If he was as strong as he looked, maybe it'd be worth recruiting him as a city guard. I'd left the city defenses in the hands of Ludrig and Tatsuma, but I was sure they'd be all right with hiring him if he proved capable.

Phew, I sighed. *What a nice bath. I wonder how Adel and Akiha are doing.*

I looked in the direction of the partition that separated the women's bathing area from ours and noticed that a few idiots were trying to climb it to peek at the girls. *How much more cliché can you get?*

On a second glance, I realized that I recognized one of them.

"Hey! Pile up some more buckets!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Paradise's almost in sight, heh heh."

Shou. *Why is he here? And what the hell is he doing?*

I picked up three nearby buckets and used Homing Shooter and Non-Lethal Attack to throw them at the three men trying to play peeping toms.

CLANG. CLUNK. CLANG.

Homing Shooter increased my accuracy, and the buckets hit them in the head. *Right on the mark.*

They whined in pain. I had used Non-Lethal Attack, so it shouldn't have been too bad. Or at least...they wouldn't die.

"How splendid," the beastman commented.

I needed to have a lengthy talk with a certain dumbass now.

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"Ah!"

Adel and Akiha ran into someone they hadn't expected at all.

"Colona... Is that you?" Adel asked.

"It's been a while, Lady Adel, Lady Akiha," Colona greeted.

She finished neatly folding her uniform blouse and bowed politely to the two women.

Akiha wasn't used to being referred to as a lady and scratched her face, embarrassed.

"You don't need to speak to me so politely, you know?" she said.

"But..."

"Colona, Akiha was born a commoner. She's not used to such deference," Adel explained. "She'd like it better if you talk to her more casually."

"Casual... I understand your request. Retrieving information on casual speech... Akiha, is it okay if I talk to you like this?"

"Perfect! But that aside..." Akiha started.

Colona had resumed undressing and looked at her with a puzzled expression on her face.

Akiha had heard from Masaki that she was a robot, but now that she was seeing Colona naked, she couldn't find the smallest hint of her being anything but human.

Her chest was on the small side, and her skin was perfectly smooth. Her lips looked soft.

Every part of her looked human. Akiha found it difficult to believe she was anything but a perfectly normal young woman.

“Akiha, is anything the matter?” Adel asked. It seemed Akiha’s confusion was apparent on her face.

“It’s nothing. Just...Colona really doesn’t look like a machine, does she?”

“So that’s what’s been bothering you,” Colona said. “I’ll explain everything once we’re in the bath. Would that be all right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“It’s really nice to bathe with friends once in a while,” Adel commented with a smile.

As she spoke, she disabled the costume she had been wearing on top of her clothes. Under it was a dignified red armor. Adel strived to be ready to fight at any time, but her armor stood out quite a lot in the bathhouse. Soon, all eyes were on her.

She didn’t seem to mind the commotion and slowly took off the rest of her clothing to reveal a perfect figure.

The other women couldn’t help but be fascinated by Adel’s beautiful and shapely body.

Adel and Akihawere now both in their underwear, and Colona was staring at them.

“Is anything wrong?” Adel asked.

“The two of you have large breasts.”

“What?”

“Eh?”

“It’s a joke.”

Colona...cracked a joke? Adel and Akiha let out strained laughs and finished undressing before wrapping towels around themselves. Since the changing

room wasn't accessible from the outside, it was already fairly secure, but they put their belongings safely away in their item boxes regardless.

As soon as Adel, Akiha, and Colona exited the changing room, they came face to face with a hot spring fountain.

"Wow..." Adel let out.

"Amazing!" Akiha exclaimed.

"A splendid display, indeed," Colona added.

Steam was rising from the fountain, and a few children were playing around it.

There was also a special sauna—one that made use of the steam and was said to do wonders for the skin—and a stone sauna in the women's area.

At first, Adel and the others had been a little dubious at the idea of building a stone sauna, but it had quickly proved to be incredibly popular, especially among the nobles. While it made people sweat even more than a regular sauna, visitors reported feeling much better after spending some time lying down on the hot stones.

Adel was aware of this, and now that she was visiting herself, she had hoped to try it, but it had become so popular that you needed an appointment to get in.

The three women washed their bodies before finding an empty spot in the bath to sit down together. They had tied their hair up so it wouldn't get wet.

As soon as they all settled in the hot water, they let out a satisfied sigh in unison. The girls looked at each other and started giggling.

"Colona..." Akiha started. "The more I look at you, the more I can't see you as anything but a young girl. And a cute one at that."

"Thank you for the compliment. To be entirely accurate, I'm both a machine and a human."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a goddess of machines, a being that is part human and part machine. I

guess you could say I'm an evolved version of both races. As such, calling me a robot isn't technically correct. I'm a living being—a cyborg."

"A cyborg..." Akiha repeated.

Adel hadn't spoken for a while, but she decided to break her silence. "I don't really get the terms you're using, but none of that matters to me. You're you, and that's the most important thing."

Colona looked at her with eyes wide before nodding with a soft expression on her face. "Yes. I'm just me, that's all there is to it. My lord said the same thing."

"You're right. I'm sorry for bothering you with my random question, Colona."

"It's all right. Curiosity is part of human nature."

"Speaking of curiosity... If you're here, it must mean that Shou's here too, right?" Adel asked.

"Indeed. He's taking a bath in the men's area at the moment," Colona answered, turning to look at the partition.

She pointed her finger at the fence and a strange noise resounded.

Akiha was startled. "What was that?"

"Please stay on your guards. My lord is peeping on us."

"What?!"

The three of them hid their chests with their hands and stared at the partition cautiously.

CLANG. CLUNK. CLANG.

Three soft noises reached the women's bath before another larger sound—like something crumbling to the ground—resounded.

"Sounds like someone stopped him," Colona commented.

"Now that you mention it, Masaki's on the other side too."

"He'd never let Shou get away with peeping!" Akiha asserted.

"I see. Then we're free to rest our bodies in the water for a while longer then. I exerted myself quite a bit last night so I need to relieve my fatigue," Colona

said, her cheeks flushing ever so slightly.

She had a satisfied expression on her face and seemed to be enjoying the warmth of the water around her.

While the three young women enjoyed the hot springs, they suddenly noticed the presence of two women behind them. In a split second, Colona, Adel, and Akiha rose from the water to grab them.

“What’s wrong with you?!” one of them cried.

“If you’re going to get so close, you might want to think about hiding your bloodlust,” Adel retorted.

“Yep. And pay attention to the ruckus you’re making with every step too,” Akiha added.

“Fuck! You—”

The two women struggled, but Adel and Akiha maintained a strong grip on each of their arms.

When Colona had told them to stay on their guards, Adel and Akiha both realized she was talking about more than just peepers. They had pretended to lower their guards in order to bait the enemy into making a move.

Naturally, the two women had not noticed their ploy and had thought the timing perfect.

“I will activate Shock,” Colona warned.

Akiha tried to stop her. “Colona! Wait!”

Colona paid her no mind and slipped between the two women, rested a hand on each of their shoulders, and let out a bolt of electricity. They fainted...but so did the poor innocent women around them.

Colona seemed to have noticed her mistake, but it was too late. “Ah...”

Akiha had some resistance to lightning thanks to her abilities and Adel, being a vampire, could usually bear a lot more than your regular person, but even the two of them felt numb. Naturally, the rest of the women that had been

enjoying the hot springs had fainted on the spot.

“This is a rather regrettable outcome... I suppose stopping everyone from drowning now comes first,” Colona said.

She was a bit bewildered at the—not so—unexpected outcome of her actions and rushed to help the women that were floating unconscious in the bath.

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Meanwhile, Shou and Masaki were chatting in the rest area.

“Hey, Masaki, don’t you think the women’s bath suddenly got much noisier?”

“I guess some kids are making a racket. I heard that mothers tend to bring their children here. How about you stop trying to change the topic and tell me why you’re here?”

Shou let out a big sigh. “That hits the spot. Coffee-flavored milk really is the best after a nice bath. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yeah, it really is— HEY! You won’t weasel your way out of this! Why. Are. You. Here?”

I needed to push for an answer instead of spending time on his pointless observations. After soaking in the bath for a while, I’d dragged Shou to the lounge for a talk.

The two other wannabe peeping toms had been let off scot-free for now. They had yet to commit any actual offenses, but they’d be strictly watched from now on. If they were caught red-handed again, we’d let the strong women of the red light district handle them. They’d be sure to punish them accordingly.

“Well, I came to sightsee. Isn’t that obvious?” Shou said. “Seriously, though. This is a nice place you have here.”

“I know. We’re trying to turn Atami into a wonderful place to live in. But enough of this, what’s your actual business?”

“Just a little something. Actually, I may need a hand if you’re free. Asta dumped quite the troublesome matter on me, and I have a feeling you won’t be able to look the other way if I tell you what it is.”

I won't be able to look the other way? I had no idea what Shou was trying to get at, but although his tone was light as usual, his eyes told me he was serious. It was hard to believe this very same guy had been trying to climb over the fence to peek at the women's bath a few minutes ago.

"I got it. Once Adel and Akiha are done, let's go to my mansion. I have a feeling you want to keep this job confidential."

"That would be preferable, indeed," he said. "By the way...you noticed, right?"

"Of course. Are they after you?"

"Most likely. And here I thought I had outrun them. A little bird tells me that the commotion in the women's bath wasn't completely unrelated either."

"Adel and Akiha must have taken care of it. And Colona must be here too, I presume?"

"Yeah. Well then, should we take care of these fellows first?"

I could see the shadow of someone spying on us from outside the window. I took a look at my map and confirmed there were three of them.

"I guess so. It'd be a pain if they followed us all the way to my place. I'll go handle them," I said.

"Thanks. I'll treat you to some fine booze later."

I got up and pretended to go to the restroom before activating Stealth. I then exited the building.

I walked through the red-light district to circle around to the back of the bathhouse and spotted the three men hiding in bushes, their eyes fixed on Shou.

"He still hasn't made a move..." one of them whispered.

"What about the man from before?" another asked.

"Still in the toilets," the third one answered before sighing. "The others are taking an awfully long time in the women's bath, aren't they? They should be done by now..."

They really are after Shou, huh... And it looks like Adel and Akiha managed to take care of their comrades.

I approached them with Stealth and used Silent Blow and Non-Lethal Attack to knock two of them out. They passed out on the spot.

My Stealth disabled and the last man saw me. I had no intention of giving him the time to scream, however.

“What happe—”

“Sweet dreams.” One blow was all it took.

I decided to ask Tatsuma to get them out of the way for me.

<Tatsuma, do you have a minute?>

<Oh, hey, Masaki. What’s up?>

<I have a little situation behind the Opal Bathhouse. I found a few guys that look like spies. I’ll investigate them later but could you come and take care of them for the time being?>

<Got it. I was almost done with my shift anyway so I’ll leave a little early. I’ll be there as soon as possible.>

<Thanks.>

<Don’t mention it. It’s in my job description, anyway.>

Good. Now I just have to tie them up and leave them under someone’s watch until Tatsuma gets here... Wasn’t there a drag queen bar over there? I can probably leave them there. The place shouldn’t be too busy right now, anyway.

I stopped by and the staff were happy to watch the captured spies for a while. The drag queens there were equal parts friendly and tough, both in terms of physical and mental strength. They were well respected by those who worked in the red-light district.

I returned to the bathhouse and found Adel and Akiha sitting next to Shou. They were both holding their heads and seemed to be in pain.

I then noticed several women passed out on the floor of the lounge.

“What in the world happened?” I asked.

Adel moaned in pain before answering. “We were attacked while we were in the bath...”

“I see. That explains the commotion we heard.”

“Yeah...” Akiha confirmed.

“Lord Masaki, my lord... I must apologize,” Colona said.

Colona proceeded to recap the events of the women’s bath.

The cyborg girl was the only one who was completely unharmed thanks to her strong resistance to electricity. She could have even easily withstood getting struck by a thunderbolt.

“Well... What’s done is done. And since no one was badly hurt, I’ll let it slide. But be more careful next time, all right?” I told her.

“I understand. I will heed your advice.”

You’d better. We just opened up the bathhouse. This is the worst possible timing. I guess it’ll be my job to convince the customers that something like this won’t ever happen again.

Adel and the others had dressed and restrained the unconscious female spies, having locked them in a room before calling for the guards. *I guess Tatsuma will take care of everything when he arrives with the rest of the guards*.

“Masaki, what did you do with the people that were spying on you and Shou?” Adel asked.

It looked like Shou had gotten them up to speed while I was away.

“Tatsuma’s taking care of it for the time being. I just immobilized them.”

“Sorry for interrupting your time off with this mess,” Shou said.

“I can’t say it was the best end to the day, but you did say that this matter concerns us, right?” Akiha answered. “If so, it’s only natural we’d get involved.”

“Akiha’s right. Anyway, let’s change locations for now. I’ll investigate the people we caught later so don’t worry about them, Shou,” I said as I stood back up.

My comrades followed me out.

Shou said I wouldn’t be able to ignore this... And here I thought I’d be able to take it easy for a while.

Chapter 8

I called for the coachman and we made our way back to the mansion before settling into the reception room to hear Shou's story.

Haruka was too busy with farmwork to join us, and I figured it wasn't necessary to call her back either. While her powers were very impressive, they weren't made for battle.

Tatsuma would be joining us after he checked up on the inn's construction schedule and dealt with the suspicious people we caught. He'd have to go visit the drag queen bar to retrieve them, but I hoped he wouldn't mind too much.

For the time being, Adel, Youko, Akiha, Ludrig, Jimmy, Shou, Colona, and I had gathered to have a talk.

"First, take a look at these rings. We found them on the people who attacked us," Shou said, setting down six rings on the table.

Two of them were still a little damp. They must have belonged to the two women that attacked Colona and the others in the bathhouse.

"This..." Ludrig started, picking one of them with his gloved hands and looking at it intently.

He inspected the ring from every angle, but there didn't seem to be anything special about it from where I was sitting. Only, instead of a gem, it was adorned by a seal.

"...Isn't an ordinary ring, is it?" he asked. "I can feel mana coming from it... It's a magic item, right?"

"You sure know your stuff," Shou said, impressed. "Colona sealed them so they're safe right now, but their effect is a pain in the ass."

"What is it?"

"Subjugation. These rings basically work the same as slave collars."

"How could that be?!" Adel exclaimed, staring at the rings.

Youko took the one Ludrig was studying and started muttering something. The seal started glowing.

“I see... So this is where they placed the curse...” I’ve never seen one this strong, though,” she explained.

So these rings are cursed, huh? Even though I didn’t know much about curses, I had a bad feeling about this.

“Here, take a closer look at this seal,” she said. “It’s home to a very powerful curse.”

The part she was pointing at was exactly where a gem would normally be embedded. Instead, though, a strange symbol had been carved out.

Haven’t I seen symbols like this one in the past... Oh, right! It’s Sanskrit!

“Right on the money,” Shou praised. “Do you specialize in studying magic items, Youko?”

“I’m a magic scholar. Not all of us study curses, however. In my case...let’s just say I have some experience on the matter thanks to what I was taught by my family.”

Youko came from a family of *onmyouji*. Curses were a large part of their line of business.

“Masaki, where did you find such a fine lady? I’m jealous, man.”

Of course you are. I’d be jealous too if Youko were with anyone else.

Youko continued to study the ring. “The activation conditions... They’re way too simple. That’s dangerous.”

“I know, right? You just need to imbue the ring with mana and press the seal onto your target. Just like that, it seals the contract. The collars were bad enough—they made it so that there was no need to have the target sign a written covenant, but these are even sneakier. A single touch...and it’s over. On top of that, the marking it leaves behind is so small that it’s almost impossible to spot—it just looks like a birthmark. And the worst part is that the target won’t even notice they’re being controlled until the user gives them orders.”

Damn... These rings are bad news.

Everyone had mana in this world. That meant...anyone could turn a whole town into their personal slave army with just a single ring. Even nobles and their bodyguards could be turned into slaves, and as long the caster didn't give any order, no one would notice until it was too late.

A shiver ran down my spine.

"If I may, my opinion as a scholar is that whoever made these magic items has to be incredibly skilled. They modified an existing powerful curse into a Subjugation curse. Shou, I heard only five people attacked you guys earlier. Where did you find the sixth ring?"

"We took it from the leader of a slave ship. When he attacked us, we caught him and he confessed everything. Masaki, his real target was..."

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Things were eerily silent around the gigantic wooden ship and a thick fog covered the surface of the sea. It was an ominous sight.

The vessel was a little too large to be referred to as a mere ship—it was just as impressive as the Great Admiral's warship.

It was accompanied by other ships, but their difference in size made them appear tiny.

Despite the waters being calm, the men of the armada were constantly on the move. Bridges were connected between the ships, with people being transported into the largest vessel.

"It hurts..."

"I want to go home..."

"Let me go..."

Hands bound, these people were being forced to walk across. Each had a strange red mark somewhere on their body—they were slaves.

"Unhand me this instant! Do you even know who I am?!" a woman cried.

She had been trapped inside a cage and was being moved by a group of muscular slaves. She had fiery red hair and was so beautiful that anyone, man

or woman, would have been bewitched by her charms. Her voluptuous chest would have easily thrown any man down the abyss of lust.

While the woman's beauty was unmatched, the lower half of her body wasn't human. She had the tail of a snake. She was an echidna—a race of half-human, half-snake beings.

The slaves were gathered on the deck of the gigantic ship. There, many masked people admired the new batch of slaves.

"Would you look at this!"

"A fine specimen indeed."

"Agreed. The girl's gorgeous."

It was an illegal slave market and a very successful one at that. And a very successful one, at that. Many well-to-do people made purchases here, whether they be nobles from the Rand continent, merchants or nobles from abroad, or even members of a few small nations' royal families.

A slave market taking place in such an inconspicuous place wasn't surprising. Many countries, with the Sentdrag Kingdom being the first, had long forbidden slavery. The only place in which these large markets could still be held ashore—the Granfang Empire—had recently fallen.

As a result, the largest slave market was now held here, on the Phantom Blau.

One after another, the slaves were thrown in cells with price tags attached to their necks. When it was their turn to be sold, the auction workers would tear off their clothes. For the women, they even ripped off their underwear so as to make sure their naked forms were bare to their would-be buyers.

The buyers' crazed bidding drowned out the quiet sobbing from the cages.

They were yet to start bidding on the echidna woman, but a man approached her cage nonetheless. He was intent on buying her, no matter the cost.

His appearance was like many other immoral lords she'd seen. He had grown so fat that his mask couldn't cover his entire face. He so perfectly embodied greed and gluttony that finding another man like him, even a character in a play, would have been a difficult feat. And yet, here he was—the very picture of

excess.

“Hey, you!” he called out to a nearby worker. “How much for her?”

“I’m sorry. This one’s not for sale. The owner wants her for himself.”

The man paled as he heard mention of the owner.

“Th-The owner?! I understand! Don’t tell him about this!” he exclaimed.

“Rest assured, I won’t breathe a word,” said the worker. The man scurried away

Unlike the other slaves, the echidna woman had been thrown into a very special cage—a cage eater. Before long, she was carried up the tall tower that stood conspicuously on the bow of the ship.

“Where are you bringing me?”

The slaves that transported her cage put it down inside a room and left without saying a word.

She wasn’t alone in the room, though. A large beastman with the head of a lion—a member of the battle leo tribe—stood in front of her. He opened and closed his mouth a few times as if he was trying to speak. However, no sound came out.

“Are you mute?” the echidna asked. “Or did someone make you like this?!”

The beastman nodded once. That was the best he could do to communicate with her, and he let his head sink to a bow.

“How long are you gonna stay here?! Go back to your post!” The gatekeeper suddenly waltzed in to yell at the battle leo.

He grabbed his long mane and dragged him out of the room.

Battle leos were known to be proud warriors, and the woman couldn’t help but clench her fist in anger at seeing a man of this tribe getting manhandled like this.

“Even a battle leo... I cannot believe it... How could we be Subjugated when none of us is wearing a slave collar?! We certainly did not sign slave contracts either, so how in the world...?”

A voice came from behind her.“That is none of your concern, Queen Gardenia.”

“Who are you?!” she roared.

“There’s no need to raise your voice. We’ll be seeing a lot of each other from now on, so let’s get along,” the mysterious man said, emerging from the darkness.

Each of his steps was accompanied by metal clinking. He had long dark hair that was tied up into a ponytail, and he was wearing a full set of crimson armor. It was a type that was particularly popular among the generals of Yamato.

As an echidna, Queen Gardenia immediately noticed that the man’s armor wasn’t normal. The colored lines on the plates seemed to crawl around it as if they were alive. To her, it appeared as if the lines were suffering, despairing even.

The man’s presence was terrifying—even the cage eater was trembling. It shivered so much that its mouth—the door of the cage—was cracking open ever so slightly from time to time.

“Oh my, would you look at this? I frightened the cage. There’s no need for either of you to fear me—we’ll become accustomed to each other soon either way.”

“Wh-What do you mean?” Queen Gardenia asked.

“You’ll see. Now, will you leave the cage and enter this case?” the man said with a smile, raising a finger.

As he did so, the mark on the echidna’s hand started glowing red. “What did you do to me? Why is my body moving on its own?!”

The cage eater opened its mouth wide to let her pass, and Queen Gardenia approached the countless transparent cases that adorned the wall.

She screamed. Up until now, the darkness had concealed the contents of these cases, but now that she was right in front of them, she could see*everything*.

High elves, elder dwarves, high harpies, mermaids, high-ranked demons,

members of thelunar rabbit tribe, albino wolfwomen... Countless women from rare or famed races had been put on display.

They all seemed to be unconscious and did not even twitch, their eyes closed.

“Monster! You—”

“It looks like you’ve finally understood what’s going on. Come on, let’s not waste any more time. Join my collection. I’ll make sure to take good care of you—forever,” the man said.

“No! I don’t want to!”

Queen Gardenia attempted to resist with all her might, screaming her voice dry, but she couldn’t stop her body from following the man’s orders. She entered the glass case on her own and all the man had to do was close the door.

“How beautiful. I’m so glad I finally have you all to myself,” the man whispered. “Good night, my queen.”

The queen stopped screaming and suddenly shut her mouth. She felt her eyelids close slowly, and, just like the dozens of beautiful specimens that surrounded her, she stopped moving altogether.

“Ha ha ha! Today, my collection has grown yet again!” The man let out a deep satisfied sigh. “How regrettable, though... That idiot Great Admiral sure was a bother...”

He didn’t even try to hide his irritation.

The man had been working as a slave dealer in the empire for quite some time. For him, the fall of the Valentine Empire—the land of vampires—had been the perfect business opportunity.

Vampire men and women were gorgeous and always fetched him a good price. The royal family in particular was a league above the rest of their kind.

When news of the fall of the Valentine Empire had reached him, he had dispatched as many slave ships as he could to get his hands on the famed inheritor.

Sadly, the Great Admiral had gone too far and most vampires had died in the

fighting. They were now on the brink of extinction. What a tragedy!

But all hope was not yet lost. As soon as he'd heard that the inheritor was still alive, the man had done everything in his power to catch her. He had prepared silver stakes—a vampire's greatest enemy—and a cage eater to make sure she could never escape his grasp.

Nonetheless, his carefully crafted plan ended up going up in smoke. His slavers were attacked by pirates and the prized vampire was stolen away. He had flown into a rage at the report, beating up the soldier that happened to be next to him at the time until the poor fellow died.

The man had refused to give up. As long as the inheritor was still alive, he could claim her for himself. He decided to pour all of his knowledge, money, and connections into building *the* magic item that would allow him to fulfill his ambitions.

For him, the ends justified the means. He did everything in his power, and had finally, along with his collaborators, succeeded in creating a perfect curse.

The man's name was Fujiwara Touji. Just like Masaki and his friends, he was an otherworlder.

A collector at heart, he used to own an impressive amount of pretty anime girl figures when he still lived on earth.

After being summoned into this world, he made use of the powers of his character from the game *Sengoku: Samurai War Chronicles* and had survived many gruesome fights.

After catching the eye of the royal family of the kingdom that had summoned him, he was celebrated as a hero. It was around that time that an old desire of his resurfaced.

He wanted to collect pretty girls. Not figures this time—real live girls.

He started behaving erratically. He spent most of his time in hiding, but he'd step out of the shadows occasionally to kidnap women. The first in his collection was the princess. Then he captured the queen and the daughter of the knight commander. He used slave collars to turn all three into his faithful slaves.

By the time the king noticed who was behind the attacks, it was too late. Touji was too powerful. He had strong ties with the Granfang Empire, and the moment the empire declared war against them, Touji surrendered on behalf of the country, discarding the last of the king's authority.

He kept the princess, the queen, and the daughter of the knight commander in glass cases—just like the one Queen Gardenia had entered—and displayed them.

The display cases were also particularly ingenious. The people trapped inside would be petrified after some time, which made taking care of them much easier. After all, petrified people did not need to eat, nor did they need to relieve themselves.

Ever since the new curse had been completed, Touji had been able to grow his collection at an impressive speed. He owed a lot to his collaborators. Without them, he would never have made such tremendous progress.

A knock on the door stirred him from his thoughts. Three more followed soon after—the cue that one of his collaborators was behind the door.

"Come in."

"I'm here to deliver my report. Oh my, your new toy is the queen of the echidnas?"

The visitor was wearing a white gown and glasses and had the air of a scholar about him.

"It's all thanks to you, Wataru. With the curse you developed, making Queen Gardenia mine was an easy feat. I'd be happy to let you have a go with any of my beauties if you'd like. I owe you at least this, don't I?" Touji said gesturing to his collection, an obscene smile on his face

Wataru didn't look interested in the slightest and simply placed the documents he was holding onto the desk. "I do appreciate the offer, but I'll pass. None of them are my type."

"To each their own. If I recall, your type was—"

"I like them young. I don't seem to enjoy them beyond twelve years of age,

you see. It's also regrettable that you don't have any boys in your collection."

"Right... That's what I thought," Touji answered, averting his eyes. Even he couldn't quite understand Wataru's preferences.

He was gay and a shotacon.

Just like Touji, Wataru had been summoned into this world. His specialty was alchemy, and Touji had met and recruited him while he was working for the empire. At the time, the alchemist was frustrated that his superiors wouldn't let him conduct his research however he pleased. When he made his escape, he blew up his laboratory on the way out and took advantage of the commotion to run away and join Touji.

Naturally, as an otherworlder summoned by the empire, he had been wearing a slave collar—a mere toy for an alchemist as skilled as him.

The research Wataru was so intent on conducting was the study of magic items. He had a thirst for knowledge, and the prospect of an entirely new area of research that did not exist in his previous world enchanted him. He sought information from every source he could access, and before long, he was able to create entirely new magic items from scratch.

One of these inventions was the cursed ring that worried Shou and Masaki so much.

Thanks to these rings, Wataru and Touji had plenty of funds to pursue their respective goals, and they'd been able to take advantage of the messy war to turn countless men and women into slaves that'd listen to their every order. They even took requests from clients.

They hadn't expected the Granfang empire to be defeated, but even that was a good opportunity for them. The empire served as nothing more than a place to sell their products—although it was admittedly also a good client since they purchased able-bodied men by the thousands.

On the other hand, the fall of such a large country meant troubled times—the perfect opportunity for people in their line of business.

"Touji, the mass production of the rings is going well. The only issue is that the process tires out the sorcerers I'm using way too easily. I'm going to need

you to snatch me some more of them.”

“Sure.”

“That being said, shouldn’t we start being a bit more careful? We’ve managed to mislead our enemies by dispatching undercover agents here and there, but you went for a queen this time. If they manage to track us down, we’ll have to face their navy, won’t we?”

“Why are you so worried? They’ll never get through the fog. Just focus on your research and leave the rest to me. You don’t need to pay any mind to these matters.”

“All right. I’ll trust your judgment for now,” Wataru said before letting out a little sigh and walking out.

Wataru was deep in thought as he returned to his laboratory. *There’s no more vulnerable moment than when everything seems to be going smoothly... If the echidnas ask for help, we may have to face that famous hero. We tried to capture his fiancée—he’s bound to seek revenge if he hears of us. I’m going to need to think of countermeasures on my side too...*

Meanwhile, Touji, left alone in his collection room, looked intently at the empty glass cases next to Queen Gardenia’s.

Almost everything he wanted was within his grasp, and he felt at the top of the world. Only two things were missing: the women that would fill the last two cases on his wall.

“I’ll come for you soon, my darlings. Adelheid... Colona... Wait for me.”

Touji’s twisted smile grew as he waited for his subordinates to contact him.

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“His target was Colona?! And you think they’ll go for Adel next?!”

“Yeah, I’m positive.”

If Shou was right, I definitely couldn’t let this go.

“That guy had a list on him, and Colona and Adel’s names were on it. Along with pictures.”

Colona handed me several pieces of paper. “We brought these along to show you, Lord Masaki.”

On the first page were Colona and Adel’s pictures, accompanied with their names and a sum of money. Compared to the rest of the women on that list, the prices that had been written next to their names were incredibly high—a whopping ten million flan each.

I immediately noticed that something was wrong.

Photography still wasn’t a thing in this world. However, the pictures on this list were far too detailed to be drawings. *That means...*

“Shou... Could it be—”

Shou cut me off before I could finish my sentence. “I figured you’d notice that too. I had to *persuade* the slaver to spill the beans, but yeah, the leader of their organization is an otherworlder. Unfortunately, he didn’t know much more than that.”

I’d have to fight a fellow otherworlder again... It would have been nice if things had turned out differently. Since we came from the same world, I’d have thought we could become friends or even just acquaintances. *It doesn’t look like that’ll come true now...*

“How can I help?” I declared after a pause.

“I thought you’d say that.”

“Masaki-san! Please let me come too!” Akiha exclaimed.

“I’m in too, of course,” Youko added. “It’s the perfect opportunity to see what Exmizer can do on the battlefield.”

She’s bringing Exmizer?! The rest of us won’t even have to lift a finger, then.

“Needless to say, I’ll also—”

“No. You stay here, Adel,” I interrupted her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Adel hadn’t expected me to refuse outright, and she looked at me dumbfounded. “What? Why?!”

Since the enemy was after her, there was no way I’d take her to their lair. On top of that, we’d have to fight an otherworlder crazy enough—and skilled enough—to create these rings. Bringing Adel straight to them would be way too dangerous. We didn’t know what to expect and might very well be walking into a trap.

Adel and I stared at each other for a while—neither of us backing down—until Colona raised her hand and spoke up.

“I have a suggestion, Lady Adel.”

“What is it?”

“You should stay here and act as a diversion.”

“A diversion?”

“Yes. Their targets are you and me. I’ll stay by my lord’s side, as always. As for you, you’ll remain in Coral Port—”

“Just a heads up, but this city’s called Atami now,” I cut in.

“Data correction complete,” Colona said mechanically before continuing. “If you remain in Atami, the enemy will be forced to split their forces. I believe this is our best course of action.”

Hmm... Her plan made sense, but I wasn’t sure how I felt about using Adel as bait. On the other hand, Colona would be in even greater danger herself since she’d risk jumping right into the enemy’s trap.

If Adel agreed to stay inside my Room the whole time, she’d be safe, but I doubted she’d accept that condition...

“Adel, what do you think about Colona’s proposition?” I asked.

She pondered for a while before reluctantly saying, “All right, I’ll stay here.”

“Good. Now that that’s settled, we’d better gather some intel on that mystery

organization," Shou said. "Masaki, let's go pay a little visit to the spies we caught earlier."

"Sounds good. Ludrig, can you get in touch with Jirou in the Sentdrag Kingdom? He must have heard about this organization by now, and he may have useful information."

"Understood."

Jirou was much better than us at gathering information so I was certain he had already heard about this. Actually, he might have made a move already.

Next, I took Shou to the guard's station. When we arrived, Tatsuma was in the middle of interrogating the suspicious men I'd caught.

"Care to tell me what you were doing snooping around the hot springs?" Tatsuma asked.

"We were just taking a rest!"

"We were just minding our own business when suddenly, someone hit us from behind!"

"Exactly! You should arrest that bastard instead!"

Trying to throw me under the bus instead, huh? It might have worked had Tatsuma not been the one interrogating them.

"I see..." he sighed.

Tatsuma grabbed the right hand of the man that was closest to him and broke one of the fingers on his right hand. *He didn't even hesitate for a second!*

The man *screamed*.

"So, are you sure that's the *whole* story? Nothing you might have neglected to mention?" Tatsuma asked again.

"Wh-What is wrong with you?!" one of the other men shouted.

"Are you okay, bro?!" the third one exclaimed, turning to his injured companion.

So they're brothers, huh?

Tatsuma's expression didn't budge as he grabbed the middle finger of the same man—the eldest brother, I assumed.

"I'll ask again. What were you doing there?"

"W-We told you! We were just taking a break."

Tatsuma broke his second finger in the same way. The younger brothers turned white as a sheet watching their older sibling scream and cry louder than before.

Shou and I had a hard time looking at the harsh scene, but I didn't stop him. I couldn't forgive them for coming after Adel.

In the end, Tatsuma had to break five fingers until the brothers finally spilled the beans.

That was faster than I thought. I figured they'd hold out for a while longer.

"W-We were just told we had to touch a couple of people! Touch them, that's all!" the eldest brother finally confessed.

"Is that the whole truth? If you're lying to me, I'll do the same to your left hand."

"NO! I'm telling the truth! So don't! I beg of you, don't hurt me anymore!"

The man fell to his knees, lowering his head and crying. Tatsuma sighed and finally let go of his broken hand.

"Good job, Tatsuma," I called out to him.

"Didn't notice you here, Masaki. You heard the whole thing? Do you think he's telling the truth?"

"I'm pretty sure he was," Shou answered before me.

"You're...Shou, right? Masaki... What's going on?"

"I'll fill you in," I said before walking Tatsuma through everything that had happened.

After explaining everything, I showed Tatsuma the list. He read through the names and looked over the pictures when suddenly, his bloodlust exploded and electricity started gathering around his body. *Calm down! No need to activate*

Peerless Mode now!

Maybe I shouldn't have shown him that—Philia's name is listed there too, after all.

"Philia...into a slave..." he muttered before turning to the brothers again. "I hope you're ready for the consequences of your actions."

The three brothers screamed in fear. They were holding each other and shivering as Tatsuma walked up to them, one step at a time. They must have felt his bloodlust.

I couldn't let him kill them now, though.

"Tatsuma. Calm down. We still need them alive! There's more we can learn from them."

"Right..."

He disabled Peerless Mode and calmed down somewhat. The three men were huddling together on the floor, still shaking.

"W-We're saved..."

"Hey, I have another question for you guys. Where were you planning to take Adel and Colona after kidnapping them?" I asked.

"That's..."

Guess they still have some fight left, huh? Desperate times call for desperate measures, right?

"Tatsuma?"

"Yeah," he answered, activating Peerless Mode again.

He could easily activate and deactivate this state as long as he had enough vital energy stored in his body. It was a simple and effective technique, and just the sight of it worked wonders on the three spies. They were cowering in fear yet again.

"Don't! Phantom Blau! We had to take them to the Phantom Blau! It's a slave market!"

"How do we get there?" I asked.

“You can only get there by boat... But we don’t know where it is exactly! Someone was meant to take us there, but the meeting time’s long since passed, and they said they wouldn’t wait for us...”

“So their organization cut them off, huh? What do we do then? Wait for Jirou to contact us?” I asked.

These guys are just grunts... They’re right, there’s no way the boat would wait for them... Wait. A boat?

I’d completely forgotten! *At that time...that man... It can’t be a coincidence!*

“I’ll need to ask Jirou to help me out,” I said after thinking for a while. “If I’m right, we’ll know where to go soon enough.”

We left the spies in the hands of the guards and headed back to my mansion. I wasn’t a monster so I’d healed the guy’s hand before we left. It wouldn’t be a good look for me if people heard that their lord was torturing prisoners. Tatsuma seemed to have had the same idea and had also prepared potions in advance.

That said, I had a question burning in my mind. “Say, Tatsuma. What were you planning to do if they had refused to speak?”

“Well... If breaking all twenty of his fingers and toes hadn’t worked...I was planning to start peeling his skin while using potions to keep him alive.”

So you weren’t gonna stop at the hands... And skinning him alive? That’s insane!

When we arrived at my mansion, Ludrig was in the middle of a discussion with Jirou.

“Here you are, my Lord!” he greeted me as soon as I walked in. “I’ve contacted Lord Jirou, and, as you expected, he has already taken notice of this affair. While the local armies were at war, noble ladies were disappearing in several regions. It would also appear that commoners in those same regions were also disappearing around the same time. The one trait that ties them together is that they were all considered to be attractive. They’ve most likely been abducted to be sold as slaves.”

It looked like the ringleader had made use of the war to kidnap women undiscovered. The battle of Lurf had been of utmost importance, and many countries had sent their best soldiers to participate in it. Those who remained had been busy protecting the people from bandits, robbers, and monsters. On top of that, no one could have expected magical rings that could turn people into slaves to suddenly appear. Since the victims hadn't been wearing collars, no one would have even noticed they were in danger. Then, the slavers could have just ordered them to disguise themselves as refugees so as not to alarm the guards, even if they suddenly left.

"Ludrig, is Jirou still there?"

"Yes."

"Great. Then tell him to stop by Schutzwald before coming here. I captured the captain of a slave ship a while ago before I came to the Sentdrag Kingdom. He should still be there, so ask Jirou to bring him along."

"At once," Ludrig agreed before addressing Jirou again. "Lord Jirou? My lord asks that..."

That man must *know about that slave market. He had a special cage to capture Adel, so there's no way he's not linked to all of this. He must have been tasked with bringing Adel back to that Phantom Blau place too, which means he'd know how to get there... Or at least, he'll know how to contact someone who does.*

If he had already escaped from jail, we'd be back to square one, but I trusted Count Alan. I was certain the security in his territory was far from lax.

Three days after Ludrig had relayed my request to Jirou, a high-speed vessel from the Sentdrag Kingdom arrived in Atami. *That was fast!*

My crew were pretty speedy, but even they'd take at least a week to get to the royal capital from here. Three days was crazy!

I asked how they'd managed such a feat, and I was told ten magicians took turns using wind magic at full power, even during the night. The vessel they used was also a little larger than a frigate and had bigger sails.

“I’d have never expected that man to be linked to these incidents. Everything must have started quite some time ago...” Jirou sighed.

“So he really was?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m a little ashamed to admit it, but I was careless. It took me way too long to finally notice something was amiss. According to my investigation, there are missing people in several countries, including the empire. It appears even the queen of the echidnas has recently gone missing. She disappeared during a diplomatic meeting, and, apparently, several unusual ships were spotted setting sail at around the same time.”

They’re even going after the queen of a nation? Damn, they’re pretty bold.

“That sounds like a nightmare. How did the countries involved in that meeting react?”

“Things are tense between them... They’ve been shifting the blame to one another. The echidnas are particularly on edge now that their queen has disappeared. Their country is rather small, but it’s situated right at the border between the two continents, Rand and Arth. If the situation escalates, a war may break out.”

“Another war...” Akiha whispered. She started shivering.

Did another war really *have* to happen? People would die for nothing once again... It wouldn’t even be for the sake of some grand goal such as unifying the land but instead for the pettiest reason of all: money.

We had to stop another war from breaking out, no matter the cost.

We were finally at peace. We couldn’t let a few irresponsible bastards destroy everything!

“Jirou-san, you brought the slaver along, didn’t you? We should interrogate him.”

“You’re right. I also have a few questions for him. Kinrou, bring him here.”

“Yes, father!”

The blond young man who had been following Jirou around since he had arrived was actually his son. *Kinrou? That’s almost like the folktale hero*

Kintarou. Did they forget the “ta”?

I had meant to ask Jirou sooner or later since he was married, but it looked like otherworlders could have children with women from this world.

While Kinrou had blond hair, his eyes were just as dark as most Japanese people’s. His facial features also made him look like a Japanese person. All in all, he looked like a younger version of Jirou—just with bleached hair.

I was curious about something so I decided to ask Jirou right away.

“Jirou-san, does your son have an interface window like we do?”

I really wanted to know if the children of otherworlders inherited their abilities.

It’d be great if they did... I was afraid that they’d struggle if they didn’t. Of course, having such powers was a burden in a way, but they made life so much easier.

“You’re wondering if our powers are passed down, is that it? They are. Not all of them, but my son does indeed have access to an interface window. He wasn’t born with the ability to use my skills, but he has the potential to learn them. It’s not just my son though. The children of other otherworlders also inherited the ability to use the interface window.”

“‘The potential to learn,’ you say? Does that mean he has to level up and train to learn skills?”

“Yes. For instance, Kinrou can use Shadow Clone or Fire Style techniques, but he still has a long way to go before he’s able to use Lightning Style techniques or high-level skills like Heavenly Wind. And I must admit I’m not sure he’ll ever reach that point either. While he does have a lot of potential, I can’t say how much.”

“I see. So it’s not like he’ll naturally learn every skill you know either. It all depends on his own growth and aptitude,” Akiha commented.

She looked like she was quite interested in the topic.

“What prompted you to suddenly ask me about this?” Jirou asked. Could it be that...”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. I was just curious.”

“I see.”

I wouldn’t just go and get one of my fiancées pregnant out of the blue like this. It’s just that Adel and Youko wanted to know what would happen if we ever had children.

Anyway, regardless of whether my future kids ended up being talented or not, I intended to love them all the same. *Family’s family. How much potential they have doesn’t matter.*

I sipped on my tea while we waited for Kinrou to return with the slave ship captain. The leaves had been harvested in the area, and it made for an excellent cup.

“While we’re on this topic, Sir Masaki, Lady Akiha, ” Jirou started.

Akiha and I both hummed in response.

“If two otherworlders have a child together, the baby will inherit abilities from both parents.”

We both choked on our tea, and I started coughing. *Argh. It went down the wrong way.*

“M-Masaki, are you okay?” Adel asked, rubbing my back.

“Went down...the wrong...way,” I managed to get out, still coughing.

“Ouch.” Youko turned to Akiha, who was suffering just as much as me. “How about you? Here, have some water.”

Youko... I’m not sure water’s a good idea if she’s already choking on tea.

Phew. I’m starting to feel better.

“Jirou-san! Why did you have to suddenly bring that up?!”

“I thought you two might as well know, just in case.”

He wasn’t wrong. It was better to know these things, but still!

Akiha’s cheeks were bright red. We weren’t in that kind of relationship, but Jirou’s words had gotten me thinking... Did we seem to be from his perspective?

I should probably distance myself from her a little then... But with all of this happening, now isn't the time, is it?

While I was thinking about my relationship with Akiha, someone knocked on the door. Kinrou was back with our guest.

"Hi. It's been quite some time. Do you remember me?" I asked him.

"Y-Yeah. You sure made something of yourself. I heard all about it. You're the hero who defeated the empire. People talk about you even in jail, you know? I heard there's even a play!"

There is... There is, but...please let me forget about it!

I had received a brochure introducing the play and its characters, but the lead honestly had very little in common with me. He was some kind of handsome superhero.

"Enough about me. I brought you here today to ask you something. Does 'Phantom Blau' mean anything to you?"

"H-How do you know that name?!"

"Well, some people in the same line of work as you started poking their noses into our business. They told me they'd been sent by a guy from the Phantom Blau, but they didn't know how to get there. This is where you come into play. You were the captain of your ship—you must know where that Phantom Blau is. Take us there."

"The Phantom Blau is a ship," the man said after a pause. "An enormous ship. Even the empire's warships would look ridiculous next to it. It's basically a floating city."

So it's on the sea... It would've been hard enough to find if it had been on land with a few clues, but searching for a ship would be hell. We needed someone to lead the way there.

"I see. Well, that doesn't change anything. I'm going to need you to take us there."

"I can't! If they hear that I betrayed them, they'll raze my whole village! The

boss never forgives rats!”

Funny how he’s able to worry about his home village after destroying the lives of so many families...

That being said, we’d have a hard time finding the Phantom Blau if he refused to show us the way. Perhaps striking a deal would be for the best. Protecting one village wouldn’t be that difficult of a task.

“Where is it? Your village.”

“Why would you want to know that?”

“If we make sure your village’s safe, you won’t have any reason to be scared, right?”

“You’re right, but...”

“Jirou-san, we can protect his village, can’t we?”

“I guess we don’t have a choice...” Jirou sighed. “And well, protecting the people *is* our duty, to begin with. I’ll just send my son with a few of my men there. Time is of the essence so we don’t have the time to mobilize other troops.”

“Thank you,” I said before turning to the prisoner. “Hear that? Nothing will happen to your village.”

“M-My home village is located in the east of Lurf... It’s called Midd... And by the way, my name is Miida. My younger brother, Izami, is a farmer—he took after our folks. Hey... You’ll really protect him, right?”

“Of course. As long as you don’t try to pull a fast one on us, you have my word,” I assured him.

He seemed to care more about his village and family than his own life. That was why I was willing to negotiate with the slaver. If he held onto that feeling, there was hope for him after he was done serving his time.

If he had just feared for his own life, I would have found a more forceful approach.

I had considered using Log Analysis to figure out where the Phantom Blau

was, but a significant flaw in that plan made me give up.

Log Analysis allowed us GMs to check people's pasts from their point of view. It was incredibly useful, but the main issue was that we could only *see* what happened from the target's point of view.

Even if I saw the Phantom Blau through Miida's eyes, there wouldn't be anything of note for me to remember and use as a landmark on the sea. I could learn what the ship looked like, but that was about it.

"I got it... I'll guide you there. But we won't be able to reach the Phantom Blau with a regular boat. Is the ship I used back then still intact?"

"Yeah, it should be. I remember that it was pretty sturdy, and it barely got damaged during our fight."

While I had destroyed a number of imperial warships, I hadn't blasted powerful spells at the slave ship. I remember using...Storm?

"That's good to hear. There should still be a magic item hidden on that ship. Without it, we wouldn't have been able to sail through the Sea of Fog."

"'The Sea of Fog'..." Jirou repeated. "So that's where the Phantom Blau is... It does make sense. That's the best place to hide at sea."

As its name suggested, the Sea of Fog was an area constantly covered by thick fog. It was said that only the luckiest of crews ever found their way out. The rest were fated to drift about until they met their deaths. Every sailor knew and feared those vile waters.

According to Miida, the fog was caused by monster whales, and, if you had the right magic item, you'd be able to navigate through it without issues. Slave businesses lent such items to the captains of slave ships.

"There's something else we'll need to prepare," Miida continued. "They'll turn us away immediately if we arrive empty-handed. We need slaves we can sell on the market."

Hmm... Then we'll need some people to play the role of slaves... We could just round up a bunch of thieves, but...that would be too evil, wouldn't it?

"My lord, I'll be the slave," Colona spoke up, raising her hand.

“Wait a minute! Are you insane, Colona?” Shou exclaimed. “You’re their target, you can’t just jump into their arms!”

I agreed. Coming with us would already put her in more than enough danger. It’d be crazy to have her pretend to be a captured slave as well.

“I’m perfectly sane. I’m confident you will save me, so I do not see the issue, my lord.”

“Oh? You trust me that much? Guess, I’ll have to respect the dedication then,” Shou gloated. “Hey, Miida, she’ll do fine, won’t she?”

“Do fine?! Of course, she will. She’s a priority target! Are you sure *she* should play the slave?!” Miida exclaimed.

“She just said she wanted to do it,” Shou said.

“Well... With that girl as our merchandise...we may actually reach the central tower,” Miida said before resting his chin on his hand. He seemed to be deep in thought.

Jirou interrupted his musings “May I ask you something? I’m glad to hear you will be guiding us, but I’d like to confirm something before we plan our attack. Your boss, the president of the slave business, his name is Fujiwara Touji, right?”

“How—?! I mean, yes. Yes it is. I haven’t heard President Touji’s last name very often, but it did sound something like that.”

“Jirou, do you know that Fujiwara guy?” Shou asked.

“I do. We fought once before the war started. Naturally, I didn’t know he ran a slave market at the time, but I regret that I didn’t have the resolve to deal the finishing blow. Even if it meant I had to get hurt in the process. He’s as strong as Sir Tatsuma or Sir Hayato. Depending on the situation, I may not be able to take him down by myself.”

A powerful warrior running a slave market... The fight ahead may turn out to be more difficult than I expected.

After this, we formed a detailed plan with Miida and sent a few of Tatsuma

and Jirou's men, along with Kinrou to the village of Midd.

We also spread the news that I would soon visit the Sentdrag Kingdom. It was Adel's plan: if everyone thought I'd left her alone in Atami, it'd be the perfect time for slavers to strike.

I didn't like the idea of Adel being in danger, but it was a good plan. Slave traders would definitely try to get to her while I wasn't there, and it would make things easier on our side if a bulk of their forces were busy chasing after Adel.

Adel was a strong fighter too so she'd definitely be fine...right? *I can't help it. I'm still worried...*

We decided Tatsuma would stay with Adel to protect her if need be. Although, to be fair, he probably wouldn't have been of any use if we had taken him with us. We'd have to fight on ships. Tatsuma was fully aware of this and was more than happy to stay on land.

Such an incredible warrior rendered useless by a few waves... I don't know if it's funny or sad.

If we suddenly attacked them in large numbers, they may have held the slaves hostage, so we decided to make this a stealth mission.

First of all, Shou would join me. Without him, we wouldn't be able to stay in touch with Colona, which could be incredibly dangerous for her.

The rest of the team would be composed of Jirou, the ninja who could move while staying hidden, Akiha, who could get rid of her targets swiftly even from a distance, and Colona, our decoy.

"Masaki! What about me?" Youko asked.

"I'm sorry, Youko, but I'd like you to stay on standby with Barbarossa and the others. We'll need a ship to escape, so stay with my crew and ensure our route is clear."

"Hmpf... I guess I don't have a choice," she whined. "I'll wait for you on the ship."

"I promise I'll make it up to you!"

“You’d better keep that promise, okay?”

“I will.”

Adel approached timidly before saying, “You have to make it up to me too...”

You too?! You obviously can’t come, so it’s not the same, is it?

I had a feeling that Adel might sulk if I pointed out the obvious difference so I decided not to mention it.

“All right. I’ll make it up to both of you. Is that okay?”

Youko and Adel nodded with smiles on their faces.

While I was chatting with my fiancées, Akiha walked away and went to discuss something with Jirou.

“Don’t you have anything to say to him, Lady Akiha?”

“Me?! No... I... We’re not in that kind of relationship!” she blurted out, shaking her head and looking down at her feet.

“I’m sorry for meddling in your affairs, but I’d like you to know that bottling up your feelings may not be the best course of action. We’re not in Japan anymore. You can go ahead and do what you like. It’s all right to be a little more selfish, Lady Akiha.”

“‘It’s all right to be selfish’...” she repeated.

“Maybe try being a little more direct. Who knows? Sir Masaki might just accept your feelings,” Jirou added.

“Eh?! I-I just told you, it’s nothing like that!”

Akiha’s weak denial just made Jirou laugh.

While I couldn’t hear their conversation, they seemed to be having fun. They were quite far apart in age so it looked like a father joking with his daughter.

According to the information we had gathered, the next time the slave market was set to open was in three days. We busied ourselves with our

preparations to make sure we were ready by then, and two days went by in the blink of an eye.

We had three main objectives.

First: rescue the slaves, including Queen Gardenia, the sovereign of the echidnas. This was our biggest priority. Shou, who had dozens of tricks up his sleeve, would be in charge of making this possible.

Second: destroy the slave market. I'd planned to fight their leader from the start so that fell right into my area of expertise. As for the Phantom Blau itself, I was fairly confident I could sink it with magic spells.

Third, and this was more of a problem than an objective: figure out a way to deal with the rings. Our resident magic item expert, Youko, was in charge of researching the curse and devising a solution before we left.

Today was the last day before our operation started, and Youko had promised to report on her findings. I was in the middle of a meeting with Jirou when she entered the room.

"Masaki... I need...a hug..." she whined, clinging to me.

She had huge dark circles around her eyes. *She must have stayed up all night.*

Her hair and tails were a mess so I found a comb to brush them with.

"Youko," I started after a few minutes of brushing her tails and stroking her head. "Did you figure out how the rings work?"

"Feels so goooood," she purred. "Oh, right, the rings. I was a bit puzzled when I first saw them, but I finally understand what was bugging me so much. How should I say it... The nature of the curses is the exact same for all five rings."

"The nature of the curses?"

"Basically, these rings were all made using a strong curse as their basis. And I think I know how. Curses will affect any person or objects that are close to them. Well, the person who made the rings took advantage of that fact. There's a specific material—magic ore—that is incredibly responsive to nearby mana and will easily absorb its attributes. Therefore, the rings were made with magic ore that absorbed the original curse's attributes."

Oh, so kind of like pickled veggies?

“Did you also find out how to deal with them?”

“Yes. It’s pretty simple, really. You have to destroy whatever contains the original curse. The rings won’t function anymore if the mana that powers them disappears. And even the greatest of curses *will* disappear in a heartbeat if it doesn’t have anything to tie it to this world. The only issue is...”

“What is it?”

“I can’t know for sure what will happen when the original cursed item is destroyed. Once, to destroy a cursed painting, someone burned down the mansion it was in, and a burning wraith emerged from the blaze. It took the Adventurer Guild a long time to deal with the aftermath. A powerful wraith or a lich may appear when you destroy it...or perhaps something even worse.”

“So there’s no way to know beforehand, huh?”

She nodded with an apologetic look on her face.

Purging the curse was also an option in theory, but considering how powerful it was, it’d most likely be impossible even for me.

Youko told me that, in the past, a noble family had once hired a priest to purge a cursed ring. He had to pray for three days and three nights straight to finally get rid of it. If we tried something like that with the curse we were facing, we’d need two hundred such priests to pray for ten times as long.

This meant we only had one option: destroy the cursed object, regardless of what may or may not happen if we did.

I couldn’t leave that job to someone else. With my GM powers, I’d be safe from the influence of the curse while others wouldn’t. I had to take on that mission myself.

According to the latest reports we received, the situation in the southern land of the echidnas was growing tenser by the minute. A war could break out at any moment. *There’s no time.*

Shou later told me that he had ended up learning all of this while he was out

looking for the queen at Asta-san's request. He and Colona had been attacked during their investigation, and that's when he discovered the first ring.

As far as Shou was concerned, our new operation was also a way for him to settle the score with the slavers that had dared to target Colona.

To infiltrate the Phantom Blau, we planned to pose as Miida's guards. Since our usual clothes were way too conspicuous, we decided to disguise ourselves. We planned on wearing costumes to disguise ourselves. It was a full set of armor that the guards of private estates wore in both Atami and Sentdrag.

Since the set included a helmet, the enemy wouldn't be able to see our faces, let alone figure out our gender. It also wouldn't prevent us from fighting, which was ideal. And thankfully, they came in many different colors. People usually wore the same color to indicate they belonged to the same squadron. As an added bonus, since there were so many designs, we could pick anything we liked.

I also decided to remove my usual Cloak of the Azure Dragon and bring another camouflage piece with me: the Mantle of Distortion, a black and deep blue mantle that looked somewhat like the night sky. It used to be very popular for infiltration quests in Britalia Online. It helped conceal the user's presence and had the Sneak Boost effect. It also had a hood to conceal your face and was perfect for getting around dark places unnoticed. The interior of the ship would most likely be poorly lit so I'd equip it immediately after disabling the armor.

Camouflage: Mantle of Distortion (Sneak Boost)

Mantle of Distortion: A mantle crafted from the clothes of spirits wandering the boundary between the real world and the void. It could almost be considered to be a part of the astral plane itself. When entirely covered with this mantle, your presence will not be noticed. Recommended for covert operations.

Rarity: HR

As I read over the item's description, I thought about Jimmy. If he wore that mantle, I had a strong feeling that no one would *ever* be able to notice him no matter what he did. I stopped that train of thought. Even if it was just to myself, it wasn't nice to joke about that.

While he was hesitant to speak up and kept a low profile most of the time, he did help me a lot. He had done the most work to prepare for this operation, and I was incredibly grateful to him. *A true unsung hero*.

I had three Mantle of Distortions in my inventory so I gave the other two to Shou and Akiha. Jirou had plenty of stealth-oriented equipment and didn't need my help.

"Even if my old privileges are still valid, I won't be able to go everywhere. There are limits to the places we merchants are allowed to visit... Since you are posing as my guards, I think the furthest you'll be allowed to go is the waiting room on the ship's bow," Miida explained.

"Do you know the layout of the ship's interior?"

"I don't. Only those who manage to get their hands on individuals on the boss's wishlist are allowed inside. I think some nobles also get to enter from time to time, but most of them are royalty or high-ranking aristocrats with...disgusting preferences."

I couldn't help myself from being curious and asked what kind of preferences he was talking about. It was indeed strange to hear someone who ran a slave ship call something "disgusting." However, when he answered, I immediately regretted asking. *I wish I could unhear it...*

I passed on everything Miida knew about these key figures to Jirou. It was a good occasion to get rid of corrupt and depraved nobles, and, if he played his cards right, he may even be able to exchange these facts to rival nobles for favors.

There were also some noblemen from the Sentdrag Kingdom on the list.

"Looks like we'll need to find suitable replacements for those roles...again," he sighed, an exasperated look on his face. "Sir Masaki, would you care for another territory?"

"No thank you."

Please don't try to casually dump more land on me! I already have my hands full with Atami!

Chapter 9

On the day when the slave market was set to begin, we headed out into the open sea.

To prepare for our next mission, I'd rearranged my skills a little:

Passive skills: HP & MP Recovery (High), Martial God Principle, Sneak Boost (High), Heightened Senses (High).

Active skills: Oversword, Silent Blow, Thousand Dust of the Six Realms, Quick Attack, EMPTY SLOT.

Composite skill: Overtachi.

It was my first time adding Quick Attack to my skill list. While the damage it inflicted was a little lower than my normal attacks—ninety percent, to be exact—it would allow me to deliver a blow almost instantly. There was a thirty-second cooldown so I couldn't spam it, though.

The reason I had left a spot empty was so I'd be able to add a new skill quickly if the situation called for it. I didn't want to have to worry about what to remove in the middle of a fight.

While my crew was running about, hard at work on the ship, I leisurely looked out at the sea. We had asked the members of the Pirates of the Round Table to man the slave ship. While it was a little smaller than our usual vessel, it was still built larger than most to carry as many slaves as possible.

"It be a while since we last cut through these waves together, Cap'n!" Barbarossa grinned, coming to stand next to me and breathing in the salty sea breeze.

"Well, I've barely gone out to sea ever since I arrived in the kingdom. I'm kind of a failure as a pirate captain, right?" I joked.

"Don't ye be worryin' about it. We be alive thanks to ye, and that be enough to make you our captain 'til Davy Jones takes us. I also be thankful that ye allow us to continue living as pirates."

Although Barbarossa said “living as pirates,” it didn’t mean they attacked defenseless vessels. They mostly went treasure hunting, fought other pirates—who were on the rise again now that the empire’s armada no longer ruled the seas—and worked as guards for merchant ships.It wasn’t anything new for Barbarossa and his crew, though. Since they’d be hunted down by the navy of the closest nation if they committed too many offenses, they continued to be on their best behavior. It helped that merchants saw the hiring of pirates as a good deal. They paid them three to five percent of their profits for safe travels—a small price compared to the risk of losing their entire cargo. Barbarossa’s crew, in particular, had dozens of clients lined up, especially since it gave the merchants the chance to try Lohas’s cooking. I’d heard he had gotten even better recently.

“We’re moving so fast... Must be nice to always have several mages on board.” Miida sighed, coming to stand on my other side.

Three men gazing at the sea side by side...how sad.

There weren’t any girls in our vicinity, and while that was a bit of a letdown, it also meant we could take things easy and not have to worry about showing our best selves.

According to Miida, he used to have only one mage on his crew, and the man took regular breaks. Mages were highly sought after, so they’d be off to greener pastures in the blink of an eye if you asked too much of them. As a result, Miida used to have to drop anchor every night to let him have a proper rest.

It was interesting that a slave ship—arguably the most questionable of businesses—wasn’t as bad as most shitty companies when it came to handling its employees. They got enough breaks and were paid relatively high wages. A dream job.

I hope that all those toxic companies learn from these slavers. Giving your employees proper benefits was important!

Paddle and Peddle took turns powering the ship and, thanks to them—and to the favorable winds today—we sailed forth at high speed.

I could have helped them too but their refusal had been adamant. They wanted me to take it easy since it was my first boat trip in a while. I ended up

relenting and thanking them for their thoughtfulness.

I should try to make some time to accompany them at sea once in a while. *But then again, hanging out on a pirate ship in my current role... Maybe it would be all right if I said I was going treasure hunting?*

“Masaki-san! I see the fog!” Akiha called out before coming down from her spot in the crow’s nest.

Rather than properly climbing down, she had jumped all the way down to the deck. *I know you’re strong, but you could have used the ladder...*

“I can’t see through the fog even with my Hyperopia, so I’m guessing that’s the place we’re looking for,” she said.

“It is,” Miida confirmed.

“All right. Everyone, to your stations! Let’s move according to the plan. And Barbarossa, put on the costume I gave you. They may know your face,” I instructed.

“Be that really necessary?” Barbarossa whined before reluctantly taking out the panda onesie I had given him earlier. “All right then...”

There was a race of people in this world known as the panda tribe, and they looked exactly like humans in panda onesies. If Barbarossa wore a few clothes over his costume, he’d look just like a pandaman.

“HA HA HA!!! Brother, you look incredible like this! It suits you!”

“Shut your mouth, Lohas!” Barbarossa huffed, raising his arms in protest.

We burst out laughing—he just looked like an adorable panda throwing a tantrum. If he went back to Atami in this get-up, I had a feeling the people would try to turn him into the town’s mascot.

Even the ever-stoic Jirou hid his smile with his hand and pretended to look away. *You’re not fooling anyone, Jirou, I can see your shoulders shaking.*

“I’m gonna die! My abs hurt! HA HA HA HA!!! I might die here before we even get to the fighting.” Shou was literally rolling on the floor laughing.

And Colona was...

“Lord Barbarossa. Would you be so kind as to look at me and strike a pose?”

“A-Aye?”

...holding a camera and snapping pictures of Barbarossa. She seemed to be a fan of his new look.



However, the laughing stopped when we started to get close to the fog. We were all used to battles here, and we knew it was time to focus.

“My lord, have some water,” Colona said.

“Thanks! I haven’t laughed so much in a while, ha ha!”

Let me correct myself: everyone *but* Shou was focused on the fight to come. He was just drinking some water, his helmet fully open.

“Shou, we’re getting close to the ship. Pay attention,” I scolded him.

“I know, I know.”

His tone was so nonchalant that I was still a bit worried at first, but when I saw the serious look in his eyes, I figured he’d be all right.

Our ship entered the thick fog, and the magic item that had been built into the ship activated automatically, clearing a path ahead of us.

“We’ll reach the Phantom Blau if we follow it,” Miida stated.

He sounded tense, and his gaze was fixed on the fogless path. As far as the people of the Phanom Blau were concerned, he was a traitor. If they noticed he had betrayed them, he’d be killed on the spot.

The only reason why he had agreed to help us in spite of the risks was that we had promised to protect and send money to his village in exchange for his work here regardless of whether we succeeded.

We had gotten King Laurent to issue the decree so that he’d trust us fully. That went to prove how important Miida’s collaboration was for this mission to succeed but also how badly the kingdom wanted this to be dealt with.

“Masaki, do you have a minute?” Youko said, beckoning me to come closer.

Did she get *it* done?

“You know that thing you wanted? I made it. It was a difficult task with only six samples, but here you go,” she said, handing me a small ring.

“I knew you’d manage! Thank you, Youko.”

“Anything for you.”

Youko had modified this magic ring to give it the ability to track down the original curse. I had no idea what it would look like, so I needed a magic item to help me figure it out.

"The ring I used as a base isn't one of the subjugation ones so don't worry," she explained. "Originally, it just had the power to glow in the dark. I modified it so that it'd start glowing if it got close to the curse."

I equipped the ring to check out how it worked. It was glowing very faintly. Since it was bright outside, it was barely noticeable, but I'd have an easier time following it in a dim place.

Youko had barely had enough time to make just one of these rings, but that was more than enough. Destroying the original curse was my job so I'd keep it with me.

After half an hour of navigating through the fog, a gigantic ship finally came into view. The white fog around it was so thick that even the sun was blocked from view.

I nodded at Barbarossa, and he started giving orders to the crew members. We only needed to get a collar around Colona's neck and then we'd be ready to go.

The collar we'd use was the one Barry had tried to put on me when I was still in the empire. It was torn at the time, but I had been able to repair it with my Leatherworking Skill, Mend. Naturally, I had only made it *look* like a working slave collar. It didn't have any effect anymore.

Instead of having me put it on Colona, it'd be better for Shou, her master, to do it, so I handed it to him. She'd probably feel more at ease with him doing it too.

While he fastened it around Colona's neck, Youko looked at me, an envious expression on her face. *All right, I see where this is going. She's into that kind of thing, isn't she?*

Speaking of Youko, she would stay on our ship. Female sailors were incredibly scarce on slave ships, and even when there were some, they were usually there

to provide some *different* kind of service.

If she came with us and people mistakenly thought she did that *kind* of work, she may get assaulted, so it was safer for her to stay here. Of course, she was strong enough to kick the ass of anyone trying to touch her, but we couldn't risk a commotion.

We entered the ship's shadow, and it was as if we had suddenly entered a whole new domain: the fog cleared away immediately.

Now that I could see it clearly, the monstrous ship looked more like an oddly round, floating city. *Can that thing even sail? Maybe it just floats there...*

I had a feeling I'd seen a ship like that...somewhere...

"It looks just like that Russian warship..." commented Akiha.

Right! I remembered reading about it on the internet before. If memory served me right, it was that ship, Novgorod! It looked just like the pictures I'd seen, only many, many times bigger. If it only needed to float and not move, its size likely wasn't an issue.

Magic items were a thing in this world so anything was possible, though.

The fact that the ship was built with so much iron went to show how rich its owner must be. There were also cannons set up. *What's the point of cannons in this fog?*

We followed Miida's instructions and moved the boat to the anchorage for commercial vessels. He said something to the workers there before showing them Colona. Their expressions immediately shifted and they hurried back to the ship.

"Looks like we'll be able to get in. Stay calm and don't make any fuss," I warned.

"Don't worry, we all know what to do," said Shou, his tone light as always.

Now we just had to stick to the plan.

Jirou—who was disguised as some kind of ruffian—walked in front of Miida. Shou, Akiha, and I—in full sets of armor—followed. Shou was also dragging Colona along by the ropes that bound her hands.

After the six of us had left for the main ship, Barbarossa and the others were granted access. They followed behind, carrying barrels of wine and foodstuff. That was how the Phantom Blau usually stocked up on goods.

We went up a staircase lit by lanterns and stepped into a place that could only be described as *chaotic*. There, the ugly desires of some mixed with the despair of others. What immediately caught my attention were the obscene grins of the nobles, each wearing a mask across their eyes. As they passed by the poor slave girls, the nobles would casually grope at their bodies.

A little further away, a young masked woman holding a leash in her hand, dragged along a half-naked man with a slave collar as if he were some dog. Her strong perfume assaulted my nostril when we walked past her.

At the end of the pathway were a few young girls bound and almost naked. Next to them, a sign read “Virgins in stock.” *They’re really treating them like mere objects... Disgusting bastards.*

I wanted nothing more than to let my rage out and trash the whole place.

“Masaki-san, you need to calm down,” Akiha whispered in my ear.

Her voice brought me back to reality. I had brought my hand to my sword without noticing. *That was close.*

“This way,” Miida whispered, speaking quietly enough that his voice would be drowned out by the pandemonium around us. “You haven’t seen the worst of it. It’s already a bit difficult for me to stomach, so I can only imagine how hard it is for you, but...”

We were heading toward the most imposing structure on this ship: the tower that rose toward the sky on the bow.

A large door slowly opened, granting us access to the bow. As soon as we tried to move forward, though, the gatekeeper stopped us.

“Only you and the slave from here on. Your guards can wait for you,” he told Miida.

“But—” I tried to interject.

“Are you gonna make me repeat myself?!” he fumed.

I wanted to insist but Jirou held me back.

“Sorry. These guys are new, they just don’t know when to shut up,” he said with an assured tone. “You’ll give us a heads up when our boss’s done here, right?”

“Sure, I’ll send a messenger to your ship.”

Jirou nodded. “Perfect. Sorry for the bother, you know how greenhorns are. I’ll make sure to rein my guys in,” he told the man before turning to us. “Come on.”

Spoken like a true gangster! Jirou sounded like he had been doing that his whole life. Even his voice was different.

How on earth did he learn to even disguise his voice?! Ninjas sure are impressive.

“We couldn’t get in. What do we do now?” I asked.

We’d entered an empty room to figure out what to do. It was one of the few that could be borrowed by people who wished to stay the night, but at this time, there was no one around. It was the perfect place to talk.

We’d be in a pickle if someone suddenly walked in on us, so I monitored my map and used my skill, Heightened Senses to make sure there was no one around. Jirou also had very sharp senses so we should be all right.

Miida had told us that there’d be a waiting room for guards on the bow, but when we asked about it, the guy who handled lodgings for outsiders told us that the waiting room had been closed. Apparently, some idiot caused a ruckus a while ago. He had tried to get into a restricted area to make a deal directly with the boss. Naturally, the guards had tried to stop him, and it had quickly turned into a brawl. In the end, the boss—Touji—had killed the intruder. Now, security was even tighter, and guards weren’t allowed past those doors for any reason.

“We have no choice but to infiltrate,” Jirou stated. “I was able to locate an entrance point on the third floor.”

“On the third floor? But how are we even supposed to get there, Jirou-san?” Akiha asked.

“Don’t we have the perfect man for the job?” He pointed at me.

Yeah, yeah, I know. No need to point.

“I just need to do the same thing as that time in Lurf, right?”

“I see. I guess Masaki wouldn’t have any issues sneaking in with his powers. Do you guys need me to start a little diversion, though?” Shou asked.

“Sounds good. It’ll make things easier on our end,” Jirou agreed. “Would you mind?”

“You got it!” Shou exclaimed with the enthusiasm of a seasoned TV presenter.

Shou would be using an iron beast to distract the guards. He decided to use one that, like Colona, didn’t look one bit like a machine.

He disabled his costume and picked out a card from his deck.

“Come forth and let out your glorious silver roar! Crush your enemies with your sharp fangs! Rule upon all living beings and overwhelm your enemies with your might! Beast Invocation: Silver Wolf, Arthur!”

As he chanted, Shou threw the card in the air. It started shining, and I felt the power of his spell fill the small room.

It made the furniture rattle as the light got brighter and brighter. Gradually, the card started taking the form of a person.

Without a sound, a three-meter-tall beastman appeared in the middle of the room. He had a silver mane, steel claws, and fangs that looked as sharp as blades.

“How may I be of use, master?” Arthur the beastman’s deep voice resounded throughout the room.

The Japanese characters for “silver wolf” were read “ginrou.” *Huh, kinda like Jirou’s son’s name. Should I call him Ginrou, then? There was a mystery TV show*

with characters called Kinrou and Ginrou a while ago too, wasn't there?

I'd have time to worry about what to call him after this ordeal was over and done with. I didn't even know what kind of guy Ginrou was at this point.

"I'd like for you to create a diversion. I imagine that won't be difficult for you."

"A simple task, indeed. Should I refrain from killing?"

"Even if I tell you to do as you like, you'd never hurt non-combatants, would you?" Shou said with a little laugh.

Ginrou nodded. "You know me well, master. A proud beast like I does not kill outside of the battlefield unless to hunt for sustenance. I shall use my own discretion, as you offered."

"Go right ahead. Oh and, take this with you. Fenrir's Claws!" he exclaimed, throwing another card in the air.

A blue light covered both of Ginrou's forearms, and before long, large silver claws appeared on them.

"My trusty partners," Ginrou said, looking at the claws. "Thank you, master. I shall strive to honor your resolve! Now, I will go and complete my mission!"

Without a sound, Ginrou jumped out of the only window of the room.

A few moments later, we heard a scream coming from the main open space on the Phantom Blau. Before long, we heard clinking metallic sounds—it sounded like men in armor running—heading in the direction of the scream.

The soldiers that rushed off had been drinking around the lodging area up until now. Looks like Ginrou managed to lure them away.

Shou suddenly clicked his tongue. "Masaki, Colona has come into contact with Touji. I don't know what happened, but she can't move anymore. We need to hurry!"

I'd never heard him sound so distressed before.

If Colona had already been handed over to Touji, we needed to move fast.

"Sir Masaki, like we discussed, Lady Akiha and I will work on liberating the

slaves," Jirou said.

"Shou-san... I just need to keep holding this, right?" Akiha asked.

She was holding a box large enough that she had to carry it with both hands. I asked why she didn't just put it in her item box for now, but it was apparently somewhat of a special item and couldn't be stored away. In the box was a strange miniature village. I could even see a river flowing inside.

"Yeah. You just keep holding it like that, and you'll be able to hide the slaves inside."

The mysterious box Akiha was holding was actually one of Shou's cards: the Magic Doll Village. It worked almost like my Room and could fit a great many people. The only drawback was that as long as there were people inside, you couldn't turn it back into a card.

Once you were inside the miniature world, everything looked lifelike, and it was completely impossible to escape without the approval of its owner.

According to Shou, the original use of this card in *Metallic Monsters* was to have a place for monsters to roam, but ever since entering this world, he had started discovering different applications. *It's definitely coming in handy now.*

Shou held onto me and I activated Stealth and Wing. As we flew through the window, concealed from everyone else, we saw Ginrou growling and slashing at the men trying to stop him. I checked my map, and sure enough, most of the guards on board were rushing toward him.

I shot a glance toward the room we had just come out of and saw Akiha and Jirou sneaking out discreetly. Akiha had thrown on the Mantle of Distortion I had given her while Jirou...looked almost like a chameleon. *I figured as much. My mantle would have been a considerable downgrade considering the incredible stuff he's got!*

Streams of people were leaving their stations on the bow to see what the commotion was about, so I figured sneaking in should be fairly easy. I flew in a straight line to the spot on the third floor Jirou had mentioned earlier and entered through the window there.

Since the Phantom Blau was surrounded by fog on all sides, there wasn't much sunlight, and since the inside of the tower was only lit by lamps, it was fairly dim.

"It's kinda gloomy in here, but I guess that works out in our favor," Shou commented. "Lead the way, Masaki."

"Okay, follow me."

Shou and I ran through the empty corridors until we reached a staircase. We hurried down to the second floor.

There wasn't anyone there either, but when we finally reached the first floor, we bumped into two soldiers guarding the staircase on each side.

"Who the hell are you?!" one of the men exclaimed.

"Who do you think? Villains, obviously!" Shou teased before beheading him with a swift sweep of his sword.

I used Silent Blow and Quick Attack to deal with the other guard. I hit his chest without activating Non-Lethal Attack, and he was propelled upward before falling to the ground, motionless.

Shou whistled. "Impressive."

"You're not so bad yourself," I said. "I thought it was your summons that did the fighting."

"You should always strive to widen your options."

"I agree."

We headed toward the basement as we bantered.

The atmosphere there was completely different from that of the upper floors. "OFF LIMITS" was written large on the floor using the letters of this world.

Shou tried to step forward, ignoring the sign, but I stopped him.

"It's a trap. It'll activate if you step on it."

He hurriedly moved back. "For real?! Phew, you saved me.

It made sense for him not to notice considering how little light there was

down here. I was only so sure because it was written on my map.

The trap covered the letters and the area around it. I could see an alarm mark on my map which meant that it would blare out a noise if we stepped on it, immediately revealing our presence.

If you looked closely enough, you could see the plates that'd been used to cover the floor and hide the trap. They were almost indistinguishable from the normal floor.

"Walk in the exact same spots as me," I warned Shou.

"Got it."

We went past the trap and started running again while discreetly getting rid of any soldiers we ran into.

"A-An enem—" one of the guards started....

"In your dreams."

...before Shou plunged a dagger into his throat.

The man fell to the ground soundlessly. On my side was another corpse, fresh blood pouring out of his mouth.

Unlike Shou, the guards didn't know what hit them when I attacked, and I didn't give them the opportunity to react. I disabled Stealth when we ran, but as soon as we spotted enemies, I reactivated it and swiftly got rid of my target with a single blow.

The layout of the ship was even more annoyingly complicated than I'd first expected. Every time we went down one flight of stairs, we had to run to the other side of the ship to get to the next one. I tried cutting the floor to see if we could just jump down, but I found water pipes and figured it was too dangerous. We had no choice but to painstakingly use the stairs.

I considered blasting everything in our way with magic, but we were now near the ship's bilge. If I blew a hole in the ship by mistake, there was a risk it would sink. My spells were too strong to use like that.

“Masaki, how long until we reach Colona?”

“We’re getting close. One more floor and— Wait. Enemies ahead,” I answered before using Stealth to once again conceal myself.

“Got it.”

As we cautiously moved forward, we ran into a beastman with the head of a lion.

Making use of the Mantle of Distortion, Shou lunged forward and slashed at him with his Cursed Sword, Gram, without giving the beastman any time to react.

CLANG.

A shrill metallic sound echoed through the corridor.

“What the...?!”

The beastman had stopped Shou’s sword with just his bare hand. A strong fighter could definitely have reacted in time and parried with a weapon, but this was unfathomable. *How did he stop Shou’s blade barehanded?*

The beastman didn’t give his opponent time to hesitate, and he leaped into the air to land a jump kick into Shou’s abdomen, sending him flying.

“Argh!” Shou cried out.

He rolled on the floor for a few seconds before he managed to climb back to his feet. I saw a drop of blood rolling down his lips. *He must have gotten a cut inside his mouth.*

This beastman wasn’t like the other enemies we’d fought up until now.

I can’t mess up here. I stayed in Stealth and snuck up behind him, aiming my super speedy combo—Silent Blow and Quick Attack—at the back of his head. However, the moment my strike was about to connect, he disappeared

I was dumbfounded. *He can dodge even when I’m using Stealth?!* Before I’d even noticed him retaliate, I felt something connect with my chin.

Invincibility protected me from taking any damage, but it didn’t stop my brain

from feeling the vibrations of his kick. I started to feel myself lose consciousness but somehow...I didn't. *Is this one of Invincibility's effects?*

I was still astonished that he'd managed to dodge! While Stealth had been disabled automatically when I started attacking, I'd used Quick Attack! To think he had sensed my attack and then disappeared in such a short time... He was incredibly skilled.

Needless to say, he hadn't *actually* disappeared. I assumed he'd left my field of vision by crouching before delivering a kick from below to my chin.

"Ouch..." I whined. "Hey, Shou! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine... I didn't think we'd run into a monster like him, though."

"We have to get through somehow. Colona's on the other side. "

"Damn right."

The lion man had yet to say a word. He simply stood there, ready to continue our fight. I took a look at my map and noticed that a bunch of people were heading our way. *They must have heard the ruckus we were making... Not good.*

If we were stuck here for too long, we'd just attract more enemies.

We wouldn't be able to defeat this guy with half-hearted attacks. We had to fight him with the intent to kill.

Shou understood that fact as well as I. I activated Oversword while he used the card Strength to buff himself.

The beastman's ears twitched a few times and, surprisingly, instead of facing us, he suddenly opened a nearby door and walked through it. *What is he doing?*

Without saying a word, he stepped out for a moment to gesture at us to follow him.

"What do we do?" I asked Shou.

"He's inviting us in? But that doesn't make any sense... If it's a trap, we can still crush him, I guess."

"Yeah."

The next batch of enemies was right around the corner so we dashed through

the doorway and found ourselves in a room. The beastman simply closed the door quietly behind us.

No one moved nor spoke for a moment as we listened to the footsteps of the guards rushing right outside. They went past us without noticing anything.

I looked at my map and confirmed they'd left the corridor. We could probably come out.

Why had that beastman helped us hide? Wasn't he our foe?

"Hey, you. Why aren't you saying anything?" Shou asked.

He pointed at his neck. Not only was he wearing a slave corner, but he also had what looked like a strange birthmark poking out—one that looked oddly similar to the mark left by the cursed rings.

"Is a curse preventing you from speaking?" I inquired.

The beastman nodded.

"Masaki, can't you do something about his curse? I'm pretty sure he doesn't want to fight us."

"I've got the same feeling," I agreed before turning to the beastman. "Please stay still for a moment."

First, I took out my Pick of the Bandit King to remove his collar. I could now take a better look at his neck. That mark had definitely been left by a curse.

"Dispel," I chanted.

The beastman's neck started glowing, and before long, the cursed mark disappeared as if it had been burned by the light.

"I-I can speak again! Thank you so much!" he exclaimed, grabbing both my and Tatsuma's hands and bowing again and again.

"Care to tell us who you are? You can't be a regular beastman, right?" Shou asked.

"My name is Nemea Londwell. Who I am isn't important right now! Please save the shaman!"

"The shaman?"

“If you go down this corridor, you’ll find the slave market president’s office. In there is a hidden room where the bastard hides his women—or in his words, ‘his collection.’ The great shaman is also being held there... Please! I know we just met and you don’t owe me anything, but I must beg you to help me! I can’t defeat him alone...” Nemea pleaded.

He gritted his teeth in frustration and clenched his fists so hard that he drew blood. The beastman must have been unable to fight back after that shaman was taken hostage, and they must have taken that opportunity to turn him into a slave. Considering how strong he was, I doubted he could have been taken down otherwise.

“We’ll help you,” Shou said immediately. “We’d always intended to save everyone either way, so I imagine she would have been on the list regardless. Right, Masaki?”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Honestly, I’d much rather be your friend than your enemy, Nemea.”

He was the kind of man who could react to a blow initiated while using Stealth. I couldn’t fathom how strong he was.

“Rather than that, I have a question for you,” Shou asked Nemea. “Did a petite girl with blue hair come this way? Not long ago.”

“A girl with blue hair... I did see one get dragged down there by one of the boss’s men. If she’s your friend, you should hurry to her. When the boss saw her, he had this look on his face...‘sinister’ is the only way I can describe it. He can’t be up to anything good... I’ll lead the way—I know how to get into the boss’s hidden room.”

I already knew about the hidden room thanks to my map, but if Nemea could get us inside, it’d be a big help.

We had unexpectedly found a dependable ally. Shou and I offered our thanks and we hurried together to the boss’s office. If Nemea was right and Colona was in danger, we couldn’t waste any time by being cautious.

We ran as fast as we could, getting rid of any guards standing in our way without so much as slowing down.

We painted the corridor walls red as bodies fell to the floor. We didn’t have the time to dwell on them, though.

The further we moved forward, the darker the corridor was getting. Fewer lamps lit the way here, and we couldn’t help but feel crushed by the ominous atmosphere around us.

I looked down at the ring Youko had given me. It was glowing brighter. We were definitely getting closer to the source of the curse. Still, we couldn’t rest yet.

I’ll never forgive you for laying your hands on someone I hold dear!

The three of us shared that same thought as we dashed into the dark abyss of the lowest floor.

Side Story: Shou's Leisure Trip in Another World

Light flooded through the curtains, hitting my eyes and waking me up with a yawn.

I slept so well.

I tried estimating the time. *Should be around...noon, maybe?*

Colona and I were currently in a city called Rockblue. It was a pretty chill place nearby Lurf and was famous for its blue rocks. This was where one of my several hideouts was located.

After having summoned Cthulhu during that last battle in the imperial capital, I'd really needed that rest. *Seriously, keeping Cthulhu on the field is crazy costly.*

I'd used so much mana in one go that I spent most of my time since in bed.

I didn't like making use of my secret weapon—my joker card, in a way—but sometimes, shit happens.

I'd chickened out in the past, fearing the toll it might take on me, and I'd once messed up at a crucial moment because of it... I didn't want to do something like that ever again. Taking the plunge without hesitation didn't make the aftermath any easier, though.

I'd been training to increase my mana ever since I came to this world, but yeah... I couldn't even hold out for two minutes. That's even shorter than a certain fleeting Giant of Light. What a joke.

Argh, I can't even make cup noodles to cheer myself up! I miss instant noodles so much... Why isn't it a thing in this world?

I wonder if Masaki has some. I wouldn't put it past him. He had a coffee machine, after all. Ah, damn. I should have gotten him to make me a cup of coffee before I left...

Since I was completely useless after summoning Cthulhu, I had to rely on

Colona again. I felt pretty bad for making her take care of me all the time.

For some reason, one of the side effects I suffered was a drastic increase in libido. If a hot girl somehow found her way here, I'd definitely hit on her.

Damn Masaki and his harem of cute girls.

That was one of the reasons why I'd left abruptly and secluded myself here with Colona. Masaki was pretty famous, and I didn't want to cause him or his girls any trouble.

Speaking of Colona, she was currently asleep right next to me. Because of the side effects, I couldn't really help myself, and—*how should I put this?*—I'd had a little taste.

I was really thankful to have her by my side.

Whenever I said that I loved her while we were doing it, she'd always give me the cold shoulder. "Keep that nonsense to yourself," she'd blurt out coldly.

She'd always blush and avert her eyes afterward, though. *Freaking cute.*

I should wipe her down with a towel in a bit. She was part human and part machine, but her body was pretty much the same as any human girl.

She was my greatest partner, always doing everything she could for me, and I never got tired of making love to her. I felt like she was my wife, in a way. Although she'd definitely punch me in the face if I ever called her that out loud.

The fact that Colona was so cold to me was mostly my fault.

I'd been in this world for a while now, and I'd gone through my fair share of women. Naturally, Colona was aware of that too. After all, she was my trusted partner, the very first card I summoned after arriving here. Since she was always by my side, there were no secrets between the two of us.

That said, although I'd had a lot of partners, I was pretty sure I hadn't fathered any kids. *God bless whoever invented contraception magic.*

This world was devoid of fun pastimes. TVs didn't exist and neither did video games. Playing cards or board games like mahjong were fairly popular thanks to some past otherworlder, but that was far from enough to truly relieve boredom.

In the end, though, the only thing that would truly prevent you from dying of boredom in the evening was to go have a drink in the red-light district. Needless to say, I was a regular.

I couldn't bring Colona with me, and she was always moody when I came back, so I made sure to treat her to some tasty desserts afterward to cheer her up.

Before reaching Rockblue, we stopped in a city called White Garden, famous for its white flowers. I went to a store there and bought Colona a crêpe made with honey produced from those white flowers' nectar.

However, her response had been quite curt. "A single crêpe won't be enough to make me forgive you," she'd said. I remembered how cute she looked while munching on it, though. In the end, she had even asked for seconds.

The two of us had stayed in the capital for a few days after the battle, but we'd left soon after without alerting the others.

On our way, I had met with Asta to request my payment—money, plus a little extra. I was loaded now. I had promised Asta not to tell anyone what my bonus reward entailed. Colona knew, but she was the only one.

I made sure to leave a letter for Masaki before leaving the empire so I figured he wouldn't worry too much. I was happy to finally have a friend who'd get my jokes and references.

Maybe the one I went with this time was too old, though... What if he didn't get it?! I'm gonna be so embarrassed to show my face to him again.

Anyway, since I had some time, I'd decided to take it easy and tour a few cities after leaving the empire. I'd held off on doing that during the war because I didn't want to get caught up in battles, but now I was free to go wherever I pleased.

A good coach was absolutely crucial for traveling through this world. They didn't have cars or other handy means of transport here so there was no other way of getting around it. I technically had car cards I could use, but I didn't want to stand out too much. Instead, I used an iron beast called Drill Horse. It ran

much faster than a regular horse and was strong enough to deal with everyday monsters like the orcs and kobolds you'd encounter out on the plains.

While my iron beast had drill-shaped horns, they could be stored away so that it didn't look any different than a normal black horse.

The coach itself was thanks to my card Mobile Cottage. Its wheels made it look more like a campervan than a coach, but it served its purpose.

Our first stop after leaving the imperial capital was Dreizehn, a city known for its relaxing hot springs. I'd visit there whenever I had the time and energy.

After that, I felt like eating seafood so I decided on Aquashum, a city where I could eat my fill of shrimp and crab. Colona loved fried shrimp and was always in a good mood whenever we found our way there.

Our next stop had been White Garden, which, as I mentioned earlier, was renowned for the beautiful white flowers that grew there. They were an important ingredient in many potions and thus were very strictly guarded. Picking up flowers without permission could get you thrown in jail. I had once beaten up a dude there, and after it turned out he had stolen flowers on him, I was almost arrested as well on suspicion of being his accomplice. Colona had managed to convince the guards I had nothing to do with flower theft, but the whole affair had been a pain in my ass. They'd introduced Colona and I to a great crêpe place as an apology.

Finally, we had landed in Rockblue, a city we were both very familiar with. Besides the blue stones that gave the city its name, Rockblue was famous for one other thing: its dungeon. In fact, these peculiar blue stones were also mined there.

The Rockblue dungeon was different from other dungeons in many ways.

It was managed by the Adventurer Guild, and they had the responsibility of deciding who was allowed to go to which floor depending on their rank. They did that to make sure arrogant idiots wouldn't get ahead of themselves and end up dead in the lower levels.

Gatekeepers recruited by the guild protected the staircases that led to the dungeon's depths. Most of them were retired high-ranked adventurers or just

adventurers who were in the profession for the money rather than the thrill. It was a boring gig, but the pay was good—*I guess going down there to stand guard's kind of like a business trip*.

Other dungeons didn't work this way. Large countries did manage the dungeons within their territories, but they didn't go so far as to dispatch employees and restrict access to particular floors.

Wondering why the Adventurer Guild went so far for *this* specific dungeon? Well, it was because no one knew how deep it went.

How many floors have they explored again? Oh, right. Sixty-four.

I had never met them, but I'd heard a party of otherworlders had set this record. Apparently, they'd found stairs to go even lower but since they didn't have any food left, they had to give up on going any deeper. I could only applaud them for knowing when to quit. Though I had no idea where they even found the motivation to explore *sixty-four* floors in the first place. *Rather impressive if you ask me.*

I had dungeon dived myself quite a few times for the money, but I wasn't too fond of it. Since I was a summoner, fighting in those kinds of enclosed spaces wasn't my forte. There were even some places where my Megalo Chimera didn't fit. *What if I summoned an iron beast a bit too big and the ceiling came crashing down on me?* I didn't want to be buried alive. It sounded like a sucky way to die.

My go-to strategy in combat was to give Colona plenty of equipment and have a few humanoid beasts—like Metal Sharkman, Blue Metal Soldier, Gear Leech, or Pawlmes, one of my trusty scouting dogs—support her.

I had also trained enough to be able to fight by myself too. I was pretty much at the same level as top adventurers now.

I may not look like it, but I'm quite the hard worker. I live my life to the fullest, and I try my best not to make girls cry!

Even though I didn't like entering dungeons, I still sometimes ended up having to. My power required cash.

I could summon monsters from my cards, but if one was killed, its card would

go up in smoke. Too many of my cards had been destroyed during my fight against No Face and Kokuu.

I handled my cards with the greatest care, but at the end of the day, they were consumable goods. As for the equipment cards, they'd break after a set number of uses. Traps, magic spells, and item cards, for instance, could usually only be used once.

In *Metallic Monsters*, you had to roll a gacha to get new cards. I could still do that here from my interface window, but needless to say, no matter the world, gacha costs money. *Though I wouldn't have survived long here without it, so I guess I should be thankful.*

One random card costs one silver coin—ten flan—in this world. It's roughly equivalent to a thousand Japanese yen. Yet despite being way too expensive, I had no choice but to rely on this mechanic...*boo-hoo.*

Thanks to Asta, I now had plenty of money so I decided to use three hundred gold coins—three thousand flan—on the gacha.

I watched the unnecessarily long animation before clicking on the screen to see the results. A pack ripped open and cards started coming out. *All right, let's see what we got this time.*

Adamas Shield, Pile Bunker, Mach Runner, Gear Leech, Galaxy Fighter Pharos.

Super Aircraft Eins, Adamas Shield, Shield Barrier, Golden Mead, Change Attack, Cthulhu's Ritual—

And the last one is...Super Aircraft Drei, huh? I rolled the gacha three hundred times, but nothing amazing came out. I guess I should be satisfied with the few SSRs that I did get. And I managed to restock most of the cards I needed.

I was happy about getting another Gear Leech after the last one fell protecting us... *Glad to have you back on the team, Gear Leech.*

It was also pretty cool that I managed to roll two Super Aircraft series cards. They were both SSR, and as you could expect from cards of that rank, pretty useful.

It was always better to have more options to pick from in case things turned

sour. In my case, the quality of my deck pretty much decided my worth as a fighter.

Speaking of options, Masaki did seem to have quite a number of his own brand of cards up his sleeve. *For real, what kind of class did he— I guess I shouldn't pry too much. Not really my thing to spend so much time thinking about a dude, anyway.*

"My lord?"

Looks like Colona's awake.

"You're up? Good morning, how are you feeling?"

"I cannot say my condition is perfect, but I'm in what you would call "good shape." I need one more day of rest before I will be fully restored to my base values."

"Okay. Then take it easy today. We probably won't have anything important to do for a while anyway."

"My lord... I'm sorry to disappoint, but Lady Asta is trying to contact you."

I hadn't noticed because I was writing in my journal, but the Communication Stone that was laying on the floor was glowing.

I sighed and mumbled the words. I'd known Asta for quite a few years now, and I could use simple spells.

Static noises came out of the stone. It meant that it was establishing communication. If the spell had failed, there'd be no reaction at all.

The figure of a fine woman with horns adorning her head—Asta—appeared.

"Hello, Shou. I see I'm interrupting your fun."

Oops. I'd forgotten I was shirtless. Plus Colona was lying next to me covered only by the bed sheets. *I can see why she'd think that.*

It's a good thing I'm wearing pants. I couldn't really talk business with Asta in the nude. She was a big shot within the demon tribes, after all.

I quickly grabbed a top that was resting on a chair next to me and pulled it over my head. Now dressed, I sat down and faced the Communication Stone.

“Nah, I just woke up.”

“It’s past noon, you know? You’re such a slob... And you’ve got a pretty bad case of bed hair in case you didn’t notice.”

“Oh my, would you look at that! Give me a minute.”

“Good grief. I must say I’m a little envious. I wish I could be just as carefree as you.”

I had to keep myself tidy in front of women. *As they say, a hedge between keeps friendship green.*

I took out a small mirror and fixed my hair with a comb. Perfect. *Hey, handsome*.

“Now you look more like yourself, Shou,” Asta commented.

“So? Did you call just to see my face?”

“Of course,” she teased before adding. “Or rather, I wish I could say that, but no. I have a request for you.”

I figured as much. Asta was an important figure. She wasn’t some kind of promiscuous woman who’d get in touch for such frivolous reasons. While she did sometimes contact me just to chat, that was at night when she was drinking and off duty.

“Have you ever heard of Rungard?” she asked. “It’s a small country located in the south of Arth.”

“Yeah. Right at the border with Rand. I’ve been there a few times. I must say their princess is a stunner. She drank way too much when we spent time together, though. I’d thought she’d eat me right up.”

While Rungard was a small country, it was famous for its mines—and especially for the mithril it exported. It was also famous for the members of the royal family being echidnas—a race of half-human, half-snake beings. *The gleam and feel of their scales are pretty incredible if I dare say so myself.*

“I see you’re already acquaintanced with the princess. That should make things easier. The queen of Rungard was headed to a diplomatic meeting, but she suddenly disappeared a few days ago.”

Urgh. I can already feel that this job is going to be a pain. And my intuition's always right when it comes to these things.

Well, I can't very well refuse one of Asta's requests, and I do know the princess... Guess I have no choice—I'll see what I can do.

Afterword

—Akatsuki has logged in—

Thank you so much for picking up the second volume of this series. I'm glad to see you again.

The greater part of this second volume was dedicated to wrapping up the fight between Masaki and the empire, but I must admit, I noticed something after I started putting it together.

*Now that the character of Shou exists... Won't everything change...*a lot*?! Wait... Do I have to rewrite everything?!*

I freaked out a bit, but I managed to rewrite the most important parts. As a result, I had to remove two characters that made an appearance in the web novel.

Adding more characters would have been a little confusing, and more than anything, I wanted to give Shou and Colona the chance to show what they could do.

Speaking of Shou, I can't begin to tell you how much fun I have writing the scenes in which he appears. Even my editor, I-san, noticed how excited I get whenever I write his scenes.

Thinking up card effects and new iron monsters for him to summon is always a little difficult, but trying to figure out ways for Shou to shine and use his talents efficiently is always an entertaining process.

Colona, Shou's trusted partner, is also a character I get a lot of enjoyment out of writing for.

You may have noticed how some monsters that did not appear in the web novel's fight in the imperial capital showed up and how I also gave some enemies powerups. I decided to make things more difficult for the main characters since Shou and Colona had joined the fight this time.

A friend of mine recently told me that this novel was a lot like a tabletop RPG

campaign. I hadn’t thought of it like that before but I completely agree.

I ended up increasing the difficulty to match the players... I don’t regret it, though! Nothing beats seeing characters suffer a little!

The main character, especially, shouldn’t have it too easy. And so, now that Shou has joined the cast, I’ll have Masaki go through the story in hard mode. Depending on his progress, I may have to turn up the difficulty to ultimate or even lunatic mode, who knows?

After the end of the empire arc, Masaki and his friends went to Atami, and I was able to expand on a lot of points I wished I had developed more in the web novel.

Akiha, in particular, got a lot more screen time.

Akiha is the kind of girl who wears plain clothes and glasses in the privacy of her room. She’s also the type to wear comfortable clothes like gray turtlenecks in the winter. When she was still in school, she was a very discreet and quiet girl.

Aren’t these kinds of easygoing and relaxed outfits the best?

I even debated having her wear a comfy tracksuit, but I ended up settling on regular clothes instead.

On the other hand, Haruka is soft-spoken and gentle, but she’s also the type to mind what other people think of her and dresses to impress. Ever since she entered high school, she’d gotten used to attracting a lot of attention thanks to her figure. Because of that, she always wears neat clothes that won’t make her feel embarrassed, even if people stare at her.

The Kisagari sisters made an appearance on the cover of this volume. The illustration shows a scene from volume 1 during the Lurf arc, and I feel like their personalities were captured perfectly. I’d like to thank Yuui-sensei for doing an incredible job on the illustrations once again!

I also started a completely new story arc in this volume that did not appear in the web novel! The illegal slave market arc! It was an idea I’d had for a while, and I’m happy I finally got to write about it here.

I also wrote an exclusive side story about Shou. It was a lot of fun, and I could fill dozens of pages talking about Shou and Colona. Characters that make you feel this way are precious and make me truly happy as an author.

A new otherworlder, Fujiwara Touji debuted as the main antagonist of the slave market arc. There are a lot of otherworlders with a variety of personalities, but Touji stands out as someone ready to do anything, including taking over a slave business, to fulfill his own desires.

This time, Masaki's opponent isn't a native of this world but rather an otherworlder motivated by lust.

As for the ship on which the story takes place, it's not your run-of-the-mill ship but instead one based on the Russian Novgorod. I made the Phantom Blau gigantic for the book, but this ship did exist—although it was smaller—and was indeed a round battleship.

Naturally, it could float, but it also had one striking particularity. It was built so that the hull would start rotating from the recoil of the cannons. It'd spin and spin! I find it pretty interesting, and I can't help but wonder why it was ever built that way.

The Novgorod left a deep impression on me when I first heard about it, so I decided to have a ship based on it appear in the story. Of course, the version that appears here is dozens of times bigger than the real ship. Please assume that this is due to tons of upgrades being made by its owner.

Jirou, who didn't do much during the empire arc, is back in full force! Please look forward to seeing more of him in volume three as well!

I've already started working on the third volume of this series. It's a little late compared to a regular publication schedule, but I'm doing my best to stay afloat on both of my series!

The Game Master Has Logged In to Another World is becoming an increasingly complex story, and I'll do my best to make it interesting enough for you to have an amazing time reading through each volume!

Let's meet again in volume three!

—Akatsuki has logged out—