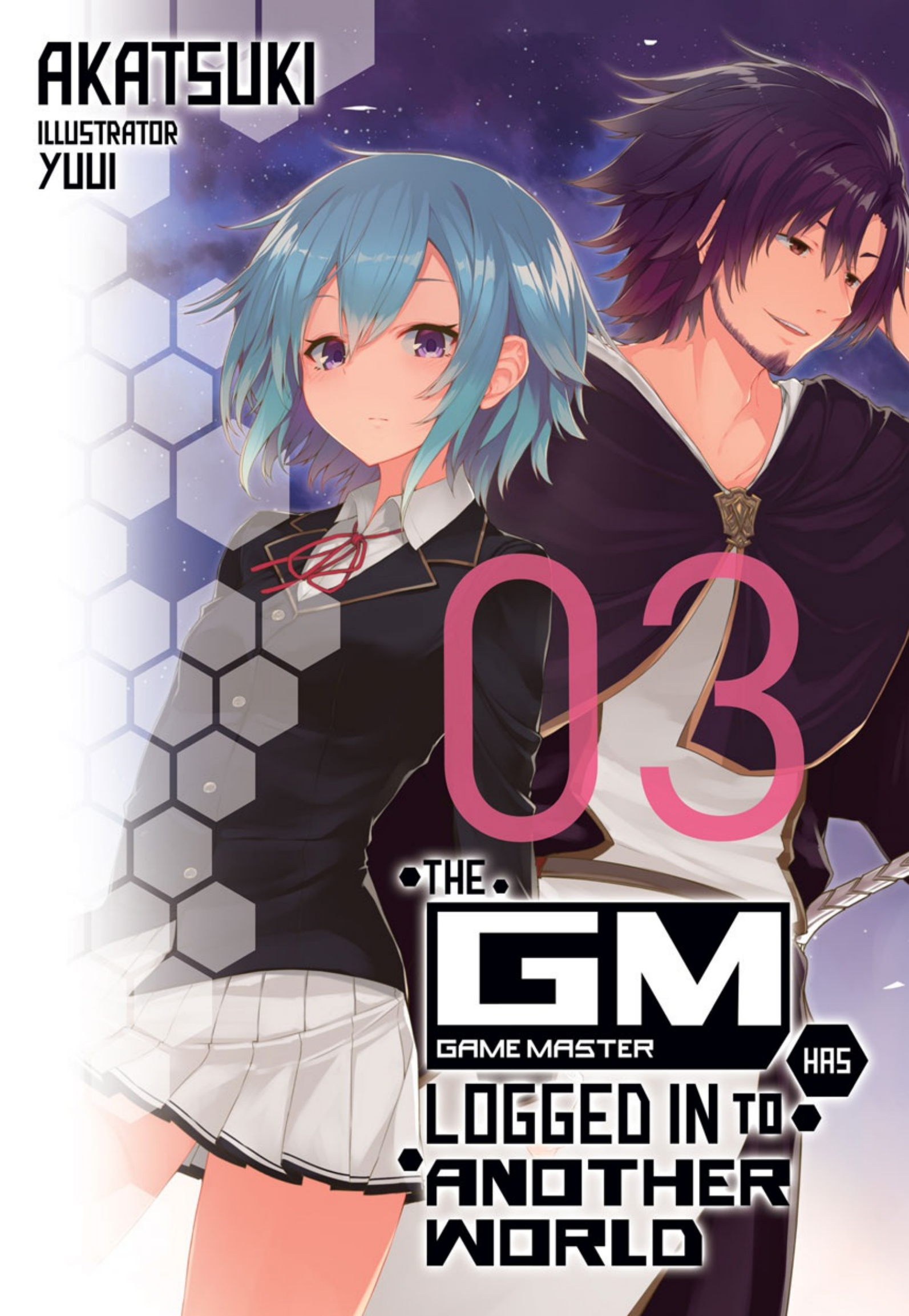
AKATSUKI

ILLUSTRATOR
YUUI



03

THE GM GAME MASTER HAS LOGGED IN TO ANOTHER WORLD

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The Game Master Has Logged In to Another World: Volume 3 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12

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Sitting alone in the residence's office, Adel read through documents, signing them one after the other. From time to time, she spared a glance to the desk next to hers—the one Masaki always used.

Something wrong, Adel?

She jumped off her chair. "What?!"

Was that Masaki's voice just now? She rubbed her eyes before looking at his desk once again.

He wasn't here. Obviously. He had just left to deal with the Phantom Blau's secret illegal slave market and prevent another war from breaking out. He had also sworn to take revenge on Fujiwara Touji, the man who was targeting her.

"It must have been my imagination... I suppose I need a break."

Adel had been busy with the estate's paperwork since early morning. She put down her quill and picked up her cup of coffee instead. It had turned lukewarm.

On both desks, three wooden cases—with a height of around six centimeters each—had been stacked to store and organize documents. They weren't like the ones Adel was used to, though. The front and the upper part were open and little indents on each side allowed you to stack them on top of one another. They were incredibly practical.

These special cases had been handmade by Masaki. Adel didn't think woodworking was the job of the lord of the estate, but he'd made it so quickly thanks to his skill that she hadn't even had time to complain.

She'd stopped him when he had tried to make some more for Jimmy and Ludrig, though.

This sort of work fell under the jurisdiction of the Carpenter Guild. It was fine for nobles to craft little wooden animals or other such small things to pass the time, but they had to leave the actual work to the professionals or they'd be out of their job.

In the end, Masaki put in a request to the guild. They'd been blown away by the ingeniosity of his creation and had started manufacturing them right away. These cases were practical, and since you could stack as many as you wanted,

they saved a lot of space.

Masaki had shown them the cases he'd made so it wasn't hard for them to reproduce them. They quickly moved on to mass-producing them and selling them in furniture stores under the direct management of the guild.

It had already become a popular product and most nobles—and stewards for that matter—stopped by to purchase a few when passing through Atami.

Sorting documents was a challenge everywhere, after all.

In exchange for introducing the guild to his invention, Masaki pocketed a percentage of the profits which he then used to further invest in his territory.

While Masaki had heaps of such ingenious ideas thanks to the knowledge he had gained in his previous world, he was a complete beginner when it came to managing a territory. Still, he refused to leave it all to others and was adamant about doing everything he could. He was even working hard to get through the mountains of paperwork.

He could have given up on his responsibilities and had Adel and the administrators do everything, but that just wasn't his style.

This mindset had been a good influence on Adel too. She originally hated doing paperwork, but ever since they'd started working together side by side, she had found a new appreciation for it.

It also so happened that Masaki's ability to do calculations surprisingly fast made both their jobs easier. Even the documents Adel was currently looking at had already been checked over for mathematical errors by Masaki before he left.

After a few sips of lukewarm coffee, Adel focused on the paper in front of her once more and continued to work until the sun was high in the sky.

At around noon, she put down her quill, gathered the documents she'd been working on, and stored them away.

She stepped out of the office and walked through the silent mansion. She would normally run into maids or over servants, but most of them had required time off today and the mansion was almost empty. Only Ludrig, Jimmy, and the

coachman were working today.

But since Ludrig and Jimmy had gone out to meet with merchants and executives from several guilds, there was pretty much nobody working here besides Adel.

Even the chef had taken the day off so she had to fend for herself. She'd most likely end up going into town to get something.

If Masaki or Akiha had been here, they could have cooked her some amazing dishes from their world. On the other hand, Adel was terrible at cooking.

Youko was, surprisingly, fairly good at it, though. She had apparently learned how to cook and take care of herself during her travels. Adel had tried her cooking a few times and had particularly enjoyed her squid and potato stew.

Adel resolved to go out, and right as she was getting ready to leave the house, she ran into Haruka.

"Oh my, are you going out too, Adel?"

"Yes. Would you like to head into town together?"

"I'd love to," she agreed before letting out a little sigh. "You know, I actually wanted to cook us something, but both the chef and Akiha kept warning me not to before they left..."

"I see..."

Haruka seemed down, but Adel figured there was nothing much she could say to cheer her up.

Haruka had an astounding memory and knew so much about all sorts of things. She was incredibly kind to anyone she met—although Akiha often complained that she didn't pay enough attention to her surroundings—and had already become a very popular figure in Atami. She had also mastered the art of etiquette and was able to hold conversations with commoners and nobles alike.

While she'd been gifted with both intelligence and beauty, even a talented woman like her had one fault: she was an absolute disaster in the kitchen.

In her old world, she could still somewhat manage easy tasks like toasting bread, but foolproof appliances such as toasters didn't exist here. People would

toast their bread using frying pans, and Haruka could not be trusted with one. The one time she'd tried, her bread had caught fire.

Thankfully, Akiha had a keen nose and had been quick to notice the mess. She'd covered the pan with a lid and stopped the fire from spreading.

Haruka knew she wasn't a great cook, but she wanted nothing more than to improve. Once, she'd promised to make stew and had ended up with a pot full of some sort of black sticky liquid.

Masaki had used Appraisal on it. As it turned out, Haruka's dish—the Stew of Chaos, as the system had called it—was a poisonous dish that would—for some unknown reason—increase the attack stats of whoever ate it by fifteen percent for a set time.

After detoxifying the stew, Masaki had cautiously taken a bite. He'd never tasted anything so dreadful, and he'd almost passed out on the spot. Sadly for him, fainting was also a status alteration and Immune Status didn't allow him to drift into unconsciousness to avoid the nauseating taste.

Haruka and Adel, having given up on cooking, headed toward the small stable where the horses and carriages were being kept and called out to one of the employees there. He was busy tending to a chestnut horse.

"We want to go to Atami, so please ready a carriage," Adel said to the employee.

"Of course."

As soon as the two women were comfortably seated, the carriage departed in the direction of the city.

A few moments later, the sound of rustling leaves disrupted the quiet of the estate, and two men hiding their faces with green masks came out of the bushes.

"Are they gone?" one of them whispered.

"Yeah. Contact the others with Telepathy," the other answered.

Adel and Haruka were on their way, enjoying the comfortable rocking of the carriage. The large horse pulling it had a beautiful chestnut coat and stunning fiery mane.

As for the coachman, while he was taciturn and hadn't spoken a single word, he was masterfully handling the temperamental horse.

On the way to Atami, Adel and Haruka enjoyed a pleasant talk.

"I see. What about the dairy cows? Does it look like there'll be enough of them?" Adel asked.

"Yes. And we'll be using prefabricated barns for the time being so we're all set," Haruka answered with her usual carefree tone.

Adel was surprised. "Prefabricated barns... Those are from your world, right? You did say they were faster to build than regular buildings, but is it really that quick?"

"Well... I can't say I've ever seen a prefabricated building get assembled before, but I do know that most of the work is done in a factory first—or in workshops in this world—so there isn't much to do besides putting everything together when you get to the final construction site. We're lucky that Tatsuma knows so much about them."

"It's really impressive. Building something like that would usually require quite some time. I can't begin to imagine how advanced the technology is in your world."

"It's funny how we get impressed by different things. If you ask me, magic and skills are much more amazing."

"The grass is always greener on the other side, I suppose."

"Exactly," Haruka agreed before taking out a small vial from her pocket. "I wanted to ask you something, Adel. What do you think of this perfume? I was thinking of giving some to the noble ladies at the next tea party as a gift."

"It's great! I don't think I've ever seen this perfume before, but...I can't help but feel like I know this scent. How strange."

“I had an inkling it would work so I tried making it. But the thing is—”

Their amicable conversation continued as the carriage headed on its way toward the city.

However, as it approached tall bushes, the horse—which had been obediently following the instructions of the coachman up until now—suddenly neighed. The next moment, an arrow lodged itself in the poor horse’s leg.

“Tsk!” a man clicked his tongue, jumping down from the tree he’d been hiding in.

At the same time, over twenty masked men emerged from the bushes.

Adel, who was wondering why the carriage suddenly stopped, took a look outside.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Bandits, my lady,” the coachman answered calmly.

“I see,” she said, just as calm.

Adel pushed the door open and stepped out of the carriage without even bothering to draw her sword.

“Now then,” she started. “Did you idiots ambush me on purpose because I’m a noble?”

“Heh heh heh! You’re oddly calm, young lady. Do aristocrats know no fear? You don’t even have an escort with you! Word has it your hero is on a little trip. I’m sure he’ll be heartbroken when he comes home to find his mansion empty! He didn’t even think to leave a few guards with you, did he? If you wanna curse someone, curse him!”

The men burst out laughing at their leader’s words and took out their silver knives. They surrounded the carriage and readied silver chains to capture Adel.

Adel had yet to bring her hand to her sword. She was simply glaring at the men—or rather, at their hands.

Seeing her like that, the assailants could only assume that she was yet another helpless noble lady and were already dreaming of what they’d spend

the hefty reward they'd been promised on.

"Adeeeel, are we in Atami already?" Haruka suddenly asked, peeking from the window.

She was holding her straw hat so it wouldn't get blown away by the wind, completely oblivious to the tense standoff around her.

Her sudden appearance caused quite a stir among the men.

"Wow. That one's a babe," one of them commented.

Another whistled. "Damn, was that bastard keeping such a beauty to himself? I'm so freaking jealous."

"I mean, we were told to bring back the lady, but no one said anything about that hottie. We can just keep her."

"Good idea. It's kind of a waste to let another man get his hands on a babe like her."

Adel ignored their indecent comments and turned around to face Haruka who had just stepped out of the carriage.

"Not yet. Looks like the trip will take a little longer than planned," she told her.

"That's a bummer," Haruka sighed before addressing the men. "I'm sorry to say it so bluntly, but you guys really didn't think this through, did you? If a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

The men went from amused to angry in a second. They weren't here to be looked down upon by these two unfazed women.

"Are you trying to say we fell into your trap?! It doesn't matter, you don't even have guards with you! Think you're strong enough to handle all of us by yourselves? Boys, get them!" one of them yelled.

They readied their weapons and lunged at Adel, Haruka, and the coachman.

CLING.

The sound of shattering metal echoed. The men looked down to see the knives they were holding broken in two, the blades already lodged into the

earth below them.

“What the—”

“You kept going on and on about how they didn’t have a guard, but you could have taken a better look.”

The coachman, who had barely said anything since the girls had set out, was now holding a long spear decorated with a dragon ornament.

The coachman—Tatsuma, the Wei General—detached his prized horse, Red Hare, from the carriage and jumped on its back, removing his hat with the same motion.

He had been doing his best to remain as inconspicuous as possible up until now, but he could finally unleash his might and aura. The men couldn’t help but take a step back.

Tatsuma’s Chinese-style armor appeared over his coachman uniform as he stood in his fiery mount’s stirrups, looking down on his enemies from above.

Red Hare’s hooves struck the ground as it neighed. It seemed to be waiting for Tatsuma’s next command. Its master understood it as a matter of course and nodded before grasping the reins with one hand.

“Ha!” he exclaimed, pulling on the reins and squeezing his legs around Red Hare. The horse started to gallop toward his foes.



“ARGH!”

The first man to suffer at Tatsuma’s hand was the one standing right in front of him.

Red Hare was over two meters tall. The massive horse’s charge sent the masked man flying as if he were a mere leaf in the wind. The horse then went after the man standing behind it, kicking him flying as well.

Tatsuma didn’t sit idle. He swung his spear and cut right through three of the men. They fell to the ground, blood splattering everywhere before they even had the time to scream.

Every single swing of his spear made more blood flow as man and horse worked together in a splendid display of cooperation.

Adel finally decided to make a move herself and created a sickle-shaped mana blade to attack some of their enemies.

Her mana blade was much stronger than silver or iron, and it easily cut through the men’s knives and armor, tearing their bodies into pieces.

Adel could make the weapons she created with Mana Coagulation as sharp and sturdy as she wished by adjusting the amount of mana she used. They would only dissipate if she let go of them.

“Damn! We didn’t sign up for this! Wasn’t she supposed to be a knight in name only?! And who the hell is that guy?! There shouldn’t have been any guards left in the estate!”

“B-Boss...I’m out of here! I don’t wanna get killed by these monsters!”

“Me too!”

“Same! I’m not throwing my life away for a mission!”

Most of the men threw down their weapons and scurried away, scared out of their minds by Tatsuma and Adel. However, they found Haruka blocking their path.

She was still smiling brightly and holding her hat with one hand.

Luck was on their side, the men thought. Haruka was alone. They could snatch

her as they fled.

“I can’t let you go,” she said with a warm tone that didn’t quite fit her words. “Don’t you know bad guys have to face retribution? Obelisk Wall!”

Before the men could get to her, Haruka gently moved her hand from left to right, and a translucent blue pillar—around five meters tall and three meters wide—rose in between them.

The square pillar was around five meters tall and three meters wide.

The runaway bandits panicked for a moment, but the pillar seemed to be made of glass—or perhaps ice? Either way, it seemed fragile enough for them to quite easily break through.

Their silver knives had been rendered useless by Tatsuma and Adel so they unsheathed their iron swords and started slamming them against the pillar. However, their swords couldn’t even make a dent.

“How is this thing so hard?!”

Haruka’s Obelisk Wall was a skill that allowed the user to surround a field with sturdy obelisks.

Similar walls could be made out of wood, mud, stone, iron, steel, or a plethora of other materials, but the one Haruka had created was made out of obelisk, the sturdiest material of all.

Obelisk pillars were strong enough to fend off high-level enemies, and that included dragons. Hooligans with iron swords couldn’t hope to leave even a scratch on it, let alone destroy it.

Tatsuma had tried to break one such pillar in the past. Even though his spear could easily pierce through the shells of grand turtles—they were said to be as sturdy as mithril—it had taken a long time to finally get through Haruka’s Obelisk Wall.

The men eventually gave up and resolved to go around it. It was already too late, though.

They turned to their right and were faced with another identical pillar.

“How?!”

They immediately turned and started rushing toward the left...only for their path to be cut by a third pillar. When they finally spun around to check for any possible escape route, they realized that they'd already been enclosed between four walls. The crystal pillars were blocking their path on every side.

They were far too tall to even attempt climbing over and way too sturdy to break through. They fell to their knees, dropping their weapons to the floor.

Only one man—the leader—was still outside the obelisk prison. He was still fighting with Tatsuma, clicking his tongue as he tried to plunge his purple knife into Tatsuma's flesh.

Tatsuma—who had since dismounted his horse—was facing him with his trademark spear.

As for Red Hare, it had galloped after the few men that had escaped Haruka's trap, kicking and trampling them until they stopped moving.

From an outsider's perspective, Tatsuma and the bandit's leader appeared evenly matched. While the man was indeed remarkably strong, that was quite far from the truth.

The leader, who might have seemed to have the upper hand at first glance, looked distressed. Meanwhile, Tatsuma, the one in a seemingly disadvantageous position, had a nonchalant air about him. He continued to dodge the other's attacks one after the other with his masterful footwork, appraising his opponent's skills calmly.

The leader was at a loss. By now, he should have already won.

The knife he was wielding was a little special. If it so much as grazed someone, it would leave enough poison in their body to leave them completely and immediately immobilized.

It had saved him time in time again. Needless to say, working in the slave trade wasn't a walk in the park and came with its fair share of dangerous fights.

The issue was that he couldn't land a single hit on Tatsuma. He always missed by a few millimeters. The bandit was starting to feel like his blade itself was avoiding the coachman.

“Damn! Why can’t I hit you?!” he groaned.

“‘If only I could land *one* hit, I’d win...’ Is that what you’re thinking?”

The bandit leader’s mouth sprung agape.

“Bull’s-eye, huh? I had a feeling that knife of yours was a little unusual. It’s an artifact, isn’t it?”

The man transferred his weapon to his other hand at the last moment in an attempt at a feint, but Tatsuma dodged by a hairbreadth once more.

The leader’s next move was less calculated. Likely flustered by Tatsuma’s deduction, he swung his knife wildly. The Wei General did not overlook this mistake and used the chance to kick the man’s hand, forcing him to drop his weapon.

He panicked and tried to catch his falling knife, but Tatsuma followed up with a punch to his solar plexus. A sinister cracking sound echoed—the man’s ribs had been shattered.

“A-Argh...”

Tatsuma had pierced a hole through his torso and he felt the air leave his lungs while his guts spilled out of his stomach. He lost consciousness, the pain too much for him to handle, as his knife stabbed into the ground. A dark purple liquid came oozing out of the blade, staining the dirt.

“Poison, huh?” Adel commented, picking up the knife.

“Be careful not to touch the blade,” Tatsuma warned her. “Vampires aren’t immune to every kind of poison, and some have effects that can’t be cured even with magic.”

“I wasn’t aware such poisons existed... You hold onto it then, Tatsuma.”

“Yeah. It should be fine if I keep it in my weapon inventory,” he said, carefully taking the knife from Adel’s hands and storing it.

Tatsuma checked the weapon’s description. The Belcher Knife would apply the paralysis effect upon hitting a target.

“You sure took your time,” Adel said. “Was he that strong?”

“Not really. His weapon was a bit of a pain to handle. And to be honest, I haven’t fought against a knife user in a while, so I decided to draw it out a little.”

“Long story short, you used him as a training dummy.”

“Enough about me, are *you* all right, Adel?”

“Of course I am. Even with their silver weapons, they were just amateurs. No point bringing a vampire’s weakness if you can’t even land a hit. It’d be a different story if I had to fight someone on your level, though.”

In the vicinity were a dozen men with their legs and arms bound. Their mission—to subjugate Adel—had failed.

They were barely better at fighting than your average delinquent and had not succeeded in so much as scratching Adel. They had been little more than moving targets for her shape-shifting blade.

Now that the fight was over, Adel and Tatsuma took the opportunity to count the number of assailants—a little over forty. Over half of them had been beaten up by Adel, Tatsuma, or Red Hare, while the rest were trapped within Haruka’s obelisk prison.

“Good grief. Where did they find so many men? I suppose that is the bare minimum if they hoped to catch me, but still... Then again, I doubt this will be the last attack.”

“You’re just that popular, Adel,” Haruka said with a smile.

Adel sighed. “I’m not sure I want to be if this is what I have to deal with...”

“You and me both,” Tatsuma said before turning to stroke his horse’s mane. “You did great, Red.”

Red pressed its cheek against Tatsuma’s hand, whinnying gently.

“Good thing we gave most of the servants the day off,” Adel said.

“Right,” Tatsuma agreed. “If they can bring together that many mercenaries, they would have attacked the mansion without hesitation if you had stayed in all day. *We* would most likely be all right either way, but I can’t say the same about the servants. A few might have gotten hurt—or worse—if they’d set the

house ablaze.”

“We should also be thankful to the Dark Guild. They were very helpful,” Haruka added.

“Indeed.”

Atami was one of the most popular port towns in the region, and it was bustling with tourists. However, there are always two sides to a coin—the Dark Guild ruled over Atami’s underground businesses.

On the surface, the Dark Guild was in charge of managing shady businesses, brothels, and gambling houses. Much like the mafia, they took a fee in exchange for their protection. However, they still had some principles and refused to deal with drugs or human trafficking.

Ruffians tended to gather in places where they could let their desires run wild—brothels and gambling dens. Because of this, these businesses hired adventurers and guards to deal with any commotions, but sometimes, it was the adventurers that were the problem. When that happened, issues were prone to escalating into bloody fights, and sometimes, employees and prostitutes would get hurt in the process.

That was when the Dark Guild stepped in. Most of its members were former criminals, and they were well-versed in brawls, blackmail, and all sorts of dissuasion techniques.

Adventurers and guards usually couldn’t hold a candle to these underworld experts, but sometimes they’d get cocky and try their luck anyway—those were the ones who more often than not would later be found dead in a back alley.

In their own way, the Dark Guild kept the city’s underground in order. Masaki was well aware of their existence and had decided to leave them alone for that very reason.

The Dark Guild had actually approached Masaki and Adel first.

Masaki had done a lot to fight poverty in Atami. He’d distributed food to orphans and homeless people and had started building temporary dwellings for them using magic. He also devoted a lot of resources to finding them jobs.

With Masaki's almost inexhaustible supply of magic, erecting walls was easy. He had gotten rid of the old deserted houses that these people once used—rain leaked in, and the half-crumbled walls did almost nothing to stop the wind—and had replaced them with simple houses that could at least provide shelter from wind, rain, and sun.

The first thing passersby would notice about these new houses was that they were all connected, just like Japanese nagaya—row houses that were popular during the Edo Period.

At first, the people of the slums had opposed Masaki's reconstruction project. They'd thought he intended to evict them after modernizing their homes.

Masaki had expected there would be pushback to some extent, but to allay their fears, he decided to hire as many homeless and poor people as he could to work on these houses alongside him. He also kept the construction costs as low as possible.

In the end, not only did these people get the satisfaction of building their own homes, they also obtained modern functional houses for free. And since the area was rather far from the city center, rent prices were also low.

Masaki did ask them to maintain the houses and take turns cleaning the area, but considering they had gotten brand-new houses for free, there were no objections.

On top of that, since the reconstruction of Atami required a considerable amount of workers, most of the people in the slums ended up finding a place of employment before long.

Even those who had difficulty working due to having been injured during the war and orphans, who would be too young to handle most jobs, were given work that they could accomplish.

There were a variety of accessible jobs available to them—cleaning the streets of the hot springs, cultivating medicinal herbs, patrolling the fields...

In the early days, Masaki was often called a hypocrite. That wasn't enough to make him give up on his initiative, though.

"I wouldn't call that hypocrisy. I'm just picking out the win-win option here,

and I don’t see why I shouldn’t,” he’d simply said.

In most cases, the workers’; wages were paid daily, and Masaki provided them with meals as well.

There wouldn’t be as many jobs available in the city when the reconstruction work ended, but Haruka’s new farms would need hands as well. In fact, most orphans already worked for her. They fed the animals, cleaned the barns, and did all kinds of other important chores so that the other workers could concentrate on their own tasks.

Before long, Masaki’s policies started bearing fruit, and criminal behavior—theft especially—decreased.

There was no need to take the risks involved in stealing when you could feed yourself by working an honest job.

The once gloomy atmosphere in the slums had gradually been getting brighter, and the laughter of children now echoed in the streets.

After witnessing all of this, the Dark Guild started seeing Masaki in a different light, and its head was particularly pleased.

The Dark Guild’s guildmaster had always wanted to find a way to provide orphans with a better life. Those poor children were sometimes used as drug mules or cheap workers for slave traders. And if there were any mistakes or blunders, more often than not, their bosses would pin the blame on them, leaving the orphans to deal with the fallout. And those were the better instances—sometimes they’d just be murdered to ensure their silence.

Before the war destroyed their lives, they simply lived happily with their parents who were content to work normal jobs. The guildmaster was relieved to see them able to return to a sense of stability, and he was sincerely thankful to Masaki for everything he had done.

As it turned out, that very man was contacted by the people of the Phantom Blau. They’d shared their plan to capture Adelheid with him and tried to hire mercenaries for the job.

If the Dark Guild accepted, they were ready to pay five hundred gold coins upfront. They’d then reward them with an additional five hundred coins if they

succeeded. It was a considerable sum.

The moment the guildmaster received that offer, he had his men deliver two letters.

The first was given to the messenger from the Phantom Blau, and it stated that the Dark Guild would gladly accept this mission. The messenger was overjoyed and handed over the promised advance payment before heading off to celebrate with a drink at one of the taverns managed by the guild.

As soon as he confirmed the messenger was busy, the guildmaster handed over the second letter to one of his men and had him leave discreetly through the back door. His destination? Tatsuma's house—which doubled as the guard's station.

Tatsuma got permission from the man to open the letter on the spot. It read "Lady Adelheid is being targeted by slave traders. Their company is called Phantom Blau. I'd like to meet with you to discuss this matter further."

Tatsuma notified Masaki who then organized a meeting between himself, Adel, Tatsuma, the head of the Dark Guild, and his executives. After a lengthy talk, they decided to use the Dark Guild to feed the slavers false information.

Their members had shown some opposition to the idea of letting Adel act as bait, but she had refused to back down. They found a compromise by getting Tatsuma to stay with her as a bodyguard.

Since the Dark Guild was taking a risk by offering their help, Masaki let them keep the advance payment they had received. Both parties then shared information through Telepathy.

Their collaboration paid off. In the end, the slave traders fell right into their trap. Some of them had been slain, the rest had been captured.

"Happy to be done with this," Tatsuma said after tying the survivors to nearby trees and putting up a sign that read "Criminals. Do not rescue."

"Let's head to Atami," he continued. "There'll be guards there, but stay alert."

"I know," Adel answered.

"Will do!" Haruka piped in.

Tatsuma reattached Red Hare to the carriage, and the three of them continued their way to Atami.

Having finally arrived at their destination, Adel was looking in the direction of the sea absentmindedly.

“I hope everything is going well for Masaki and the others,” Haruka said.

“Me too...” Adel answered without turning her head.

From where the two girls were standing, a hill blocked the sea from their vision. They could only smell the salty breeze and watch the steam from the hot spring rise into the air.

“You’re really worried, aren’t you?” Haruka asked.

“I... I supposed I am.”

Masaki was now so far away from her. She brought her hand to the pendant he had given her and squeezed it tight.

“It’s going to be okay,” assured Haruka.

“Huh?”

“I promise! Everything is going to be okay. Masaki will come back to you safely,” Haruka exclaimed with a bright smile.

She sounded so confident that Adel couldn’t help but smile as well.

“I’m sure you’re right, but how do you know?”

“My intuition’s almost never wrong! My little Akiha could confirm that, hee hee!” she bragged, holding up two fingers in a V sign.

Adel was surprised by Haruka’s baseless display of confidence, but for some reason, it made her feel better. Haruka just had that effect on people.

She’s right. It’s Masaki we’re talking about! He’ll definitely be all right. In the meantime, I should make sure to stay safe so I can welcome him home. That’s my job as his wife— Ahem, as a member of his family, I mean.

Haruka watched Adel turn red with a warm expression. She then looked at the sky, holding her straw hat so it wouldn’t get blown away, and repeated

once again inside her heart the words: *I'm sure you'll be all right.* She had confidence in all of them—her little sister, Masaki, and even Shou, Colona, and Jirou, whom she now considered her friends as well.

Chapter 2

Howls echoed throughout the deck.

While the nobles and wealthy patrons ran for their lives, pushing one another to get to the exits as fast as they possibly could, the mercenaries and guards aboard the *Phantom Blau* rushed to the closest armory.

To prevent theft, the doors to each armory were kept locked. The guards would usually only carry a knife with them, and that was enough to handle most situations that came up. However, against a silver wolf wreaking havoc, their little knives were little more than kids' toys. They needed to arm themselves properly.

They'd all gathered in front of the armory when a sailor finally arrived, key in hand.

"You're late! What the heck were you doing?!"

"You dumb or what?! D'ya know how hard it was to go get the key in this mess? Be happy I'm here at all."

"Who the fuck do you think you're talking to?"

"Stop it! You can fight later! Just open the damn door!"

Even while arguing, the sailor had never stopped trying to stick the key into the lock, but no matter how many times he tried, it didn't seem to fit.

"Hurry up! Shit! How did that damned wolf even get here?!"

"The hell should I know? It has to be some stupid noble's pet. Or a slave someone wanted to sell."

"Aren't the idiots down there supposed to check shit like that?!" the sailor commented, fiddling with the key.

"You shut up. Move your hand instead!"

"Stop pestering me, I'm doing it!" he snapped. "Here, it's open!"

Now that the door was finally unlocked, the man tried to push it open...but

something fell to the floor next to his feet.

It was black and round and looked very similar to a type of tropical fruit.

The other men also noticed it rolling at their feet and looked down, puzzled.

BOOOM!!!

The explosion was loud enough to destroy the men's eardrums, while the light it emitted was brighter than the sun itself.

Those standing around the armory found themselves unable to see or hear. The one who'd been the closest to the bomb crouched down on the floor, unable to stay upright any longer.

One of his colleagues started to lean on his back. He tried to push him away, but his hand was met with a lukewarm liquid.

He suddenly noticed the smell of blood in the air. He wasn't able to do anything about it, though, as the next moment, he heard a small muffled noise and lost consciousness.

Akiha, wearing a mantle as dark as night itself, peeked out from her hiding place. She was holding an MP9 with a silencer.



She'd thrown a flash grenade to prevent them from moving about. It was an incredibly effective weapon in a confined space like this, and it was also the only type of grenade she could use without risking sinking the ship.

After the men stopped moving, unable to adapt to the assault on their senses, Akiha moved on to shooting them. She'd easily landed over ten headshots in a few seconds. All of the guards were now laying on the ground, dead.

Akiha replaced her gun with a knife and started rummaging through their clothes.

"There it is," she said, picking up the key ring she'd been looking for.

"Akiha-san, how are things progressing on your side?"

She flinched when she heard Jirou's voice. He had suddenly appeared right next to her. The only reason she didn't scream was because of her extensive sniper training. Her heart, on the other hand, was drumming in her chest.

Jirou had made sure to conceal his presence—even more than he usually did—for this infiltration mission. If she'd thought to check, she could have technically seen him on her map, but instead, Akiha was caught entirely unaware.

Back in Lurf, she'd managed to notice him because the conditions were just right: he'd been forced to peek out from a specific spot she'd been watching, and she had the high ground.

Akiha tried to settle her heartbeat and breathing before turning to face Jirou.

The older man was wearing the uniform of a sailor—god knows who he'd gotten it from—and it didn't look out of place in the slightest. Had she not come here with him, she'd have mistaken him for a sailor of the *Phantom Blau*.

"I found these keys," Akiha said, dangling them before him. "What about you, Jirou-san?"

"I got my hands on the ship's map, as well as the keys to the slave collars."

"The map? Where did you find something like that?!"

"Since this ship is always out at sea, they have to take maintenance very

seriously. So I knew a repairman would have access to it. I disguised myself as a sailor and told them there was an issue with the pipes. They were eager to help."

"I see..."

"Incidentally, I also found two other armories hidden on the ship, but I made sure they'd remain inaccessible for the time being. Arthur seems to be doing his part on the deck, but now he's surrounded. There are a few skilled fighters over there, so he'll need the help. It also looks like Barbarossa and the others were noticed so they'll be joining the fight now." Jirou explained. "Oh, and *they* will go off soon."

"Got it," Akiha answered. It was almost a whisper, but she nodded vigorously.

They both prepared to head toward the deck.

"Let's finish things up here before we leave," Jirou said, taking out a small pouch from his pocket and throwing it into the armory.

She could hear a little sound, but nothing seemed to happen. Still, Jirou turned his back to the room and started climbing the stairs to the deck.

"Jirou-san, what was that?" Akiha asked.

"A bag of sleeping powder, courtesy of Haruka-san. This armory is out of order too now," Jirou answered with a polite smile.

Akiha couldn't help but smile wryly. That sleeping powder was something Haruka had developed while the two of them were still held captive in that stronghold, and it had been used several times during the war—to put soldiers to sleep mainly.

It was extremely potent. Much more than the sleeping powder adventurers usually used on monsters. The particles were light and filled the air fast. Since Jirou had used it in a confined space, it'd be impossible to access it without a special mask for quite some time.

When Akiha and Jirou arrived on the deck, they found the silver wolf, Arthur, making use of his steel-like flesh to fight off a crowd of guards himself. He drew so much attention that no one even noticed Akiha and Jirou were there.

They hid in a corner and pricked up their ears.

“Damn it all! What the hell is going on?! We have a crazy beastman on the deck, and now you’re telling me that the cafeteria was destroyed by another intruder?!”

“I don’t get it either! I heard that the smell around the cafeteria was horrendous. Apparently, someone went to investigate and passed out as soon as he got close. I’ll go check it out, you go see why no one’s back with weapons yet!”

“All right!”

Jirou and Akiha continued to conceal themselves and watched them walk away.

“It looks like *they* successfully exploded. That should make things easier for us,” Jirou said.

“Indeed,” Akiha agreed.

Jirou was talking about peculiar fruits grown by Haruka. They were called balloon dudurians. Unlike durians, the putrid fruit that inspired its name, balloon dudurians did not smell like anything until they were opened.

However, it had another particularity. If left in a place that’s warm and humid, it would start fermenting, and gas would build up inside. Eventually, the gas would make it float in the air, which had earned it the name “balloon.”

However, cooking a dudurian would release a sweet aroma, and as long as you knew the correct way to prepare it, you could make delicious desserts with it.

For this mission, however, they’d modified them to be small enough to easily carry and smell especially bad—so much so that one whiff was enough to make an adult man lose consciousness.

As for the reason why Haruka had created this fruit in the first place, it was because a contest to crown the worst possible fruit had once been held in *Farmer Island*. When the mission had come up, she’d remembered her prize-winning creation and had asked Jirou if it might prove useful.

Their plan had been a wild success. Thanks to the balloon dudurians, both the food storage and the cafeteria had been turned into hellish no-go zones.

Jirou and Akiha made use of the confusion to find the entrance to the room where the women were being kept. Two guards were still standing in front.

Akiha and Jirou exchanged a look before making their move. The former didn't leave the shadows. She simply pointed her gun at one of the guards, pulled the trigger, and the bullet found its target right between the eyes.

The blast was muffled thanks to the silencer, and, with all the screaming and scuffles about the deck, no one heard a thing.

"Hey, are you—" the second guard started, seeing his colleague fall to the ground.

Jirou didn't let him finish his sentence. He'd already snuck behind him and took the opportunity to cover the guard's mouth with one hand and grab the side of his head with the other. In one swift motion, he snapped the man's neck and let his body hit the floor before fishing out a key from his pockets.

Akiha and Jirou moved the bodies to a more discreet location before heading through the door. They went down a flight of stairs and arrived in front of a large barred door.

There were a number of women wearing collars and shackles trapped inside. When the two of them barged in, a few of the women started screaming. They must have thought it was their turn to be sold off.

"Don't worry. We're here to save you," Akiha said softly, removing her hood.

Jirou used the key he'd just retrieved to open the cell before handing Akiha the key to the collars. She approached the woman closest to the door and gently removed her collar.

The woman was dumbfounded. Everything had happened so fast that she didn't know what to do or say.

"You're free now," Akiha assured her with a smile.

"I... Hmm... Th-Thank you! Thank you so much!" the woman exclaimed, clinging to Akiha.

“Let’s keep the thanks for later,” the sniper said, pushing her away as gently as she could and moving toward the next woman. “If we’re going to save everyone here, we’ll need to hurry.”

“Please come this way once you’ve been freed,” Jirou said.

While he kept lookout, he gestured for the women to approach the Magic Doll Village that Akiha had brought.

The first woman who’d been freed followed Jirou’s instructions and placed both of her hands on the box. She was immediately sucked into it and disappeared. The eyes of the young girl waiting her turn grew wide.

“Sh-She disappeared?! What happened?!”

“Don’t worry. She’s right there in this little village, see?” Jirou explained. “This box is a magic item that will help us carry you outside safely. There’s food, water, and beds. Please feel free to freshen up in the river if you’d like as well.”

After hearing that, a look of joy joined the surprise in the girl’s eyes. She’d barely eaten since she had been captured, let alone had the luxury of sleeping in a proper bed.

Hunger and thirst made her and the other women weary and broke their spirits. Without hesitation, they reached for the box one after the other.

“Last one!” Akiha called out to Jirou.

The last woman threw her arms around Akiha as soon as she’d been freed, crying. “Thank you so much!”

After letting go of Akiha and shaking her hands a few times, she also walked toward the Magic Doll Village and disappeared inside.

“Perfect. We’re done here,” Jirou commented.

“We are,” Akiha agreed before suddenly noticing something. “Jirou-san!”

“I know. A few people are heading our way. Let’s move. Quick.”

Akiha and Jirou left the room and hurried to the next cell.

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I continued to check my map while we ran through the darkness.

“Three more enemies at the next corner.”

“‘Kay.”

“Understood!”

Thanks to my warning, Shou and Nemea were ready, but the men we bumped into were anything but.

“I-Intrude—”

One of the sailors tried to scream, but Shou swung his cursed sword at him. “In your dreams!”

Even though he was wearing robust-looking plated mail armor, one blow was enough to slash the man’s torso open from his shoulder to his waist.

Shou’s weapon, the Cursed Sword Gram was an artifact, and like most of the items he used, it came from *Metallic Monsters*. It was a unique and incredibly rare weapon, capable of cutting through other swords, armor, and bones, leaving a dark, ominous afterimage in its wake—according to him, the card was an SSR.

While some cards weren’t all that good in spite of their rarity, the Cursed Sword Gram was more than deserving of its SSR status.

It also helped that Shou himself was a skilled swordsman. His carefree nature made it hard to believe, but he truly was another person entirely when on the battlefield.

Nemea, whom we had just met, turned out to be the same. He was carrying a long sword, but he hadn’t bothered unsheathing it and had instead sent the two other sailors flying with his bare hands.

He alternated punches between his left and right hand, each landing right on the chins of his opponents.

The sailors groaned in pain with each punch until they eventually passed out, the shock from Nemea’s powerful attacks too much for them to handle.

Most beastmen were remarkably muscular, but Nemea’s body was even more impressive than any of those I’d met before. Battle leos were known to be the most skilled in close combat, and now that I’d seen one of them in action, I

could only agree.

On the other hand, they usually weren't all that proficient at magic. In fact, most could not use it at all.

"Phew," Nemea sighed after his opponent fell to the ground. "Are you both all right? Let me know if you're hurt. I can use healing magic."

And yet, it seemed like Nemea was an exception. He was apparently pretty good at both healing magic and physical reinforcement spells.

If Nemea was an MMORPG character, he'd be a monk without a doubt.

"I'm good," Shou answered. "We can't waste too much time on these guys, let's move."

"Right," I agreed as we started running again.

Since there were no enemies ahead, I figured now was the best time to ask Nemea something that had been on my mind.

"Nemea, can I ask you something? The way you move and fight feels familiar, but I can't seem to figure out where I've seen it before..."

"You too, Masaki?" Shou cut in. "I'm pretty sure I've seen that style before too! A long time ago..."

Shou too? It can't be a coincidence, then.

But where could I have seen it? The only combat sports I used to watch were those end-of-year tournaments, and I'd been too busy with work to watch TV at all in recent years.

"The way I fight? Well, before I came to this continent, I used to study martial arts under the guidance of an otherworlder. I was just a weak priest at the time, but my master taught me how to fight so I could protect the shaman. I didn't get to use any of these skills at the time, though. The shaman was taken away before I could do anything. I'm a failure..." Nemea said, casting his eyes down and shaking his head.

His lion tail drooped pitifully.

None of this was his fault, though.

“Don’t blame yourself. They used magic items against you—there wasn’t anything you could have done. If I hadn’t noticed the rings when they attacked me, I wouldn’t have fared much better,” I assured him.

“Exactly! And aren’t you about to save that shaman of yours from their clutches? You can’t show her that kind of face. You gotta look confident,” Shou added.

“You’re right... I can’t allow myself to waver. I need to be strong for her. And what would my master think if he saw me like this?”

Nemea clenched his fist and raised his head. He looked more determined than ever.

Good grief. I was worried he would end up having to fight in that state, but I’m glad to see him get over it quickly.

He’s pretty sensitive for a man that burly. Although I imagine he must feel responsible for what happened to that shaman he seems to hold so dear...

“To think your master would be an otherworlder, though... I guess that explains why Masaki and I know your fighting style.”

Yep. His master must have been a fighting game player.

Online fighting games were getting increasingly popular all around the world, and tournaments came with hefty cash prizes. While the scene was small at first, the professional fighting game world had grown a lot, even in Japan, thanks to more and more sponsors investing in it.

I’d even heard that some people were pushing for fighting games to make it into the Olympics. *I wonder how all that turned out... It would have been amazing.*

“I’m very thankful to you both. You’ve given me an opportunity that was stolen from me that day... An opportunity to fight for the shaman.”

“You can thank us after you manage to save her. That being said, I’m only here because the bastard who runs this place targeted my fiancée. I don’t think I deserve your thanks at all.”

“Sorry to rush you, but my partner is actually in danger *right now*. I really

hope Colona's all right... Hey, Masaki, still nothing on your map?"

"One more guy at the next corner," I answered.

We headed left and ran into a man very different from all the sailors we'd seen up until now. He looked like a scholar of some sort.

He was wearing a white lab coat and glasses. He ruffled his messy black hair as he walked unhurriedly. It looked like he hadn't slept in ages. All in all, he just seemed...out of place compared to all the ruffians we'd run into here.

He let out a big sigh when he noticed us, but he didn't panic at all. He even stepped out of our way, as if to let us pass.

"I suppose you're looking for Touji? He's that way," he said, pointing in the direction he'd come from.

"Aren't you on his side?" I asked, puzzled.

"'On his side'? Don't make me laugh. As far as I'm concerned, we have a business relationship, nothing more. I have no interest in hanging around him if it's no longer beneficial to me. He's been getting increasingly difficult to work with now that his company has gotten big. I've been telling him this would happen, you know? But my warnings went in one ear and out the other," he shrugged.



“I’m kind of just done with him. Since you seem to be out for blood, I’d rather take my leave if you don’t mind,” he continued. “By the way, if you’re trying to save the girl he just got his hands on, I suggest you hurry a little. To make her his, he’s trying to amp the power of his magic item to the max. You’ll miss your chance if you dillydally here.”

“I can’t let that happen. She’s *mine*. I’ll take you up on this and go ahead, bye.” Shou dashed forward.

“Shou! Wait, don’t go alone!” I shouted after him.

“Let’s follow!” Nemea exclaimed.

We left the man in the lab coat behind and ran after Shou.

I’d never seen Shou lose his composure like this, but I could understand what was going through his mind. The only thing we could do for him now was make haste.

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The man in the lab coat—Kannazuki Wataru—watched the three men disappear at the next corner before hurrying to his laboratory.

Messy piles of documents were waiting for him on his desk, and he stored them away in his inventory one by one.

After making sure that he’d retrieved everything he needed, he walked up to the safe in the corner of the room. It was protected by several chains—complete with sturdy locks—and talismans.

He stared at the safe for a few seconds before reaching out to undo the chains, but he felt like if he did, he’d lose his mind.

“Not good... This isn’t good at all! The curse has become too strong. I need to get out of here,” he mumbled, drawing back his hand before it could even touch the safe.

He ran out of the room and headed toward the emergency exit.

“Touji’s a goddamn moron. I kept telling him to be wary of otherworlders, but he just wouldn’t listen. It’s only a matter of time before the curse starts going

on a rampage. I need to find a lifeboat. No one can do anything about this anymore. And to think a little piece of paper could do that much damage... That's ridiculous... But if I get involved, even I won't be able to put up a fight... I guess I should be happy I managed to retrieve all my precious data at least. I feel bad for the rest of the team, but they're beyond help," Wataru muttered to himself as he walked around in the dark.

A few minutes after he'd left the laboratory, the chains around the safe shattered, and a ghastly aura started to seep out.

The safe shook, filling the room with an unsettling clattering sound. Then, when the talismans shone brightly, it stopped moving as suddenly as it had started. However, it didn't take long for the talismans to start turning black. They would not be able to contain the ominous aura much longer...

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Inside the cabin of the *Phantom Blau*'s captain...

A man dressed in a set of Japanese-style armor holding a helmet with the face of a blood-drenched demon in his arms was shouting angrily, his voice filling the room.

Touji tied his disheveled hair in a low ponytail as he yelled orders at his crew. He wanted the crazed beastman on the deck taken care of.

"You're allowed to open the first, second, and third armories. And tell Zanki to go stop that damned beastman! That should be more than enough. What to do with the nobles? Who cares about that right now?! Check on the slaves, we need to make sure none of them escape! That mess on the deck is probably just a diversion. And take control of Miida's ship. If we cut off their escape route, they're dead," Touji shouted at his men through the speaking tube before violently slamming it closed.

He didn't bother concealing his anger and kicked Miida, who was writhing on the floor, all the way into the opposing wall. He moaned in pain. The deep gash on his torso continued to bleed as he cried out weakly.

"Miida, I have no idea what you're trying to do here, but I'm sure the commotion on the deck has something to do with it. Do I look like an idiot to

you? I just need to take one glance at someone to know if they've truly been subjugated," Touji said, raising his blade again and plunging it into Miida's thigh.

Miida's face had swollen and every part of his body was now drenched in blood. Touji started twisting his katana around, gouging out the flesh.

"AAARGH!!!"

"Too bad your plan didn't pan out. Thanks for delivering Colona right into my hands, though." Touji kicked Miida one last time as he yanked out his katana.

Miida's thigh was in a horrible state and blood was gushing out with no end in sight. It was impossible to tell if Touji was satisfied with his work or if he had just gotten bored, but he wiped his blade clean before returning it to his scabbard.

He then turned to Colona who was frozen in place next to him and brought his hand to her cheek. His fingers traveled down to caress the slave mark that now decorated her nape.

She couldn't move to escape Touji's touch, but, as a sign of resistance, she glared at him with everything she had. She'd done her fair share of glaring at Shou—for a wide array of reasons—but she'd never looked at him this way before. Hatred, disgust, contempt... All of these emotions could be seen within her eyes.

"I love it... But that said, although the way you're looking at me is enthralling, to say the least, I think I'd enjoy seeing you smile lovingly at me even more," Touji commented.

"I decline."

"You still have it in you to defy me, huh?" he sneered, funneling more mana into the ring he was wearing and resting his finger on her forehead. "Feisty."

A dark purple aura seeped out from the ring and found its way into Colona's head. The cyborg's face was usually expressionless, but her eyes sprung wide open and she trembled violently.

CAUTION! CAUTION! Abnormal activity detected in memory log. VIRUS: UNKNOWN entered system. Activating Firewall Gaia. Error detected! Firewall

error. Firewall error. Firewall disabled?! VIRUS: UNKNOWN spreading through system. Memories being altered. CAUTION! CAUTION! I'm changing?! My memories... No... I won't be myself anymore! My lord... I'm forgetting my lord! NO! STOP! I don't want to! Don't take my precious memories from me!!!

Colona couldn't speak. All she could do was shed tears as the curse overwrote her memories.

As for Touji, he was shuddering in pleasure, reveling in the way Colona's face contorted in pain. He increased the power of the curse and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him.



“Ah... What a nice expression. It hurts, right? You’re in *so* much pain, aren’t you? I’m sure you want to feel better. Call me master and I’ll make it all go away. I’ll make you feel so good...”

Colona’s tears continued to stream down her face as she slowly opened her mouth.

She painfully pushed out the words, “Help...me...”

“Oh, I *am* going to help you. Come on, call out your master’s name, Colona,” Touji said, his expression betraying the ecstasy running through his veins.

He continued to pump more mana into the ring.

“Help me! My lord! Shou!” Colona screamed in agony.

“I’m right here, Colona.”

“You?! Shou?! Where are you?!”

The voice of a man who shouldn’t have been here had answered Colona’s cries.

Touji unsheathed his katana and increased the intensity of the magic items lighting up the room. He suddenly noticed a shadow on the ceiling: Shou had just jumped down.

“You fool! Die! Four Strikes Prison!” he roared, swinging his blade four times. The dark afterimage left by each slash billowed in the air before accelerating toward Shou while he was still in the air.

The four slashes cut through Shou’s flesh—his neck, heart, abdomen, and philtrum targeted with pinpoint accuracy.

I did it! I took Shou down! Colona is finally mine!

Touji was delighted: he had finally killed Shou, Colona’s master. His lips curled into a twisted smile.

He was so happy that he let his guard down for a moment. He didn’t notice that Colona hadn’t said anything despite watching her dear master meet his fate.

Shou’s bloodied body fell to the ground, and his severed head rolled for a

while before coming to a stop. That was when Touji noticed something was amiss. Shou should have been dead—his head wasn't even attached to his body anymore, and yet, it was looking at him.

"What?!"

Shou's severed head started shaking as it laughed. "HA HA HA! Thought you'd won already?"

Touji looked around in a hurry. The blood—or what he'd thought to be blood—was turning into smoke as even more came out of Shou's wounds, completely obstructing Touji's view.

"Well, then... Too bad, no regrets, see you next week!" said Shou's severed head.

It appeared Shou had stuck his tongue out, but it was actually a piece of paper. It read "consolation prize."

Shou had used an iron beast called Fake Puppet. It could take the appearance of its master—or any member of its master's party. While it could look exactly like the person it mimicked, the Fake Puppet was by no means a fighter. All it could do was take damage instead of its user.

Using this card wasn't very costly, and it was useful in a variety of situations, so Shou liked it very much. He laughed from within the smoke, mocking Touji.

"Damn it! Crafty bastard!" Touji shouted. "Whirlwind Blade!"

He created a tornado with his katana, clearing out the smoke in mere seconds. He was careful not to breathe any of it in as he looked around for Shou.

Colona—who was right next to him a few moments ago—had vanished. His eyes darted to the entrance and saw Shou carrying Colona in his arms as he ran away.

"She's mine so, if you don't mind, I'll be taking her back with me. Bye-bye!" Shou said, waving his hand toward Touji as he dashed into the corridor.

"Wait! Come back here, you little—"

"You really think I'll wait just because you ask me to?" Shou taunted him.

“Bastard! I’ll have your head!” Touji screamed, following them with katana in hand.

CLING! CLING!

The sound of Touji’s blade knocking into the walls echoed through the corridor. Miida, who’d been left alone, could gradually hear it getting quieter and quieter as the man got further from his cabin.

He stirred. At the same moment, the seemingly empty space next to him started to contort itself in a strange manner. Soon, two shadows appeared out of thin air.

Masaki crouched and rested a hand on Miida’s shoulder while Nemea stood by their side.

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After Shou and Touji had stormed off, my first order of business was healing Miida.

Even though he used to be a slaver, I couldn’t abandon him here after he helped us so much. Others in the same position as me may have let him suffer as punishment for his past deeds—and honestly, that might have been the best course of action—but I couldn’t bring myself to do that. Especially not to someone who was ready to throw his life away to save his family.

His legs, arms, and torso had been lacerated and he was bleeding profusely. His right leg, in particular, had been almost separated from the rest of his body.

With both Nemea and myself using healing magic, Miida’s wounds were closing up nicely.

“I’m done with his leg. How is it going on your side, Nemea?”

“I just finished too. His arms were in better shape than I thought. Still, the rest of his wounds were so deep that there might be aftereffects...”

“You’re right. Some nerves might have been hit. I’ll do what I can to fix any issues later. I can’t do anything about the blood loss with magic, though. He’ll have to take it easy and recover naturally.”

Healing magic wasn’t all-powerful. I had used High Heal, but even that

couldn’t bring back the blood he’d lost. I’d be able to fix his nerves, though. Even if they’d been severed by Touji, I would be able to grow them back.

I wasn’t happy with the situation. Miida was one of my men, and he’d been hurt very badly.

I didn’t know if it was in my nature or if I’d started feeling like that after experiencing so many hardships in this world, but I was convinced that treating your subordinates right was crucial. Those who didn’t would eventually live to regret it. I had every intention to make Touji regret what he’d done.

It would be too dangerous to leave Miida here. I needed to get him off this ship. I left him in Nemea’s care for a moment and walked up to the wall to create a door to my Room.

Nemea looked at me, speechless, as he saw the door appear out of nowhere. *Yeah, everyone makes that face at first.*

“Nemea, please bring Miida inside this room. There are beds inside so he’ll be able to rest comfortably.”

“All right,” he said with a nod. “I’ve never seen this spell before.”

I saw Room as one of my best abilities. Being able to make a door appear out of thin air wherever I went was incredibly useful—and it looked pretty cool.

I’d changed the layout of my Room a lot since the last time I used it.

Youko’s favorite sofa and the kitchen hadn’t changed at all, but I’d removed the coffee maker and some pieces of furniture.

Instead, I had added large beds to four of the rooms—out of the six I had in total. There was a cap on the amount of furniture I could have in my Room, but I’d managed to add the large beds by cutting down on anything unnecessary while keeping the important items—such as the sofa, the kitchen units, and medical kits.

Nemea carried Miida to one of the beds. It just so happened that he chose mine, but I decided to let it go—desperate times called for desperate measures.

I left him a note so he wouldn’t panic when he woke up. I’d made sandwiches and pancakes before we set out, so there’d be something to eat if he was

hungry.

Jirou and Akiha were in charge of rescuing the slaves, but it was my job to save the women in what Touji called his “collection.” That was why I had made these changes and gotten some food ready.

Touji kept these women separated from the rest of the slaves in a secret place that only his closest collaborators knew of.

Since Nemea was strong enough to carry cages along with their occupants by himself, he also knew where Touji’s secret collection was hidden.

“Let’s save them all while Touji’s attention is on Shou. Nemea, you said there was a secret passage here. Do you know how to open it?”

I could see on my map that he was right about the secret passage, but it was full of traps. There were arrows ready to pour down on us from a fake ceiling, holes full of spikes, and even a guillotine. The path seemed narrow and it’d be hard to dodge all of them.

There had to be a better way to access the hidden path—or at least some way to deactivate the traps.

“Well, the door itself is easy to open,” Nemea answered, walking up to one of the bookshelves.

Books were in disarray on every shelf except for the one at the top—on the right side, it was completely empty. Nemea put his hand there and pushed. The bookshelf slid to reveal a door.

There were marks on the wall around the bookshelf that showed it had been moved often, so it wouldn’t have been too hard to find the trick. When Nemea finished sliding it, I heard a clicking noise.

“If you just open the door like this and enter, the traps will kill you,” he explained. “Which is why...”

He put the bookshelf back in its place and picked up five books: *Nosferatu’s Life*, *Varlon’s Adventure Journal*, *Gorou Shibasaki’s Epicurean Journey*, *Rorona Pettara Colocynth*, and *Dorlan Kingdom: A Complete History*.

He arranged them in the empty space in that order and there was another

clicking noise. The traps had been disabled.

I see... No-v-go-ro-d... That makes sense.

The Novgorod was a very unique ship, but most people wouldn't know of it—unless they were fans of battleships. It even had yet to appear in that one famous game with girls based on battleships.

Nemea pushed the bookshelf out of the way once more, and it didn't make any noise this time.

"We'll be safe now," he said. "I'll go first so please watch my back."

"All right."

Now that the traps had been disabled, Nemea and I entered the dimly lit passage.

I checked my map to be safe, but there didn't appear to be anyone moving in here—nor any golems.

At the end of the passage was a staircase that led to the deepest part of the ship.

We started going down. The ring Youko had given me was glowing brighter than ever: the source of the curse had to be close.

It took no time at all for us to reach the deepest part of the ship, and we entered through an imposing iron door.

The room was incredibly large and seemed to make use of the entire bottom floor. Despite there being no lanterns in sight, it was still bright, unlike the dimly lit passage we'd gone through to get here. I suspected magic crystals had been embedded in the walls.

Therefore, I was able to see his so-called...collection very clearly.

"His lust knows no bounds..."

Dozens of women each of a different race were trapped in glass cases, unmoving, just like dolls in their boxes.

I looked around and saw a high harpy with large wings, a mermaid with a colorful tail, a three-horned demon woman, a little fairy trapped in a bottle, and many others whose race I did not even recognize.

This one is...an elf? What about this smaller girl next to her? She might be a dwarf or a korpokkur since she's so small... No, it doesn't matter, I'll have plenty of time to wonder about that later.

I spotted the queen of the echidnas very quickly. Her overall figure—very similar to that of a lamia—as well as the small wings on her back—one of the characteristic features of the echidnas from what I'd heard—made it fairly easy.

We need to wake them all up.

"Nemea, can we force these cases open?"

He shook his head. "That would be too reckless. I don't know what would happen to the women inside if we did. Since these cases are magic items that petrify the people trapped inside, we'll need to undo this process by finding and destroying their mana supply."

He petrified them so he wouldn't have to look after them either. He's really treating these people like mere dolls... How revolting.

Nemea and I followed the wires that were connected to the cases. They all seemed to lead to the same corner of the room.

There we found... *Urgh...*

“Masaki, are you all right?” Nemea asked from behind me.

“This...”

“Oh. Hrm, it’s very lifelike, indeed.”

I was currently pointing at a realistic portrait of Adel and Colona, completely grossed out. *Wait, that’s a photo, not a portrait.*

He had somehow taken this without their knowledge. There were even small figures of the two all around it.

Portraits of Adel were sold in many theaters, but they’d been drawn with her permission. They showed her posing in a dignified fashion and were very popular with both men and women. To be honest, I had even kept the sample we’d been sent.

However, figures of Adel had never been put on the market which meant Touji had handcrafted them! *And they’re so well made too! Why do you have to pour so much effort into doing gross stuff?!*

Behind the figures was a suspicious magic stone. It had to be what powered the cases.

All right, then.

“Time to get rid of all this!”

I quickly added Final Attack to my empty skill slot. Final Attack was one of the first skills warriors learned in *Britalia Online*. It dealt devastating damage with just a single hit—the catch, however, was that it came with a two-hour cooldown.One of the tanks in my old guild used to have a skill that directed monsters’ aggro to himself if he dealt enough damage so he would usually use Final Attack right off the bat when we faced bosses.

He could only do that because he had the right skills and equipment, though. A regular player would die instantly if they were the sole focus of a crazed boss.

“W-Wait. Are you going to unleash this here?”

Oops. While I was reminiscing, I’d mistakenly activated Overtachi.

I'm so pissed off that my body must have acted on autopilot.

"Of course I am. I want that rubbish gone!"

Nemea started panicking and tried to stop me, but I activated Final Attack anyway. *HA HA HA!!!*

It merged with the effects of Overtachi, making the air swirl around us as the large blade of light turned every shelf—and its content—into fine powder.

I didn't swing my gigantic blade around too much. We were inside a ship, and I didn't want to risk piercing the hull.

I heard a strange cry. It sounded almost like...someone's death throes?

"This voice is coming from the magic stone," Nemea explained. "If you touch it or try to destroy it, a ghost is supposed to come out to stop you. However, it looks like you cut through the ghost along with the stone. I had no idea it was possible to bypass the trap like that! What a keen eye you have!"

No, this is just one big coincidence. I was just so pissed at the pictures and figures that I decided to destroy everything at once.

I couldn't bring myself to tell Nemea the truth. "We're done with this," I stated.

Yep, let's just say we're done here and never bring it up again.

Now that the magic stone—and the ghost that was apparently guarding it—had been destroyed, the glass cases opened by themselves one after the other.

The women inside did not move, though. They were still under the effects of the curse and would continue to sleep, motionless, until we did something about that too.

"As expected, they're not waking up... We need to remove the subjugation curse," said Nemea.

"Leave it to me. I have a pretty good idea of how to handle this."

It would be difficult to purge the curse since I had yet to find the source, but there was another solution.

I put on one of the other rings Youko had handed me before I left.

“Masaki, could this be—”

“It is. You’ve seen one of these in the past too, right? Rings with the power to subjugate people...”

“But what are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to overwrite Touji’s curse.”

He gasped. “I get it now!”

This curse was incredibly powerful. There was no reason why my orders couldn’t overwrite Touji’s. He had ordered them to keep sleeping, but if I asked them to wake up, they surely would.

Youko was actually the one who had thought of it.

“If you find people who are under the influence of the curse before you are able to destroy it, use this ring to overwrite their previous orders,” she’d said.

I’m sure Touji has no idea this is even possible.

I walked up to Queen Gardenia and took her hand. For some reason, her skin was very cold to the touch. Maybe that was also one of the characteristics of the echidnas. Anyway, I pressed the ring on her hand while sending mana into it.

“Please wake up,” I asked softly.

The seal on her other hand—Touji’s—disappeared after a few seconds and she stirred awake. *Looks like it worked.*

She opened her eyes slowly and...suddenly tried to slam her snake tail into my face.

I crouched to dodge. *That was close!*

“How dare you entrap me like this?! I will have your head as compensation!”

“Wait! We’re here to help you! Why would I let you move otherwise?”

“Help me? You can speak this nonsense when I have your head on a pike!”

I won’t be able to speak at all if you kill me!

She continued to attack me with her tail. I could continue dodging, but I was

afraid she'd hurt the other women if she kept trying to fight around the cases. Nemea must have thought the same because he stepped in and stopped her, grabbing her tail with both hands and pinning her in place.

"You...! Don't touch me!"

"He's telling the truth!" Nemea tried to convince her. "He and his friend also saved me earlier!"

"I know this is hard to believe but... Hmm... You've heard about Shou, the otherworlder, and Astaroth from the demon tribes, right?"

"How dare you mention Shou and Her Grace Lady Asta?! Who are you?!"

Even Queen Gardenia talks about Asta-san so politely?! I'm getting more and more curious about her.

Still, it looked like she was finally ready to listen to me. She had stopped trying to kick me—*does it count as a kick?*—with her tail.

I explained to her what had happened as concisely as possible and told her that people we held dear had been targeted by Touji too.

"I see. This ring brought me here, and yet, you saved me with it. How ironic," she sighed.

"Ultimately, I plan to destroy the source of the curse so you can be entirely freed. But first, we need to save the other women here."

"You're right. Just looking at this room makes me mad. Who does that hateful man think we are?"

"I'm sure we'd all much rather live in blissful ignorance than know what goes through his head," I answered.

"Fair point. I have no interest in understanding him," she spat. "I wish Shou had been the one to rescue me," she added, her tone softer. "But that would be asking for too much, would it not?"

"If I may, what's your relationship with Shou?"

I had asked out of curiosity, but she suddenly blushed and turned away. "I-It's none of your business!"

All right, I see exactly *what kind of relationship you two have now.*

From what I'd heard, Queen Gardenia had lost her husband during the war and had been forced to protect her country while raising her children all on her own. Apparently, her first daughter was all grown up and helped her rule nowadays.

Shou, you're laying your hands on royalty?!

I was kind of impressed. While I couldn't help but admire him, I would never try it myself.

"Enough about me," the queen demanded. "If you're truly here to help, go and save these other women now!"

"I'm on it. I'll wake them up one after the other so could you explain the situation and lead them to this Room?" I asked, creating a door to my Room.

Queen Gardenia was surprised to see a door appear out of nowhere.

"What is this spell? To think there's still so much I haven't seen in this world!" she exclaimed, slithering through the door and looking around.

We don't have time for this.

"Your Majesty," I called out."You'll have plenty of time to examine the Room later after we save these women."

"Indeed. I apologize, I let my curiosity get the better of me. However, I still have a question. I saw a man inside, who is he?"

"He's...a slave trader who helped us infiltrate this place. He's washed his hands of this business, though."

"Trash. You should have forsaken him."

"I suppose I could have... But he led us here even though he knew he might lose his life. I wouldn't be able to sleep soundly if I left him behind after this. I also don't think he's a bad person deep down. He can still turn over a new leaf, don't you think?"

She considered her response for a moment. "I won't dictate what you should or shouldn't do. I owe you my life, after all. I'll pretend I didn't see him."

“I would appreciate that, thank you.”

As soon as the queen and I came to an agreement, Nemea dashed toward a young girl with pure white wolf ears. She must have been that shaman he kept talking about.

He fell to his knees in front of her and bowed his head.

“Shaman! I’m so sorry I couldn’t rescue you sooner!”

She smiled at Nemea. “Don’t worry...about that... Thank you for...saving me, Mister Nemea.”

His eyes welled with tears, but he managed to hold them back. *He must be relieved. I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything.*

The girl seemed to notice me after a short while and raised her face sheepishly.

“Big Brother... You came...to help me...too, right? Thank you...”

“How did you know?”

“I... You have beautiful...clear eyes...so I knew you had to be...a good person. Thank you...so much...for saving me. My name is...Ferran Aural Fermina... I know it’s long...so you can call me...Fen,” she introduced herself, bowing repeatedly.

My eyes are beautiful, huh? It’s the first time someone’s ever complimented my eyes. It’s kind of embarrassing.

“Thanks, Fen,” I said with a laugh. “I’m sorry for hurrying you when you just woke up, but could you take refuge in that Room? There’s food and drinks inside so have whatever you like.”

“Thank you...for taking care of me...so well...” she answered, bowing some more before disappearing into my Room.

“Let’s keep going, Masaki,” Nemea said.

“Yeah.”

Nemea, Queen Gardenia, and I kept waking up the girls and directing them to my Room.

I had given the two of them cursed rings as well, so the whole process was fairly quick. For better or for worse, these rings were very easy to operate.

Most of the women were wary of us when they awoke. It stood to reason. They were in an unfamiliar place surrounded by people they'd never seen before. Thankfully, Queen Gardenia aptly managed to convince them we were allies, and Fen, who'd entered my Room first, reassured each of them as they came through the door.

Queen Gardenia was a well-known figure among nobles and royals—she was the queen of Rungard, after all—which also helped a lot.

Rungard was a small country, but it exported its high-quality mithril across the world. A lot of people knew of the echidnas—and their queen—thanks to their booming business.

Thanks to her, the women entered my Room one after the other. Inside, Fen handed them water and food and made sure they were comfortable. I hadn't asked her to do any of this, but she'd taken the initiative to help us. She was a very good girl.

Some girls came from distant lands and had never heard of the echidnas or of Queen Gardenia, but they figured they had nothing to lose by following us and entered my Room anyway.

It was a good thing I'd thought to fill buckets with water beforehand considering the number of people who were now in my Room. Adel and the others were used to it now, but the people of this world had no idea how tap water worked. They usually drew water from wells with buckets or hand pumps.

We tried to be as swift as possible, and it was finally time for me to wake up the last girl.

She was a member of the lunar rabbit tribe—a very scarce race—and her bunny ears looked so, *so* soft. *I wanna pet them... No, no, I can't.*

While I was holding myself back from petting the softest-looking ears I'd ever seen, Nemea spoke up. "Masaki, I just woke up the last lady in the upper cases."

"Great! How is she doing? Can she stand?"

Some of them were too weak and shaken up to walk on their own. In those cases, we helped them get into my Room.

The girl with the bunny ears suddenly perked up after hearing my name.

“Masaki... Are you Count Toudou?!”

“Yes, that would be me.”

“For *real*?! You’re the real Count Toudou?! I’ve seen the play! It was amazing! To think Count Toudou himself would come to rescue me in person... It’s like a dream! Ah!” she stopped herself, seeming to realize something. “I’ve yet to introduce myself! I’m Meluna, a member of the lunar rabbit tribe. Can I shake your hand? Please?”

Oh my. I never thought I’d run into someone who’d seen the play. I shook hands with her, just like she wanted, but I was a little put off.

In a way, it was amazing that she could be so upbeat after waking up here, but it was a little insensitive to act like that in a place like this, I thought.

“Is Lady Adelheid here too?”

“No, Adel is at home. But could you hurry into the Room?”

“Y-Yes, of course!” she exclaimed before clearing her throat. “Please keep doing what you’re doing!”

She finally went through the door. It felt like a storm had passed.

Queen Gardenia came slithering closer to me.

“You’re quite popular, Sir Masaki.”

“Please let me forget this just happened... That being said, she was the last one, right?”

“Yes, we’re done here. I’ll head into your room too. Can I leave the rest in your hands?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll put my trust in you. Please do rid me of this unpleasant curse as soon as possible,” she said with a smile before closing the door behind her.

I deactivated my ability and the door disappeared.

She’d done enough. What came next was up to us.

Nemea and I exchanged a look and he nodded. We were ready to move on to the next phase.

The next moment, the door slammed open.

Chapter 3

Let us go back in time a little.

While Masaki and Nemea were rescuing Queen Gardenia and the others, Shou was fleeing from Touji with Colona in his arms.

“Spiral Blade!” Touji yelled.

Shou leaped out of its path. “That was close!”

The floor cracked under Touji’s attack.

“Windstorm!”

He continued to swing his blade, creating a deadly windstorm that flew at Shou.

“Here we go.” Shou crouched at the very last moment, letting the whirlwind pass right over his and Colona’s heads. It grazed his nose slightly before colluding with the opposing wall and tearing it to pieces. The wall collapsed immediately after.

Touji didn’t give Shou any time to recover his balance. He followed up with another swing of his thin katana.

“Sunburst!”

Shou looked over his shoulder and jumped ever so slightly. The next moment, a circular trail appeared on the wall behind him. Touji had cut open a hole in it.

Shou lost a few hair strands in the process, but he’d leaped right into what appeared to be a storage room just in time.

“Would you look at that? I would be in pieces if that attack had hit me. Show a little restraint!”

“Like hell, I will! You stole Colona from me!” Touji yelled. “*My* Colona!”

“I think I missed the moment when she became yours. She’s been mine from the start, and that won’t be changing anytime soon.”

Even while running away so frantically, Shou had not loosened his hold on

Colona for a second. He was holding her so close that their cheeks almost touched. Her face was bright red as she tried to push his face away.

“My lord!”

Touji had finally lost his temper and screamed, “I branded her with my seal! Now she’s mine forever! I’ve been holding back so she wouldn’t get hurt, but I suppose I don’t have a choice anymore. Colona! Your master Touji has a new order for you! Strangle Shou to death!”

The cursed mark on Colona’s forehead started glowing, but that didn’t seem to worry Shou. He grinned and took out a card.

“Finally! It took you a while! You just activated my trap card! Sacrificial Plushie!”

A plush toy that seemed to have been patched up time and time again appeared in front of Shou.

“If one of the monsters I’ve summoned is affected by a spell, a trap, or anything else that provokes a status modification, I can transfer it to the Sacrificial Plushie...who will destroy it for me!”

The Sacrificial Plushie put its soft and squishy hand on Colona’s forehead and retrieved the cursed mark. The mark seemed to float in the air for a moment—not attached to anything anymore—before the plush toy stuffed it into its mouth.

“Burst!” Shou ordered.

Light poured out from the plush toy, and it blew up like a small bomb. Strangely enough, it did not damage its surroundings in the slightest, only making the corridor shake weakly.

Touji looked down at his hand. “What?! My ring!” The cursed ring he’d been wearing had shattered into pieces.

“You shouldn’t let your guard down in front of your opponent, you know? Come forth! Quick Summon: Super Fighter Drei!” Shou exclaimed, throwing two cards into the air.

The first was Quick Summon. It allowed him to summon a powerful monster

without having to chant. The card shone before disintegrating and showering down like powder snow, enveloping the second card, Super Fighter Drei.

The second card danced in the air, shining brightly enough to drown the entire area in light before suddenly turning into a humanoid shape.

Long purple-to-yellow gradient hair fluttered in the wind as the woman who'd just appeared stretched her long legs. A pair of pile bunker gauntlets equipped with sharp stakes materialized soon after and attached themselves to her arms.

The elegant woman was wearing a military uniform and a monocle, and she gave off a mature and intelligent impression.

Another machine maiden was here to protect Shou in Colona's stead.

Shou wasted no time in giving out his orders to Drei. They had to make use of Touji's confusion.

"Drei! Use Gravity Blow!"

"Roger. Gravity Blow!"

Drei was still surrounded by a glowing aura as she rushed toward Touji, quickly covering the short distance that separated them.

Touji was focused on his hand, unable to accept the fact that his cursed ring had shattered and therefore could not react fast enough.

The price he had to pay for that mistake was heavy. Drei's armored fist drove into his body, knocking out the air in his lungs and sending him flying backward.

"UUURGH!!!"

The corridors were rather narrow on this ship, and he bounced off the walls several times before stabbing his katana into the floor to plant himself. He hit a pipe and smoke started obscuring his surroundings.

"I'm sorry, master. I wasn't able to finish him off," Drei apologized.

"Don't worry about it. You got him off my back and that's plenty. Besides, he's not weak enough to go down after a single attack. I knew that from the start. I'm pretty sure he's using defensive skills to limit the damage he takes too."

"It's merely conjecture, but I believe he's using the samurai skill Lord Jirou

told us about, Martial World," Colona cut in. "It acts as a sturdy barrier that protects the user in exchange for ki. Drei, I'll fight with you from now on, so please support me."

"Roger."

Drei and Colona were standing in front of Shou, acting like a shield, as they watched Touji slowly get up and the smoke dissipate around him.

Drei readied her pile bunker while Colona equipped her trusty Plasma Twinblade.

Touji hadn't been left unscathed by Drei's previous attack.

Under regular circumstances, such a hit would have crushed the target's bones and left them on the brink of death, but thanks to Martial World—which heightened his defense—and Rejuvenation—a self-recovery skill—he could still move.

Both of these skills required the use of ki—a source of energy similar to MP—and, in this world, ki was greatly influenced by the state of mind and personality of the user.

In Touji's case, he was so outraged that his ki reserves were overflowing despite him making use of so much of it to activate his skills. He'd dissipated the smoke that came out of the pipe with the sheer force of his anger.

"I wanted to make you mine while you were still in perfect condition, but I don't care anymore! I'll make you regret not staying by my side!" he yelled.

"I have a feeling you might be the one to regret your actions," Shou taunted him.

"How dare you?!"

Shou didn't bother answering and smiled, pulling out his Cursed Sword, Gram. He was holding a card in his other hand.

Drei and Colona were standing between the two men, shielding Shou, but, while they would be difficult opponents for Touji, he still had a shot at defeating them.

He used to be one of the top players of *Sengoku: Samurai War Chronicles*. He

was used to overcoming adversity. He couldn't help but wonder why Shou, who knew that full well, still looked so composed. After staring at him for a while, he suddenly realized that what Shou was looking at wasn't him, but rather at something *behind* him.

"No way!"

The moment Touji understood Shou's plan, the ship started shaking violently. It didn't capsize, though. With its peculiar round shape, the ship was more stable than any other—even if that meant it couldn't sail very fast. It wouldn't sink over something like this.

What bothered Touji, however, was the origin of the impact.

"My cabin... Damn!" he cursed, his irritation showing on his face.

He turned his back to Shou and retraced his steps as fast as he could. They were on the third floor. Following Shou so far away from his cabin had been a terrible mistake.

He had modified the original design of the Novgorod a lot when building this ship, and it was now not at all unlike a dungeon.

It took a long time to reach the lowest floor by walking along the corridors and climbing down the stairs, but there was actually a human-powered elevator that only top officers could use.

Touji ran all the way to this elevator, but the men who were supposed to operate it were laying on the floor with no strength left in their bodies.

"Shit! Why now?!"

He gave up on the elevator and rushed down the stairs. He felt someone's bloodlust behind him and jumped down, sliding down the stairs on his belly.

A light ray passed right over his head, and he felt the air around him grow hot.

"Did you miss?"

"It would appear so. And to think he'd be able to dodge that. I'm impressed."

"Drei. There are plenty of people like him in this world. If you continue to assume we're still in our previous world, you'll fail your mission," Colona said.

“Thank you for the warning.”

Touji could hear Colona and Drei talking to one another behind him, their tone as detached as ever. He looked back for a moment and noticed that they were both holding guns. He jumped to his feet and used ki to activate Flash Steps to boost his speed.

He wouldn’t have been so worried if Colona and Drei had been holding regular guns, but their weapons shot laser beams instead of bullets.

He could cut bullets in two before they reached him, but he wasn’t sure he could do the same with laser attacks. It might have been possible, but he wasn’t foolish enough to try it for the first time here.

His first priority was to get back to his cabin.

He ignored Colona and Drei and continued to run down the stairs. He had a bad feeling about this. Sweat was running down his back and dampening his clothes.

When he finally reached his cabin, he noticed that the door was wide open even though he remembered closing it. The hidden passage to his secret room was open too.

No! No way! This isn’t happening!

He hurried through the passage and into the room that held his treasure.

That’s when he finally saw with his own two eyes...

“NO! MY COLLECTIOOOOOOOON!!!”

...that his prized collection, to which he had devoted so much time, money, and effort, had completely disappeared.

◆◇◆

“Meefa! Ellie! Mifar! No... Gardenia disappeared too... So have the high elf and the lord pixie... All of them! They’re all gone!!!” Touji cried out, falling to his knees.

We’d barely managed to finish in time. I wished Shou had bought us a little more of it, but I figured my dramatic earlier attack might have tipped Touji off.

It had been a bit stupid, but at the same time, I couldn’t bring myself to truly regret it.

Touji stood up slowly and glared at me, his eyes full of hatred. “Was it you?! Give me back my collection, you trash!!!”

Wow, he’s fast.

Beside himself with rage, Touji approached me in a split second, shattering the floor with the sheer strength of his steps, and brought down his katana on me.



I used Quick Attack to parry. Seven Arthur's additional damage-over-time kicked in twice and shook Touji's katana.

A regular blade would have snapped on the spot, but I was fighting an otherworlder—another top player. His katana had to be something special—perhaps a drop from a high-level boss or something even better.

It may even be as dangerous as Jirou's Yami.

A dark purple aura was seeping out of his blade, and what looked like ghosts were gathering around him. His katana might have attracted them.

Strange groans started echoing around us.

Touji leaped. "Wind Faaaaaaangs!"

Before he landed, he swung his blade in the air, sending a gust of wind—and a number of ghosts—my way.

I quickly added Sonic Blade to my empty skill slot and responded with a slash of my own.

Our attacks collided in midair, scattering the ghosts around. The impact was strong enough to break some of the walls that surrounded us.

"Urgh! So powerful..." Nemea groaned, planting his feet and bringing his arm up to shield his eyes from the strong winds.

Nemea wasn't wrong. Touji was indeed a difficult opponent to face. I was using Martial God Principle to greatly enhance my close combat skills, but I was only on the same level as him. No, he was actually even stronger than me.

I can't let him push me back. I'll put a stop to this with one blow!

I had left my skill list open, and I quickly replaced Silent Blow with Swift Wind.

"Powered! Oversword! Swift Wind!"

I used Powered and Swift Wind to buff myself and closed the distance between the two of us at full speed.

"Take this!" I exclaimed.

"AAAH!"

Touji hadn’t seen it coming, but he still managed to block my sword with his katana.

Five additional damage-over-time were triggered and Touji’s blade kept shaking.

“I’m not losing to you!” he roared.

I had managed to leave shallow cuts on his arms and legs, but Touji didn’t budge. *I’m not done yet!*

I lowered my center of gravity and spun, swinging Seven Arthur one more time.

Touji didn’t try to dodge. Once again, he parried with his blade—it was sturdy enough that he didn’t have to worry about it breaking no matter how many hits it took.

Jirou was right. Touji was as skilled as Tatsuma. If I let my guard down, I’d bite the dust.

I’m not challenging Tatsuma at every morning training session for nothing! I’ll show him what I can do!

Touji would tire eventually. On the other hand, I had my Invincibility—which was pretty much cheating, but let’s not dwell on that—so even if we were evenly matched, I’d come out on top sooner or later.

While you might be thinking our fight was one-sided because of my Invincibility, it wasn’t that easy. Seeing a blade coming at me was still scary, and I could feel the impact of each of his blows. I also risked getting sent flying into the walls. I obviously wasn’t taking as many risks as my opponent, but it did drain my physical and mental strength.

Our blades kept clashing and Nemea couldn’t find a gap to step in at all.

After a few minutes, Touji started slowing down somewhat.

I used Oversword again and additional damage-over-time waves kicked in seven times. Touji did his best to block everything, but the last hit forced his katana out of his hand.

I took advantage of this opportunity and immediately unleashed Overtachi.

Without anything to protect him from my attacks and no time to dodge, Touji had to bear the brunt of the attack.

He was sent flying against the wall with so much force that he landed in the next room, destroying the wall in his wake.

“Did you get him?” Nemea asked.

“You can’t ask stuff like that. Don’t you know those kinds of lines are the very reason people lose?”

“R-Really? I had no idea, but I’ll remember it!”

The people of this world had no concept of this but those are *exactly* the sort of things you shouldn’t say at a time like this. Sadly, they always did it. *How many times have they foreshadowed stuff like this? No, I shouldn’t keep track, that would be stupid.*

As always, the prophecy fulfilled itself, and Touji was still moving on my map. *That wasn’t enough to finish him off, huh?*

Barry and Iiro had both fallen to this attack, but Touji wouldn’t.

He’s one tough fellow.

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Masaki’s sword had left a large wound on Touji’s torso. It stretched all the way from his right shoulder to his left hip.

“Argh... Shit! I accomplished so much... Why now?!”

Touji was still breathing purely thanks to his class. While samurai were weak to magic, they had an impressive resistance to physical attacks.

He was also quick-witted. As soon as he had noticed that he wouldn’t be able to block Masaki’s hit, he had devoted all of his remaining ki to building up his defense stat.

It hadn’t been enough to stop Masaki’s sword from digging into his flesh, though. Despite still being alive, his dominant arm was in a pitiful state. All he had left was his damaged left arm to fight with.

“B-Boss...? Are you all right?”

Touji heard someone call for him and he painfully turned to face them. He locked eyes with a man wearing a gray robe and a hood—even though he was indoors.

He's from the development team... This means I'm...

Touji's body screamed in pain with every move, but he still forced himself to get up and take a good look at the room he was in.

There were glass vials filled with mysterious liquids and weird powders—ingredients for some sort of experiment—resting on the shelves.

There were also plenty of books with complicated titles and laboratory equipment neatly arranged. He continued to look around and spotted ropes and amulets: a barrier.

Touji knew where he was. He was in the room where cursed rings were manufactured.

He moaned in pain, which worried his men further. "Boss?"

Touji left their concerned questions unanswered and started laughing like a madman. His wounds were so deep that he could pass away at any moment, but he still kept on laughing.

"HA HA HA! The heavens haven't forsaken me yet!"

He started walking toward *something—something* he knew was in this room. His pace was unbelievably fast for a man with such injuries.

If Touji's men had been worried before, they were now convinced that he had gone mad. To be fair, they weren't entirely wrong.

After a few strides, he reached his goal: a scroll sealed off by dozens of amulets and thick sacred ropes.

The seal was much stronger than the one in Wataru's laboratory. The sturdy ropes had been soaked in holy water by a priest and enchanted time and time again. Beyond them was a large magic circle with the scroll at its center.

Naturally, there was a reason the scroll was so well protected. The curse it contained was powerful, too powerful to handle lightly.

Just looking at it was enough for the curse to start affecting you, and countless ghosts and revengeful spirits were gathered around it, drawn to its ominous aura.

If this scroll were thrown into a country free of its shackles, it would surely bring it to ruin in a matter of days. The ingenious barrier had been invented to allow such a scary and potent curse to be used safely.

But Touji reached out with his left arm—the only one he could still move—and started cutting the rope.

His men started screaming, terrified. They'd been working with this curse for quite some time now, and they knew just how dangerous it was.

One of them rushed to stop him. "Boss! What are you doing?! The seal won't last!"

"Shut up! Out of my way!" Touji snapped, cutting down the man who'd tried to stop him with his blade.

His blood started seeping into the sacred ropes, dyeing them red.

"B-Boss... Why...?"

"Why are you all betraying me?! I know you're also a traitor..." he said, letting the corpse fall to the ground without another look.

Touji's smile hadn't faded for one moment. He stepped into the magic circle and walked toward the scroll.

"We have to stop him!" another man screamed. "If he touches the curse there's no telling what will happen!"

They started attacking Touji, but neither the fireballs nor the gusts of wind they sent flying his way reached their target. Their trajectory appeared to have been deflected by some kind of force.

"Why is my spell...?!"

"What's going on?!"

"It's the barrier! It won't let our spells through!"

"Then we have no other choice..." one of the men said, readying his staff and

rushing toward Touji.

Before he could even get close, Touji cut loose yet another rope and an ominous aura assaulted everyone in the room.

They froze, unable to move forward a single inch. Some of them, more weak-willed than others, simply fainted on the spot.

Touji seemed unperturbed and grabbed the last rope, cutting it with one swift motion before pulling at the last talisman that protected the scroll.

As soon as the seal disappeared, the scroll rose into the air and started unfurling itself as though it was alive.

Touji reached out and closed his fingers around it. He brought the edge to his mouth and pulled with his teeth to open it faster.

The curse was finally released, covering the entire room in its dark aura. Before the members of the development team—all eminent mages, curse specialists, and magic scholars—could figure out what was happening, they were possessed by the curse and died.

The aura took the life of every person present in the room besides Touji before intensifying and gathering around the captain.

It seeped into his body, tainting his soul with its darkness.

“I’ll have my revenge! I’ll take revenge on those who have stolen from me!” Touji’s soul screamed.

The being contained inside the scroll would grant him his wish.

“I shall answer...your grudge.”

The thing that used to be Touji reached his hand through the gaping hole in the wall.

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A chill ran down my spine. The entire room suddenly felt cold, and a dark, ominous aura started seeping through from the gaping hole in the wall. *What's going on?!*

Something's coming!

"This doesn't look goo—"

Before I could finish my sentence, I was sent flying backward by a dark flame.

"Masaki?!" Nemea screamed.

——Hexed (Extreme).——

——Resistance to status alterations activated.——

——Weakened (Extreme).——

——Resistance to status alterations activated.——

——Poisoned (Extreme).——

——Resistance to status alterations activated.——

——Burnt (Extreme).——

——Resistance to status alterations activated.——

Four different status alterations in one go?!

Immune Status protected me from their effects, but I still crashed into the wall.

"Urgh..."

The air in my lungs was knocked out by the impact and I felt every cell in my body screaming for oxygen. I clutched at my chest with both hands as I tried to calm my breathing.

What was that?! Touji?!

My question was answered right away.

Touji slowly emerged from the hole in the wall. His presence was as intimidating—if not more—than Barry or Iiro's.

Overtachi had left deep wounds on him. Fatal, I had thought.

His armor was completely torn. My blade had dug into his flesh, and his right arm dangled with every step. It was barely attached to his shoulder and looked like it could fall to the ground at any moment.

However, it was healing at an incredible speed.

Before long, his arm had been reattached fully to his body, and, for some reason, his katana started changing shape. It looked more like a saw now.

Weirder still, a scroll was floating around him. When I tried looking directly at it, I felt another chill—more intense this time—go through my body.

The ring Youko had given me was glowing brighter than ever.

Is that scroll the source of the curse?!

Ghosts started appearing and gathering around Touji, as if drawn to the scroll, before entering his body.

“You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastard! You bastaaaaaaaaard!”

The scroll started unrolling itself in reaction to Touji’s screams.

The words that were written upon it started escaping, taking shape in front of our eyes and engulfing us.

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“My lord, the exit is on the right.”

“All right. Hey, Drei, how is it going in the rear?”

“No enemies in sight. No one appears to have followed us, master.”

“Perfect. Then it’s time for us to make our getaway,” Shou said, running through the corridor, light-footed.

With the exit so close, his path should have been getting brighter and brighter but his surroundings were just as dark as ever. Shou didn’t have the time to think over such small details and kept running.

“My lord, are you sure this is all right?”

“What’s all right?”

“Dumping Touji on Masaki.”

“Oh, that? Yeah, don’t worry about it. That was our plan from the start, Masaki agreed.”

“I see.”

Shou and Masaki had discussed the matter at length.

At first, Shou had suggested they fight together but Masaki had refused. He couldn’t ask that much of them, especially not after sending Colona to Touji as bait, he’d said. He’d explained that he was better suited for fights in narrow places and insisted on taking on Touji alone.

He wasn’t wrong.

Shou was fully aware that he wasn’t in the best headspace to fight at the moment. Sending Colona to Touji all alone had been very stressful for him.

On top of that, Masaki was a capable fighter. He’d proven it many times over and had been the one to defeat Iiro.

Shou didn’t think Masaki was any better than him, naturally, but he believed it’d be rude to try to stop him when he seemed to have made up his mind.

Masaki’s been outraged ever since he learned Touji harmed Adel. I’ll be the bigger person here and push everything on to him—Erm, I mean, graciously allow him to finish Touji off.

Shou left the hard part to Masaki and was currently trying to secure an escape route.

He finally exited the maze of corridors that made up the lower levels of the ship and stepped onto the deck with Colona and Drei. There was agitation everywhere and a storm was raging on, contributing to the chaos.

Most noblemen had already made their escape, and the sailors were so focused on dealing with the storm and making sure the ship did not capsize that they did not notice Shou and his escorts.

“The sky was so clear when we got here and now this?” Shou sighed.

“My lord, Arthur has exhausted more than half of his stamina. Please allow

me to lead you to him," Colona suddenly spoke up.

"For real? Uh-oh... Let's go, fast!"

"At once. Please follow me. Drei, please watch our backs. My lord, please mind your steps. The rain has made the floor slippery."

"Okey-dokey."

"Roger. I will protect your back, master," Drei said.

"I know you'll do a good job, Drei," Shou answered. "And I'll be sure to thank you very, *very*, thoroughly tonight when we— Ouch! That hurt!" he whined after Colona stepped on his foot.

She hadn't held back at all, and the floorboard had cracked under Shou's foot. Drei started fussing and worrying about him, asking him if it still hurt and checking if it was broken, but Colona stepped in again. "My lord, how about moving your feet instead of your mouth? You too, Drei."

"All right, all right..." he agreed before looking down at his feet. "It still hurts..."

"R-Roger!" Drei answered. "Hmm... Master... Will you really do...*that*?" she asked Shou, flustered.

She had been summoned for the first time recently, and she had yet to get used to this side of her master. She couldn't figure out whether he was serious or not, and her face was bright red.

"Drei," Colona interjected.

"I-I'm sorry. I'll follow your previous command and shut up!"

"Listen, my lord always says things like that. You'll need to learn to ignore him. Don't let anything he says get to you," she explained.

"Yes!"

Drei knew full well that Colona was her superior. She decided to listen to her and remained silent.

"I won't let you have him..." Colona whispered.

"Colona, did you say something?" Shou asked.

“Nothing at all. Please make haste, my lord,” she urged, hitting Shou’s buttock firmly as you would a horse.

“I already told you I would, so stop hitting me!” he exclaimed, following her through the heavy rain.

Colona’s whisper was carried away by the wind and disappeared without anyone hearing it.

As they ran through the deck, they noticed the trail of destruction left behind by Arthur and the sailors. While the indents left by the former’s claws stood out the most, it was clear that some areas had been damaged by humans. Some had taken advantage of the confusion to loot the very ship they worked on.

They passed by a few cages that were full of slaves when they’d first arrived. They were now empty but not damaged in the slightest. It looked like they’d been opened with a key.

Seems Jirou and Akiha did their part. As soon as Masaki finishes dealing with Touji, we’re good to go.

As Shou’s group headed toward Arthur, they started hearing the brawl, even over the sounds of wind and rain.

They made a turn and arrived at the largest open area of the deck. Arthur was surrounded by dozens of enemies and grappling with another beastman, roughly as tall and built as him.

“HA HA HA! You’re not bad! How about joining our crew? I’m sure our boss would welcome you with open arms. I’ll put in a good word too.”

“No need! I only have one master!”

“That’s too bad! You leave me no choice, then. I’ll send you both to the bottom of the sea!”

“Destroy him, Zanki! You’re the best!”

The crowd was cheering for Arthur’s opponent—an oni with one horn.

Oni were often confused with ogres, but they were two different races. The former looked much more similar to humans, down to their skin tone.

There was only a small population of oni—a great majority of them lived in Yamato, their country of origin—but they were tremendously strong.

Despite their fearsome powers, oni seldom fought against humans. An ancient pact forbade them from attacking them. Even when they did even up fighting, it was often because a human had initiated the fight. Oni hated lies, and they loathed those who broke their promises more than anything.

It was also very rare for an oni to venture outside Yamato. They loved their homeland, and most were perfectly content staying there and devoting their lives to its protection.

Naturally, an oni would get curious about the outside world now and again, and they would become an adventurer or a merchant. A few also had to leave their country behind because of circumstances beyond their control.

In Zanki's case, he'd been kicked out of Yamato for committing evil acts.

Even after going to Rand, he hadn't mended his ways. He'd met Touji while he was terrorizing people as a bandit. Touji had immediately taken a liking to him—and to his strength—and had hired him as a bodyguard.

He'd clearly made the right choice. Only *he* was strong enough to face the silver wolf who had easily crushed dozens of humans before him.

They'd been fighting for a fairly long time. Arthur's hair was standing on end, and his metallic muscles were bigger than ever. Blood was gushing out from the wound on his right arm and dying his fur red, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

"What did you say?!" Arthur roared.

Zanki was being pushed back. "Wh-What's up with this sudden strength?!"

"I asked you to repeat what you just said! You'll send my master to the bottom of the sea? Over my dead body!" raged Arthur, using all his strength to lift Zanki with both hands.

"IT HURTS! STOP! YOU'LL BREAK MY ARMS! STOP IT! NOOOOO!!!"

Arthur kept increasing the pressure on Zanki's arms and sickening cracking sounds filled the deck.

Yet another cracking sound echoed as Arthur howled and threw Zanki into one of the wrecked rooms a little further away.

Zanki slammed into a group of bodyguards that were standing a little too close to the fight before crashing into the wall.

The impact was so powerful that the wall collapsed over him.

Arthur had suddenly gotten stronger thanks to one of his skills, Loyal Soul. When activated, it temporarily enhanced his physical abilities.

The effects of this skill varied according to the bond between the summon and its master. Arthur put all of his faith into his master which meant the boost he got was prodigious.

“He took Zanki down?! I’m out of here!”

The remaining bodyguards scattered in all directions...only to be intercepted by the three newcomers.

“Colona, Drei, I’m gonna use Jet Stream!” exclaimed Shou.

“Understood!” the other two answered in unison.

Shou took out a card and immediately activated it. A pale light enveloped his body along with Colona’s and Drei’s. Their speed greatly improved.

Jet Stream was a magic card that could buff up to three people at once. On top of increasing the targets’ speeds, it would also apply the Charged effect, which doubled their offensive abilities.

The three of them blew the runaway bodyguards away as if they were mere leaves floating in the air. A few were quite literally carried off by the strong winds.

Arthur ran up to his master as soon as he saw him. He kneeled and bowed deeply.

“Master, I’m glad to see you’re well.”

“Thanks for the diversion, Arthur. You really outdid yourself, huh?” Shou commented, looking around.

“I did not expect such a strong foe would cross my path. I might have lost

without my skill.”

“You had to use Loyal Soul? I guess that oni must have been pretty impressive.”

Arthur’s body was strong as steel, but even with that advantage, he hadn’t come out of the fight unscathed. He’d been surrounded by dozens of bodyguards, some of which could use skills and magic spells, and had been forced to face an oni with enough strength to rival his own.

A spear was still lodged in his back, his right arm was badly cut, and nails were sticking out from his left foot.

Still, he had managed to pull through in spite of his injuries. Shou was impressed and decided to show his thanks in his own way. He pulled out his deck and stuck a card on Arthur’s body.

“Speedy Operation.”

Arthur’s body started glowing faintly, and his wounds started healing before his eyes.

His blood-stained fur went back to its pristine state, and the nails and spear fell off him. By the time the light disappeared, Arthur was fully cured.

“Master?! Why would you waste such a rare card on me?!”

Arthur’s reaction was understandable. Speedy Operation was a very valuable SR magic card.

Its effects had almost no limits, and it could bring someone back from the brink of death in a matter of seconds.

Shou had several copies of this card in preparation for emergencies, but that didn’t mean he could afford to waste one willy-nilly.

“What are you on about? Speedy Operations *are* valuable cards, but I’m not greedy enough to not use one when you’re clearly in need of it. We’re pals, right? Isn’t it obvious I’d do what I can to help you?”

“Thank you for your concern, master! I’ll serve you with everything I have until the end!”

“Heavy much?” joshed Shou. “If you’re all fixed, come on, let’s go. Our ship must be surrounded by enemies by now.”

“It would appear to be the case, my lord,” Colona confirmed. “I located a large number of foes in the vicinity of our ship. Lady Youko and Lord Barbarrosa are engaging them. The storm has likely made the ship unstable. The situation could take a turn for the worst at any point, so I suggest we make haste.”

As always, Colona provided a levelheaded analysis of the situation. Just as she’d pointed out, the storm was worsening by the minute. Lightning flashed through the sky more and more frequently.

The raging waves were even rocking the gigantic Phantom Blau.

Shou and his summons hurried down the stairs that led to the mooring area, and right as they got to the entrance, something came flying at them.

They all gasped. Drei and Arthur stepped forward, redirecting the mysterious object and sending it crashing into the ceiling where it got stuck.

Now that they had the time to look at it properly, they noticed it was a person.

Their head was stuck into the ceiling so they couldn’t see their face, but they were wearing the same uniform as the rest of the sailors.

They ignored the stranger in the ceiling and went through the entrance only to be greeted by the sight of a panda. Or rather, of Barbarossa, who was still wearing the panda onesie Masaki had given him.

The panda—Barbarossa—was swinging a large sword around rather masterfully despite his short fluffy limbs.

Sparks were flying out of the sword as he swiftly took down one sailor after the other.

“Cute...” Drei whispered.

Colona nodded. “I agree, *very* cute.”

She whipped out her camera and started snapping pictures.

Seeing Barbarossa hop around in his cute panda onesie was apparently

captivating the two.

Jirou and Akiha were already aboard the ship. They had most likely succeeded in rescuing all the slaves before coming back here.

Akiha was supporting Barbarossa and the others from afar with her firearm. She didn't seem to mind the rocking of the ship and landed every shot with perfect accuracy. As for Jirou, he was running through the crowd of enemies so fast that none of them could follow his movements. Whenever he stopped, one of them would fall, presumably dead.

The sailors weren't giving up, though, and continued to attack them.

"Hey! This way! Hurry!" a young woman—Youko—called out to Shou and his group, waving at them energetically from the ship.

Next to her, someone in a black set of armor was cutting down enemy after enemy and throwing their bodies into the sea.

Shou squinted his eyes, trying to figure out who that person could be before realization dawned upon him: it had no head! There was no one inside the armor and yet, it was moving on its own. Or rather, Youko was controlling it—a golem, he figured.

"Heya! Pretty cool toy you have here. Did you make it?" Shou asked.

"Why, thanks," she giggled. "It's nice, right? I got the armor from Masaki," she added with a bright smile, her chest puffed out with pride.

"Definitely some nice stuff you have going on," he hummed, not quite looking at her golem anymore. "Ouch!" he cried in pain as Colona pinched his cheek with all her strength.

"Jeez! My eyes are up here!" Youko complained, hiding her chest with her arms as she blushed.

The golem Youko was currently using was also a shikigami. Masaki had given her a set of armor he wasn't using, and she'd modified it to create a brand-new golem.

Masaki had gotten that set of armor from a monster while leveling up in *Britalia Online*, but it couldn't actually be worn by players. It was made to either

be sold to NPCs for in-game money or taken apart for materials with the skill Dismantle. For some reason, Masaki had done neither of the two, and this item had remained unused in a forgotten corner of his storage for years.

After being summoned into this world, he'd taken it out again and had tried to use it, but since it had never been made to fit players, it was way too big for him—it was the size of the monster he'd gotten it from, after all. Even Barbarossa, who was much bulkier than him, hadn't kept it on for more than a few minutes. According to him, it didn't fit, felt awful, and no one, regardless of their build, could ever wear it to the battlefield—if they hoped to be able to fight, that is.

As it turned out, the in-game description still held true in this world; this armor wasn't fit for people to wear.

At this point, Masaki had given up on it and was getting ready to use Dismantle, when Youko stopped him and asked for the armor.

Even if it can't be worn, I might be able to use it to make a golem, she'd explained.

It had worked wonders.

The name of her new golem was Dullahan—just like the monster Masaki had gotten the armor from. And like the mythological creature, that monster never had a head in the first place. Naturally, the armor set did not come with a helmet either.

According to the legends, dullahans were nimble, empty suits of armor. Youko's golem had inherited this characteristic. It was also rather strong despite not having a body and had impressive magic resistance.

After succeeding in building a brand-new golem—a good quality one, at that—out of the most unexpected of materials, Youko had decided to test it in battle at the first opportunity.

She was pleased by the results. Dullahan was completely unharmed even after fighting dozens of enemies. Spells bounced off it, and it had no issues fighting while being assaulted from all sides.

"Masaki isn't with you?" Youko asked, anxious. She'd been expecting him to

come back at the same time as Shou.

“He’s not done yet. He should still be in the middle of his fight with Touji.”

Akiha had overheard Shou’s answer. “What?! Hang on, Shou-san! Why did you leave him all alone?!”

“Wait! Could you lower your gun, girly? You’re scaring me! He asked me to, all right? I can barely summon any iron beasts in such a narrow place, so I probably would have been a hindrance if I had stayed. But I did offer to help!”

“No way...” she said looking down pitifully and lowering her gun. “Why would he...”

“He’s going to be fine, Akiha. Thank you for worrying about him, though,” Youko said with a smile.

“Aren’t you worried, Youko? Your fiancé is out there, all alone...”

“No, I’m not.” She smiled again. “I know he will come back—he told me so. Masaki’s not the kind of person to go back on his word.”

Akiha could see from her expression that she wasn’t just putting on a brave face. She truly believed everything would be all right. Akiha was ashamed of herself—she’d been the only one to doubt Masaki.

I’m making a fool of myself... Masaki-san would never stay behind if he wasn’t certain he’d win. He’ll be back in no time, flying around like that time he rescued me. I’m sure he will...

Akiha nodded to herself. She’d believe in him and wait for him too.

Suddenly, the ship shook wildly—not the one Akiha and the others were on, but the gigantic *Novgorod*.

The main quality of this ship was its stability, but it was now tilting weirdly. The slave ship was connected to it with a sturdy chain, and it was being pulled right along.

Lohas, who’d been standing on the bow, hurriedly joined his brother. Up until now, his job had been to stay away from the fighting and keep an eye on the sea. Pirates knew better than to get surprised by waves.

“Brother! If our ship keeps getting pulled it’ll capsize!”

“Aye, I’ve got it! Cut the chain loose, me hearties! Hoist the sail! Paddle, Peddle, get ready to be usin’ wind magic! Jirou, make haste and get yer landlubbin’ self back aboard!”

“Go ahead. I’ll join you shortly,” Jirou answered.

“Man yer stations and be ready for the call of the sea, ye scallywags!”

“AYE, AYE!!!”the Pirates of the Round Table replied in unison before following Barbarossa’s orders.

As soon as they’d gotten rid of the chain and raised the sail, Paddle and Peddle used their magic to get the slave ship away from the *Novgorod*.

Jirou swiftly took down the enemies that tried to get in their way. He finished off the last sailor who was armed with a bow before rushing toward the sea.

“Jirou-san!” Akiha screamed, extending her arm toward him.

The distance between the two ships was already over ten meters.

He had barely enough space to gather speed, and crossing this distance would be close to impossible. Even though he was a skilled otherworlder, Jirou couldn’t fly like Masaki.

Still, he did not hesitate for a moment and continued to run toward the sea at full pelt before leaping.

He did not make it. With only two meters left, Jirou fell into the sea.

Right as those aboard the ship thought all was lost, they noticed something incredible. Jirou was running on the surface of the sea.

Before he jumped, Jirou had used a ninjutsu technique called Water Style: Water-Run. Just as its name suggested, it allowed the user to run on water for a limited time.

Youko and the others were once again in awe of the eccentric techniques otherworlders could use. Akiha and Shou, on the other hand, immediately accepted the new skill. They’d seen plenty of ninjas run on water in anime and games so it wasn’t all that surprising for Jirou to be able to do it too.

Jirou continued to run, crossing the remaining distance and boarding the ship before his skill's effect ran out.

After confirming that Jirou was aboard, Barbarossa turned to Paddle and Peddle. "Ahead at full throttle, lads!"

"A-Aye, Aye!"

Paddle and Peddle had to stop themselves from bursting out laughing at the order given by the huge panda. They almost messed up their spell but thankfully, the two were experienced mages. They made a few adjustments and masterfully controlled the winds. The storm did not slow them in the slightest, and the ship was quickly sailing away from the *Novgorod*.

"What in the world...is *that*?"

No one knew exactly who'd said those words, but it did not matter—they'd all shared that thought.

Now that they were further away from the battleship, they could see it clearly: there was a swarm of ghosts hovering right over the gigantic ship. They were so numerous and so close to one another that they looked more like a singular ominous lump of souls.

Jirou used Clairvoyance and Akiha used Hyperopia to get a better look at the core of that lump. Right in the middle was a man wearing samurai armor, Touji. He looked like a crazed demon.

A strange scroll was spiraling around him and words written in Sanskrit were floating in the air. It seemed to be what had attracted the ghosts, and they entered the man's body one after the other.

"I never thought he had this in his possession... I should have gotten rid of him when I had the chance," Jirou let out, cold sweat running down his back.

His usual composure was nowhere to be seen.

Next to him, Akiha was shivering uncontrollably. Her face was pale and she was hugging herself.

"No... I'm scared... What's all that? The letters...they're sending chills down my spine... I can't stop shivering... What's going on?! I'm so scared!"

“Akiha! Get a hold of yourself!” Youko exclaimed, grabbing her shoulder with one hand. She formed a seal with her other hand and pressed it against her body. “Ha!”

Akiha suddenly stopped trembling and fell to her knees, her breathing rough.

“I’m...sorry...” she said in between breaths. “Thank you, Youko.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” Youko reassured her. “That being said, this thing is bad news. It makes me feel like I might get haunted if I so much as look at it. Jirou, you seem to know what it is. Could you tell us more? I might not look the part, but I’m from a family of onmyouji, and I’ve never seen a monster—” she cut herself off. “No...this curse is almost a deity now...”

She was holding her breath while watching the countless ghosts gather around Touji. Even though they’d gotten rather far away from the *Novgorod*, she couldn’t stop herself from breaking into a cold sweat. Had she been on the ship, she’d be dead already. She knew it.

“Master... Master... I feel weird. I can’t... I can’t stop shaking!”

“My lord...I measured an abnormal frequency. WARNING: Danger!”

“I’m also...shivering...”

Drei, Colona, and Arthur were machine beasts, and their senses were much more developed than those of humans. As a result, the influence of the curse was even stronger on them.

Noticing their distress, Shou hurriedly took out a card he did not often use.

“Let me give you a hand! Sanctuary!” he chanted.

A large white magic circle appeared, covering the entire ship. From that point on, it only took a few seconds for the machine beasts—and the pirates who’d turned pale—to feel better.

Sanctuary was a magic card that created a holy barrier that would repel evil. It gave a defense boost to all allies inside the barrier and nullified debuffs and status alterations caused by ghosts, evil spirits, or evil monsters.

“That should do the trick,” he said. “Jirou, how about you bring us up to speed? What’s that thing?”

“That scroll is an item from *Sengoku: Samurai War Chronicles*. It was used to summon a specific raid boss and was rather difficult to obtain. The boss itself was also ridiculously strong. Even raid guilds avoided fighting it. In-game, that’s all there was to it. The issue is the flavor text...”

“Flavor text? How can a text taste like anything?” Youko asked, confused.

“He’s talking about the descriptive text that comes with the items, weapons, and equipment we use,” Akiha explained. “A good example would be...the furniture in Masaki’s Room, for instance. In the game he played, those items couldn’t be used—they were only there to decorate the room. But the flavor text described them nonetheless. That’s why the couch is so soft and fluffy and the coffee maker works.”

“I see! I suppose that’s also why the dullahan armor couldn’t be worn by people,” Youko answered.

“Exactly,” Akiha confirmed.

“And what’s the flavor text of that scroll say?” Shou asked, helping Colona—who had finally started to feel better—stand upright.

Jirou took a deep breath. His face was solemn.

“It contains the Five Bloody Sutras, rumored to have been written by Sutoku in his own blood. I’m afraid I don’t remember the exact wording, but if memory serves me right, the text was along the lines of ‘Do not undo this seal as tragedy shall follow. Wars, fires, natural disasters, plagues, and famine will strike the land, and the ruler of everlasting darkness, the demon Sutoku, will descend. May those who lack the strength to face these trials stay far away from this bloodied seal.’”

Shou and Akiha froze as they listened to Jirou’s explanation.

Shou was the first to speak up. “Are you for real? By Sutoku, you couldn’t mean...Emperor Sutoku, right?”

“I’m afraid I do... The very emperor who is famous for turning into the most heinous of vengeful ghosts.”

Akiha couldn’t help but remember what she’d seen.

The seal of the scroll had obviously been broken and the words trapped inside had escaped. Just a look at them had been enough for them to assault her psyche. Not to mention ghosts were gathering around them.

“Jirou-san... If the scroll was opened, then...”

“Yes... In all likelihood, Sutoku has descended into this realm.”

As if to confirm Jirou’s words, the storm suddenly grew stronger, and a lightning bolt struck the *Novgorod*, starting a fire.

The outer structures that had been added to the original ship had already collapsed, and the mooring area was among the many parts that had sunk into the sea.

“Now that Sutoku has been summoned into this world, it’ll lead to another war! We cannot let Touji escape, no matter what. Barbarossa, I know I’m asking for a lot but please turn the ship back!” Jirou urged.

Barbarossa, still in his panda onesie, immediately made up his mind. “Aye! The work be calling us, lads! We need to rid ourselves of this foul beast! So, come on, let’s send this monster to Davy Jones’ locker!”

Barbarossa did not hesitate. Why would he? Their captain was still fighting on the *Novgorod*. While he had a tendency to do whatever he pleased without consulting others, he had never forsaken them, even after becoming a nobleman. The Pirates of the Round Table would never forsake him either.

“AYE, AYE!”

Their shouts were carried away by the tempest as Paddle and Peddle got to work. They steered the ship in the opposite direction, cutting through the raging waves.

Shou decided to give them a hand. He took out several cards and threw them into the sea.

“Come forth! Metal Sharkrider! Vanguard of the Depths! Screw Seasnake! Lead our way!”

The three iron beasts Shou had summoned were perfectly suited to underwater missions.

The Vanguard of the Depths, in particular, was used to swimming in rough waters—its natural habitat. Its special ability, Vanguard, allowed it to lead its allies through the harshest of waves.

With the help of the Vanguard of the Depths and Paddle and Peddle's magic, the ship weathered the tempest without any issues, going straight toward the *Novgorod*.

In the meantime, every single ghost that wandered through this sea was rushing to Touji, attracted to the Five Bloody Sutras.

Chapter 4

What the hell just happened?!

There was dust floating all over me. As I struggled to get up, I felt water running down my face.

Rain.

I looked up and finally noticed the violent thunderstorm. I felt like I was in the middle of a typhoon.

Hang on... Why can I see the sky? I was on the lowest floor, wasn't I?

"Urgh..."

I heard someone moaning in pain under a pile of debris. *Nemea!*

"Stay strong, Nemea! I'll get you out of here!"

I moved the debris out of the way to get to him, and as soon as I did, I noticed he didn't look too good. His fur had turned pitch black and his face was white as a sheet—or rather, it was also pitch black, like the rest of his fur, but you get what I mean.

Either way, his state was quite worrisome.

I used Appraisal on him.

Nemea Londwell

Race: Battle leo

HP: 232/4500

MP: 75/540

Status Alteration: Hexed (Extreme), Weakened (Extreme)

This doesn't look good! He's hexed and weakened! Why that combination of all things?

The "hexed" status alteration dealt continuous damage to the target's MP.

Every five seconds, up to ten percent of the total MP would be deducted. This meant that your MP could run out in as fast as fifty seconds! If that was the only thing to worry about, it still would have been easy enough to handle. If Nemea's MP hit zero under normal circumstances, he'd simply faint.

The issue was that he was also weakened. If his MP ran out now, he'd die.

Nemea only had seventy-five MP left. I had no time to waste.

I need to hurry or he could die for real!

"Dispel!" I chanted.

His body started glowing and his complexion slowly turned back to normal.

"What...happened?"

"You with me again? I know you just woke up, but please drink this," I said, handing him an MP potion I'd just taken out of my inventory.

Nemea downed it in one gulp, and his MP finally went up again.

This one's grape flavored so I hope he enjoyed it.

I used High Heal to help him recover his HP too.

His total MP count was in the three digits, but his maximum HP was in the four digits. I'd never seen anyone else, otherworlders excluded, with such a high HP count.

The runner-up was Prince Leon. He'd asked me to use Appraisal on him once as a health check-up of sorts. That was when I discovered he had 3500 HP. Naturally, nothing weird had come up when I checked—he was fit as a fiddle. Predictably enough, his fascination with Haruka was no curse, the prince was just madly in love.

At first, I wasn't sure it was all right for me to know confidential information about a prince, but there wasn't much I could do with the figures alone, and I had no intention of ever telling anyone else about it anyway.

"Thanks... Masaki, where is he?" Nemea asked.

"Up there," I answered.

We were surrounded by rubble, but I knew Touji was not in our immediate

vicinity. I could see on my map that he was much higher than us. *He's on the deck.*

I looked up and the first thing I saw was a dark aura, just like the one I'd seen come out of the hole. Hundreds of ghosts were gathered around it as if they'd been pulled in.

These were no longer regular ghosts. They were filled with such strong resentment, hatred, and envy that they'd fully turned into vengeful spirits.

"Can you fight?" I asked Nemea.

"Of course. He took me by surprise, so I couldn't put up a barrier in time. That won't happen again."

Then he started whispering something. *He's chanting*, I realized after a moment.

"Purification!" he finally said. "All set."

Purification was a spell used to put up a barrier around yourself. From what I'd heard, it was a pretty high-level spell that only talented clerics could use. Even the most powerful of curses would bounce right off it.

I was getting really curious about Nemea and his story—why could use such difficult spells? That being said, it would have been rude to check for myself using Log Analysis, and honestly, I had more important things to worry about right now. That black aura, for instance. It felt so eerie...

I activated Wing while Nemea jumped, using the rubble as a foothold to make his way to the deck.

We were in the midst of a violent typhoon, and the rain and wind raged on around us.

But I couldn't bring myself to care about that.

My full attention was on Touji. He was floating above the deck and looked completely different.

His hair, which had been tied down in a ponytail, was blowing wildly in the wind, and parts of his body sometimes became blurred, as if he'd become a ghost himself.

His red armor, decorated with a demon’s face, looked different as well. The eyes of the demon were now ablaze.

“I shall get my revenge over those who wronged me, stole from me, and cast me away! The throne was mine...and so was this land and every living soul in it! I’ll have your heads... You shall be mine again in death! Bow to your emperor, the great Sutoku! Souls of fallen samurai, follow your master!”

Is this...Touji?

The man in front of me definitely looked like Touji, but he’d just called himself Sutoku.

“Touji gave his body up to something truly...evil. He’s not himself anymore,” Nemea said.

Touji had been consumed by his hatred and became a fallen samurai himself, huh?

I wasn’t entirely clear what was going on, but Nemea appeared to be right—someone else was in control of Touji’s body now, and it looked like they were out to get me to fulfill Touji’s wish.

Touji— No, I should call him Sutoku now.

Anyway, I would never have thought I’d end up in another world fighting Emperor Sutoku, one of the most infamous vengeful ghosts in Japanese history along with the shuten-douji and the nine-tailed fox.

“It’s your turn to become mine. Do not resist, and I shall bring you to my realm without pain,” Sutoku said.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass. I’m not into men, and I already have two lovely fiancées to whom I belong,” I shot back.

“I’ve finally been reunited with the shaman. I won’t let you tear us apart again!” Nemea exclaimed.

“How foolish... Then I shall make your deaths painful enough to have you join my swarm of spirits out for revenge!” Sutoku yelled, raising the peculiarly-shaped katana he was holding and striking.

The way he wielded his sword was nothing like Touji. The blade itself was now gigantic, but his every move was sharp and merciless.

Nemea and I split, jumping to opposite sides to avoid getting hit.

Sutoku's powerful slash destroyed everything it touched. One move had been enough to collapse most of the rooms atop the deck, and the strong winds carried the rubble away.

Boy, that was scary! I can't let that hit me!

Even with Invincibility on, Sutoku would send me flying back, and, with the storm raging, who knew where I'd get blown away to?

I expected as much, but Emperor Sutoku seemed to be focusing on me rather than Nemea. He came rushing my way, ghosts overflowing from Touji's body with every move.

He slashed at me once more, and I heard the chilling cries of the ghosts trapped within his blade.

I blocked with Oversword.

Damn! I'm getting pushed back! He's going to overpower me!

While our swords were still locked, I switched out Quick Attack for War Cry and immediately activated it along with the spell Powered.

War Cry was a Warrior skill that focused the enemy's aggro on the user and increased their offensive abilities. Its duration was rather short, but so was its cooldown, which made it fairly easy to use during fights.

I could now stand up to Emperor Sutoku without getting pushed back too badly.

As it turned out, Sutoku wasn't that skilled with a sword. In fact, Touji was a much better swordsman.

Suddenly, a red spot appeared in my vision. Heightened Senses was warning me that something was coming from above.

I jumped back just in time to dodge steel slabs and poles—some of the debris that'd been sent flying were now falling back on the deck.

"I'm impressed. You're quick on your feet," Sutoku commented.

It wasn't a coincidence! No! That means...!

As I feared, more rubble started raining down on us both.

The storm made the movements of the rubbles unpredictable as they came crashing down on the deck. The ship was creaking dangerously, and it sounded like it might fall apart at any moment.

CREAAAAAAAAAK!

The gigantic circular deck broke into pieces, just like a dry cracker.

“You shall sleep with the fishes for all eternity!” snarled Sutoku.

“I don’t think so!” I exclaimed, activating Wing.

I wouldn’t fall into the sea, but now that I was hovering over the deck, the pressure of the wind was much harder to withstand. Since it was taking all my strength to hold fast against the gales, I couldn’t fly very fast. Dodging the debris that was still raining down upon us was far from easy.

I heard Nemea groan before he jumped between two parts of the deck. He was getting closer to Emperor Sutoku.

“Iron-Cutting Kick!”

His leg shone as he kicked Sutoku so fast that he seemed to be cutting through the wind.

“Impudent beast!” the emperor snorted, stopping his blow with his free arm. His armor cracked under the impact of the kick and blood ran down his arm. His wound healed almost instantly, though.

The emperor’s regenerative abilities are insane.

“Still, you do have remarkable strength,” Sutoku said calmly. “Die and serve me!”

Sutoku then unleashed a bolt of black lightning. It hit Nemea directly in the chest, sending him flying back as smoke filled the air.

“Argh!”

Nemea couldn’t regain his balance, and he fell between the two halves of the deck, heading straight to the raging waves.

“Nemea!” I yelled, flying away in a futile attempt to catch him.

“Where do you think you’re going? Face me!” Sutoku said, blocking my path.

Damn! I’ll never shake him off in this storm!

As Emperor Sutoku and I crossed swords, I could see Nemea disappearing into the sea from the corner of my eye. Right at that moment, a flash of silver grabbed Nemea and carried him away.

Whatever had grabbed him jumped from one piece of rubble to another before boarding the deck.

That’s...Arthur! If he’s here, then...

Emperor Sutoku leaped to the side, sensing something. “What?!”

Colona’s blade cut through the air right where his head had been mere seconds ago.

Shou was back.

How did he get back here in the middle of this storm? I guess it doesn’t matter. I can ask him later.

“My lord!”

“I’m on it! Take this!”

Shou and Colona were in sync. He followed up by throwing a card at Sutoku.

I noticed a desktop computer floating in the air behind Shou.

“Ritual Spell! Come forth, O crimson spirit of hellfire! Perform a fiery dance for your enemies and burn through their souls! Blazing Tornado!”

The card shone before falling apart into thousands of tiny particles. I lost track of them until I noticed a magic circle with a red hexagram at its center beneath Emperor Sutoku’s feet.

Red-hot flames flickered out of the magic circle, soon forming a tornado that threatened to swallow Sutoku whole.

The rainstorm did nothing to extinguish the flames. On the contrary, any droplet that touched the tornado evaporated. Smoke was rising around Sutoku as the blaze consumed him.

From what Shou had told me, Ritual Spells were incredibly powerful cards that could single-handedly turn the tide of a battle—they were his secret weapons of sorts. As for the computer that was floating behind him, it was actually a monster called Ritual Assistant—a necessary summon to play a Ritual Spell.

Is it over? Probably not...

While I was wondering whether Sutoku was dead or not, the tornado started swelling up. The wind around it was getting stronger and stronger, dissipating the blazing tornado like it was nothing more than a campfire. After a few moments, only a few sparks were left.

“How dare you?!”

While Shou hadn’t finished him off, Emperor Sutoku’s body was covered in burns.

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Shou whined. “I used my trump card, and it still didn’t work? Look at him healing himself too!”

“Surely you jest. Did you truly think you could kill me with your little sparks?” Sutoku mocked.

“Ha ha, I obviously knew it wouldn’t kill you. Must have hurt a bit though, right?” Shou shot right back, a smug grin on his face. He studied the other’s expression and seemed to rejoice in the fact that he’d managed to get a rise out of him.

A strained sound escaped Sutoku’s mouth. “Gah...”

A black blade was sticking out of his chest. I immediately recognized Jirou’s katana, Yami—one of the finest ninja swords.

Jirou had pierced Sutoku’s heart, but I had a feeling that still wouldn’t be enough to bring him down.

Sure enough, Sutoku was still standing. His face contorted in pain as he called upon his lightning once again. This time, though, he made it fall all around himself.

Jirou immediately pulled out his katana, and both he and Shou got away from

Sutoku, coming closer to me.

Emperor Sutoku rose in the sky, evading Jirou's next attack. He was now too high up for the ninja master to attack properly.

"I'm glad to see you're all right, Masaki-san," Jirou told me.

"Thanks. I still can't believe Touji was hiding something like that... I think the scroll that keeps spiraling around him is the source of the curse," I explained.

I stuck out my hand in the direction of the scroll, and my ring started glowing even brighter.

The scroll was currently fully unfurled and floating around Sutoku. Strange letters were emerging from it—perhaps the words themselves were the curse.

Anyone who touches this would get cursed on the spot.

"Jirou, do you know what that thing is?"

"Well..."

He briefed me concisely.

The Five Bloody Sutras, huh? This thing calls upon a raid boss...

In other words, our opponent wasn't just Touji anymore. It was the demon Sutoku, one of the strongest raid bosses in *Sengoku: Samurai War Chronicles*.

Why are we out here fighting a hidden boss right out of the endgame content?!

"That means..." I trailed off.

"He has weaknesses. Being called into this world may have changed him somewhat, but he's still a raid boss. Bosses can be killed," Jirou concluded.

Bosses all had patterns and weaknesses or else they'd be impossible to beat, and games would be no fun.

"We need to finish him soon. Colona, Drei, Arthur, you three will be our vanguard," Shou ordered. "This ship won't hold on for much longer in this storm..."

"Yes, my lord."

“Roger!”

“Got it!”

The three iron beasts stepped up to protect Shou. In the meantime, their master took out yet another card before throwing it into the air in front of him.

“Get out here! Field Card: Rainbow Road!”

It was my first time hearing about Field Cards. I looked intently at the card, eager to see what would come out of it—as it turns out, it was rainbows.

They stretched up almost all the way to Emperor Sutoku, merging together to form a bridge. After a few meters, they arched their way back down to sea level.

The rainbow looked very much out of place in the middle of this storm, but Colona didn’t seem to mind that. She jumped without a single moment of hesitation.

My attention had been drawn by the rainbow bridge, but I could now see the raging waves under them.

Colona was strong, but if she fell now... Well, I supposed she wouldn’t die since she was a machine, but I still didn’t think she’d manage to swim back to the surface.

Colona landed elegantly on the rainbow arch.

Shou seemed to notice the worried expression on my and Jirou’s faces, and he let out a little laugh.

“Rainbow Road is a Field Card that creates a straight path over any obstacle that blocks my way. The bridges will be stable regardless of the storm, so there’s no need to worry, guys.”

Field Cards, as their name suggested, modified the terrain. They couldn’t be affected by magic spells or items, and, as it turned out, they could apparently create floating bridges over the sea without any sort of foundation.

“Can’t you just say that kind of stuff from the get-go?!”

“You know what they say: To fool your enemies, you must first fool your

allies!”

“The enemy doesn’t care about your bridge!”

“Ha ha ha! Nevermind that! Anyway, we have somewhere to stand now, so thank me instead of whining.”

Shou wasn’t wrong. While I could fly, it would have been difficult for the others to reach the floating Emperor Sutoku without it.

However, it looked like we weren’t the only ones looking to benefit from the Field Card’s effects.

“How clever! I shall help you dye this beauteous rainbow blood red,” Sutoku said, before starting to chant a passage from the scroll that was hovering around him.

“No, you won’t!” I exclaimed.

I gathered mana in my right hand and threw a Flame Javelin at him. At the same time, Jirou flung kunai at him, and Colona started firing her Gatling gun.

Just as the projectiles were about to hit Emperor Sutoku, a gigantic hand emerged from the scroll and blocked everything in his stead.

It exploded under the impact, but, before long, the rest of an arm poked out. It was soon followed by an entire body.

“OOOOOOOOH!!!”

A gigantic ghost containing the souls of countless vengeful ghosts was coming out of the scroll.

One of its hands was badly damaged, and it did not have feet—the lower part of its body faded into nothingness—but it was still plenty threatening. It towered over us at almost ten meters tall.

Rainbow Road was only wide enough to hold roughly five adults. In comparison, the ghost was as wide as ten adult men. It didn’t even need any foothold, as it could float in the sky like Sutoku.

“Rout my enemies!” Sutoku ordered

“OOOOOOOH!!!”

The ghost brought down its gigantic fist upon us. It was only made of bones with no flesh or muscle tissue to hold them together, but it was much quicker than I expected.

Suddenly chilling creaking sounds echoed. It sounded like bones getting crushed.

There are tons of holes in its hand, I noticed.

Akiha! She must have used a machine gun!

I quickly opened my map and saw that she was around fifty meters away from us. She usually sniped enemies from further away, but the storm must have forced her to pick up a different kind of firearm and come closer. If I wasn't mistaken, machine guns didn't have a very long range.

I felt much more confident knowing that Akiha had our backs. Thanks to her stopping the ghost's hand for a moment, we all managed to get out of the way before it hit us.

"Masaki-san, please deal with Sutoku. I'll take this one," Jirou said, swinging Yami at the ghost from behind.

A jet-black flash escaped his blade and dug into the ghost's back.

"Drei, Arthur! Support Jirou!"

"Roger!"

"At once!"

Shou's iron beasts rushed to help Jirou.

Drei slammed her pile bunker into the ghost while Arthur used his claws reinforced by Fenrir's Claw to lacerate its back.

"OOOOOOOH?!!!" the ghost screamed in pain, swinging its arm at Jirou and the others.

It slammed into the deck but did not hit Jirou, Drei, or Arthur.

They were fast enough to dodge that kind of attack, and Akiha was here to back them up. Everything would be fine.

I didn't look back and ran up the rainbow arch alongside Shou and Colona.

Chapter 5

He's just like Raijin, the thunder god...

These words popped into my mind as I looked up and saw Sutoku floating in the sky. Now that I thought about it, I reckoned I'd heard somewhere that tengu had the ability to call upon wind and thunder.

According to the legend, Emperor Sutoku had become a tengu, so, rather than Raijin, he was just a tengu unleashing a storm.

I was never that interested in old tales, but you tended to pick up on this stuff naturally when you played a lot of games. Back in high school, I barely knew anything about the nine-tailed fox, let alone the other two big vengeful ghosts. I would never have thought I'd end up fighting one of them.

"How persistent! You could have had a more serene ending had you let the waves engulf you..."

"Sorry to say, but being stubborn is our one redeeming feature! People tend to die easily in this world unless they fight tooth and nail, you see."

Sutoku laughed. "Is that right? Then I suppose this world must be in much turmoil! I shall have a good time here. My world wasn't nearly as interesting."

"You won't be staying here long enough to enjoy it! We'll make sure to take you down here and now, Emperor Sutoku!" I exclaimed, activating Oversword and pointing my blade at him.

Shou imbued his sword with black thunder while Colona readied her go-to weapon, the Plasma Twinblade.

"Take me down? Ha ha ha! Do it if you can! Let us see if you can stand up to the might of the underworld!" Sutoku screamed, creating an electric field in front of him.

All the debris that contained some iron was attracted to him, and he started gathering them together.

"I won't let you!" I yelled, slashing at him with Oversword and Sonic Blade.

However, my attack only hit the rubble shielding him and did not reach Sutoku.

Parts of the deck and walls, gun barrels, and even antennas were attracted to Emperor Sutoku and joined the growing shield.

He created a whole new armor over the set he was wearing along with a long iron tail that made him look like a dragon. As for the barrels, he arranged them on his left arm.

The tail seemed to move according to his will, and he slammed it against the deck violently. Metallic clangs echoed around us as more debris flew around, concealing Sutoku.

When he finally emerged again, he looked more imposing than ever. His thick, new armor—which he'd shaped like that of Traditional Japanese samurai—made him look taller and larger, and the pair of horns decorating his helmet added to the ominous atmosphere he exuded.

He looked somewhat like a black Japanese dragon. I was a bit puzzled by the makeover, but it was clear that it would be even harder to defeat him now.

Regular attacks probably wouldn't work, but thankfully, we weren't regular players. We'd get him eventually, even if we had to innovate and figure out new strategies as we went.

"Return to dust!" Sutoku roared, slashing at us horizontally with his blade shrouded in electricity.

Colona picked up Shou and jumped onto another part of the rainbow bridge while I used Wing to dodge.

I used my regular combo, Oversword and Sonic Blade, to retaliate.

"These weak attacks won't work on me!" Sutoku sneered.

My slashes only made small dents in Sutoku's armor.

Yeah, I thought so. His defense is too high. I won't be dealing any damage with hits like these.

On the other hand, Emperor Sutoku's attacks were fierce and destructive. Not even Colona could get close to him.

“Go! Bread Beetle!” Shou chanted, summoning a new insect-type iron beast.

It started flapping its wings at high speed and flew straight at Emperor Sutoku like a bullet.

A loud clanking sound rang out as the iron beast collided with Sutoku’s armor. It succeeded in piercing a hole in the armor, but the impact made it so dizzy that it drifted in the air for a while, unable to fly back to Shou.

Sutoku did not give it the time to recover and fried it to a crisp with his thunder.

“Shit! How is his armor so hard?!”

“Do something about it instead of complaining, my lord.”

Colona was approaching, ready to strike whenever she noticed an opportunity, before moving back to avoid getting hit. Sadly, most of her attempts were blocked by Sutoku’s tail or by his blade. The few times she’d managed to touch him, he’d recovered almost instantly, and she had yet to deal any lasting damage.

Even when she moved back, Sutoku never stopped attacking her using lightning bolts or the gun barrels stuck to his left arm. The eerie shells he shot had been taken over by malicious ghosts ready to latch onto Colona the moment they met their target.

The only one who could keep Sutoku in check was me. Thanks to my Invincibility, neither the lightning nor the curses were a threat to me.

Both he and I could heal ourselves, so if we kept this up, the fight would turn into a war of attrition. There was one issue, though.—I may very well lose it. I was only human, and I would eventually get tired. Sutoku wouldn’t.

Isn’t there anything I can do? Wait...

A question suddenly crossed my mind.

Why had he done all of this to increase his defense? His regenerative abilities were powerful enough that he could heal himself almost instantly. There was no need for him to focus on defense. Attacking with everything he had would be much faster.

Why had he gone through the trouble of building himself a brand new set of armor?

There was only one answer... *Something* was threatening enough. Something or someone here *could* hurt him.

But what? He hadn't bothered doing that against Nemea and me. He'd suddenly changed the way he fought...after Shou summoned his Blazing Tornado!

I exchanged Sonic Blade and Drill Banger and used the buff Magic Sword: Blaze to add a fire element to my weapon to test the theory.

It was a little hard to make out in this storm, but Emperor Sutoku's smile dropped.

I used Overtachi and Drill Banger at the same time, and a bright red blaze surrounded my sword, the flames undulating over the silver blade.

I added Swift Wind to the mix and rushed toward Sutoku.

He did not react fast enough to my sudden attack and couldn't dodge. He swung his blade, trying to block me with the lightning aura it emitted, but that was far from enough.

When using Drill Banger and Overtachi, my raw slashing offensive power fell, but in return, my thrusts were much more powerful.

While these two skills worked well together, I hadn't managed to merge them into a brand-new composite skill using Skill Fusion. Overtachi was already a composite skill, and combining it further seemed to be impossible.

It wasn't that much of an issue, though. Even if I couldn't obtain a new skill, I could still use them together.

I easily pierced through Sutoku's lightning, and my sword—still surrounded by undulating flames—dug into his left arm.

The gun barrels stuck to his arm along with his arm itself melted as I continued to push forward. Eventually, it fell right off.

A dark mist oozed out of the gaping wound.

“AAAAAARGH!!!” Emperor Sutoku screamed in pain, bringing his right hand to hold his torn stump.

His arm was regenerating itself...but much slower than before!

I used Whisper to let Shou know about my findings.

<Shou! He’s weak against fire! Your earlier attack did work!>

<I see. Thanks for the tip, I’ll make good use of it! I have an ace up my sleeve.>

We finally had something to work with.

I switched out Swift Wind for Energy Conversion and Sneak Boost (High) for one other particular skill. Now that I was going for a quick kill, these were my best options.

I started gathering mana in my left hand, but Emperor Sutoku noticed and fell lightning bolts upon me.

One hit me head-on, and while the light did blind me for a moment, it didn’t do any damage, of course. I had felt it touch me, but thanks to Invincibility, that was about it. If anything, I was thankful for the bright light. It hid me until I was ready to unleash my next move.

I would have been in a pickle if he’d tried to send me flying with a strong gust of wind instead.

The spell I planned to use was one of the Ancient Spells, a type of particularly powerful magic in *Britalia Online*.

It wasn’t as ridiculously overpowered as Exharadio, the spell I’d used on Iiro during our fight in the imperial capital, but it was still one of the most powerful spells a player could use solo. It had downsides, naturally. The casting time was pretty long, the MP cost was heavy, and the cooldown was extremely long.

These limitations didn’t really apply to magic spells in this world, but I still needed quite some time to channel enough mana.

Thankfully, I had a way to shorten that time. I didn’t think anyone else could copy this method, but, as someone who had access to every skill in the book, I had my ways. The key was the skill I’d added to my list earlier: Rapid Magic Burst.

Rapid Magic Burst allowed its user to reduce the casting time of a spell drastically for thirty seconds.

I gathered mana into my hands much faster than ever before.

The spell I was about to use couldn't be learned by the class that used Rapid Magic Burst. It was the most destructive fire spell in Britalia Online, Gehenna Flame.

A pure white flame started emerging from my left hand. Before long, my entire hand was burning bright red—er, white, I mean.

"Consume everything! Gehenna Flame!"

The inferno I unleashed upon Emperor Sutoku burned through the sparks of electricity.

Urgh... I ended up using over half of my MP on that spell... Ancient Spells sure are costly. It's even worse than Water Dragon Invocation.

Sutoku roared, creating a lightning tornado and sending it forward to halt my spell's path.

The impact was tremendous as his tornado and my Gehenna Fire collided with one another, neither gaining the upper hand.

Meanwhile, Rainbow Road started cracking. The shock was too great.

Wait! Did he really stop that? Is he for real?!

Strong raid bosses were really something else... I wasn't about to give up, though. It was time to push through.

I activated Energy Conversion and sacrificed a part of my HP to recover some of my MP.

The fatigue was hard to bear, but I immediately unleashed another Gehenna Fire. Rapid Magic Burst was pretty made to allow for rapid-fire—that was where its name came from—and it had no cooldown whatsoever.

If the spell I was using wasn't that costly, I could have fired rounds upon rounds, just like a machine gun.

Even with Energy Conversion, my MP almost hit rock bottom. Staying upright

was starting to be a lot of effort.

My second Gehenna Flame pushed into the first one, merging with it and overpowering Sutoku's tornado in a split second.

"NOOOO! I won't be defeated! Not again! I cannot lose!"

The white flames continued their path, engulfing Sutoku and drowning his surroundings in light.

It all looked somewhat ethereal, and it seemed to me that the flames were cleansing Sutoku's sins.

In the Bible, the flames of Gehenna were said to be just like those of hell, burning the sinners. They brought upon them a second death—the death of the soul itself.

The souls of the damned wouldn't be destroyed, though. They'd be purified by the flames of Gehenna and enter the wheel of reincarnation again.

The ghosts that were gathered around Emperor Sutoku burned alongside him. They were disappearing one after the other. Still, there were too many of them for my flames to consume. When the inferno finally dissipated, Emperor Sutoku's charred body emerged.

He raised his head and glared at me, eyes full of hatred—he was still alive.

Are you kidding me? He survived that?!

He was already busy absorbing the ghosts around him to regenerate himself.

I had almost no MP left, and I could barely move anymore. I had almost managed to get him...but it hadn't been enough. I hadn't been strong enough to deal the finishing blow...

However...

"I bought you enough time, right, Shou?" I asked the man behind me without even looking back.

Shou had said he had an ace left up his sleeve.

From what I'd seen up until now, the biggest advantage of Shou's fighting style was that he could use most of his cards without wasting any time casting.

Weapons, iron beasts, and even skill and magic cards such as Adamas Shield or Tempest of the Rebellion could be used with no delay.

However, there was one specific category of cards that required some time to summon.

This included cards such as Buster Megalo Chimera—the iron beast I'd faced when Shou and I first met—Silver Wolf, Arthur, or Cthulhu, one of the Great Old Ones that Shou had summoned in the empire. Pawson the detective dog also belonged to this category. Pawson wasn't a very good fighter, but his unmatched investigative abilities justified the cost.

I had only seen a handful of these special cards up until now, but I knew just how effective they were.

It doesn't matter if I can't take down Sutoku on my own. I'm not alone. I have friends I can rely on.

I'll leave the rest to you, Shou. You're the one who brought this issue to me in the first place, so you end it now!

"Yeah, I'm all ready to go, Masaki," he answered. "Let's finish this, Colona!"

"Yes, my lord."

Shou had set six cards around him, arranged to form a hexagram. Above his head was a magic circle just as large as the one I'd seen back when Shou had summoned Cthulhu. However, its design was much more intricate this time. It looked like several magic circles with different patterns had been superimposed.

I could feel ridiculous quantities of mana in the air—several times as much as what was needed to use Gehenna Flame.

I can see why he called this an ace.

"Come forth! O god of the sun, may your light shine upon all of creation! Fulfill your oath and grant my wish. Consume the lord of wickedness with your flames of judgment! Ritual Spell: Lugh's Seal! Colona, here I go!"

Shou threw a card at Colona. It changed shape in the air, becoming a small ball of light, and was quickly absorbed by Colona's body.

Her eyes shone and she opened her two large mechanical wings.

I'd seen her wings in the past, but they looked different this time. They were covered in a dazzling light.

"Lugh's Seal has been absorbed. Machina System...full drive. Abyss Program...launched. Magic Reactor's limiter...lifted. Magic Energy...over critical point. Magic Energy...300%. Activating Wings of Light. Target locked. Margin of error...under 0.001 millimeters. My lord, I'm awaiting your command."

"Perfect. Well then, I wonder if our friend over there will recover as easily after this one. I don't think absorbing a few ghosts is gonna cut it, what do you think?" he taunted Sutoku with a cruel smile.

For the first time ever since the start of this fight, Emperor Sutoku looked truly frightened. "No! Don't! I cannot die again!"

"The dead have no business hanging out in this world! And don't worry, you won't be dying 'again.' You've been dead this entire time, haven't you? Have a nice trip home, bye-bye! Colona, Brionag Areadbhair!"

"Brionag Areadbhair...Fire," Colona said, releasing a spear of light from her outstretched hands.

It flew toward Sutoku, scattering everything in its passage and creating a vortex. It shone brightly enough to illuminate our surroundings in spite of the storm. It was like the sun had started shining above the ship again.

"NOOOOOOOO!!!"

Sutoku's resistance was futile. Neither his ghosts nor his wind and thunder could do anything to stop Colona's attack. Everything was swallowed up by the powerful light. Before long, Sutoku himself disappeared in the dazzling vortex.

"AAAAAAAAAAAH!!! NO! STOP! I... I JUST WANTED TO—"

"You just wanted to go back to your home, right, retired emperor Sutoku," Jirou said softly.

Jirou seemed to be in pretty bad shape. The mask he'd been wearing was completely torn, exposing his face.

They must have successfully defeated that ghost.

I checked my map, and thankfully, all of my allies still appeared on it. *I'm so glad they're all fine.*

"Indeed... I... I...only wanted to see the capital...once more."

"I understand, emperor. It's time for you to go back. I'm sure your children are just as eager as you to return," Jirou continued.

"My...children?"

What?

I strained my eyes and noticed a few souls that still remained next to Sutoku. They hadn't been purged by my flames or by Colona's light. These souls were so small that I hadn't spotted them in the middle of all the larger vengeful ghosts, but now that most of them had been purged, I could see them.

"Please remember. You gained something on that isolated island... Your last days weren't hopeless. You must have felt something other than hatred, back then."

"You're...right... I remember now... My children...never left my side..."

Sutoku seemed to be lost in thought, reminiscing about his life. He held his head with both hands and stopped resisting altogether.

Jirou seemed strangely knowledgeable about the emperor's personal life.

"Jirou, do you know a lot about Emperor Sutoku?"

"I do. Demon Sutoku only appeared at the end of a long quest that involved a lot of back and forth and taught players about him. He was exiled from the capital and forced to settle on a small island. He married there and fathered several children. It's said that Sutoku had an amiable personality, and his children loved him dearly."

"How did he end up...like *that* then?" I asked.

"That would be the fault of his enemies in the capital. Bad luck certainly played a part in it too, but several tragedies befell the country including plagues and natural calamities. Those close to him also passed away. At that point, the big shots of the capital decided they needed someone to blame. They pretended everything was Emperor Sutoku's fault," Jirou explained.

“He’s...right... I...hadn’t done anything wrong. And yet...they blamed me!” Sutoku said.

“I know you’re innocent, retired emperor,” Jirou stated. “And so do your children. They still believe in you—that’s why they stayed by your side.”

“I see... They did...”

Ever since he took over Touji’s body, Sutoku’s face had been distorted, almost like that of a demon, but now, his expression had relaxed into something much more human. He looked at peace. As the light continued to cleanse him, his hands and feet started to disappear. Sutoku did nothing to fight it.

“You will return to the heavens with your children. Your soul needs to follow its path. It’s a long way ahead, but I’m sure you won’t be lonely with your dear children accompanying you.”

Sutoku struggled to speak. “In...deed... I shall...go back...home...to the heavens...alongside my...children. I feel so...warm.”

He was basking in the light, a serene smile on his lips...until suddenly, his steel tail, which had yet to disappear, shook violently.

“DON’T FUCK WITH ME! WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO DISAPPEAR WITHOUT DESTROYING MY ENEMIES, SHITTY EMPEROR?!”

That voice...Touji?! He was still conscious?!

“IF YOU WON’T DO IT, I WILL! HAND OVER YOUR STRENGTH!!!” Touji roared, freeing himself from the vortex of light, his katana in hand.

Touji’s body had disappeared in the light along with Sutoku’s soul. All that was left was yet another ghost—one that had been created by Touji’s strong resentment.

My guess was that Touji’s consciousness had managed to resurface after Sutoku’s will started getting weaker.

His eyes were bloodshot, and he dashed toward Colona and Shou while screaming at the top of his lungs. “IF YOU WON’T BE MINE, YOU CAN DIE ALONGSIDE YOUR MASTER! DROP DEAD!!!”

Touji gathered the few remaining ghosts into his blade and flew at Shou.

The card Shou had just used was too powerful, and both he and Colona were suffering the repercussions. Sparks were flying out of Colona's body, while Shou struggled to stay upright.

Damn, Touji sure can't read the room. How is my MP looking? Hm... I could manage one more attack.

I'd had some time to recover, and I forced my body to move, grasping my sword tightly.

"*You* drop dead! Overtachi!"

I stepped firmly upon the rainbow bridge, putting weight on the cracks, and a few moments later, I was close enough to engage Touji.

Two people had stepped on the bridge at the same time—Jirou and I.

The ninja was as quiet and discreet as always, but when I looked into his eyes, I noticed he was truly angry. I'd never seen him look so cold. I was thankful to have him on my side.

A large aura was covering Seven Arthur, and I used every last bit of strength I had to swing it at Touji.

Jirou started accelerating at the same time. He was so fast that all I could see was a blur.

A second later, he reappeared behind Touji. His positioning was perfect. From where he stood, he could attack Touji without getting hit by my gigantic sword.

"Instant End!"

My blade of light and Jirou's dark katana dug into Touji's flesh at the same time.



“UUUUUURGH! IMPOSSIBLE! HOW COULD I LOSE?!”

“The dead don’t speak. That’s enough,” Jirou said, swinging his katana with pinpoint accuracy once more.

Touji’s ghostly body came apart under Jirou’s blade before vanishing entirely.

I couldn’t fathom what could have driven Touji to such madness. I didn’t know him before this incident, but from what Jirou had told me, he used to be a decent person that helped out others whenever he could. Maybe his powers as an otherworlder had gone to his head. Or perhaps the country that had summoned him had somehow done that to him. That country had long fallen and with Touji dead, we’d most likely never learn the truth.

I resolved to do everything in my power not to end up like him.

It’s finally over...

As soon as I started relaxing, a cracking sound echoed. I felt like I was floating for a split second before realizing...I was free-falling.

I should have expected this...

My Gehenna Flame had badly damaged the Rainbow Road. It had then withstood Colona’s Brionag Areadbhair and Sutoku’s fury.

That last Overtachi must have been the coup de grace. I’d been forced to step onto the bridge with a lot of force to get to Touji and land my attack. It made sense for it to finally collapse.

I was falling head-first toward the raging waves as I reached that conclusion.

I’d used what little MP I’d managed to recover on my last Overtachi, and now I didn’t even have enough left to use Wing. Energy Conversion’s cooldown wasn’t over yet, so that wasn’t an option either.

I was out of ideas. I’d soon fall into the dark sea, and I had no way to stop that. I would most likely sink in the blink of an eye because of my heavy armor.

I don’t wanna drown right after accomplishing our mission...

I quickly replaced two skills I didn’t need anymore with Underwater Breathing and Swimming Master.

At the very least, I should manage to find my way back swimming eventua— Wait... I can see something huge approaching on my map. That's...

I smiled. I was saved.

"MASAKIIIIII!!!" a woman's voice shouted.

Youko.

She was using Exmizer to come to my rescue. The storm did nothing to hinder them, as the large reactors on Exmizer's back pushed it forward.

She was hovering right over the sea, and the remains of the *Novgorod* were blocking her path.

"Make way! Spiraling Light Shot!" she exclaimed.

Exmizer's right hand started spinning and tore through what was left of the ship. It must have hit the fuel storage because it suddenly exploded.

The impact was tremendous and ended up blowing the storm itself away.

What about me, you ask? Well, I was blown away right along with the broken pieces of the *Novgorod*.

Invincibility shielded me from any potential damage, but the explosion looked like something straight out of a movie. It had scattered everything away.

As the smoke settled and the heavy rain finally stopped, I saw Exmizer rushing toward me. The silver giant cut through the wind and caught me right before I fell into the sea.

Youko opened the cockpit and stood up at once.

"Masaki! Are you okay?! You're not hurt, right?!"

"I'm not, but I'm out of mana, so I can't really move. Sorry for the bother, but could you carry me to the ship?"

"Of course, I can! Oh! Masaki, look!" she exclaimed, looking at the surface of the sea and pointing at something.

I followed her finger with my eyes and noticed something white poking through the waves... *Whales! They're huge!*

“They’re white vars! It’s an incredibly rare species! Why are there so many of them?!” Youko asked.

A large group of white whales breached the surface of the ocean in unison.

<Thank you for undoing the curse. We’ve regained our freedom,> all of them said at once, using Telepathy.

They spouted out water—their way of expressing their thanks, perhaps—before leaping out of the water and diving back, disappearing into the sea.

The surface of the water, which had been covered in a fog ever since we arrived, finally cleared up.

“So this place was the dwelling of the white vars... I get it now...” Youko whispered.

“Did you figure something out, Youko?” I asked.

“White vars excel in controlling mana, but they’re very gentle and tend to avoid confrontation. I’ve heard that they usually create a barrier of fog around their habitat so that other monsters can’t get close. Touji must have caught wind of that ability and used his curse to tie them down here.”

Youko’s deduction made sense. A curse that powerful could very well control monsters as well as people.

I couldn’t believe how many beings he’d hurt.

His rings were really way too overpowered...

I checked on the ring I still had in my inventory. It had been destroyed—most likely because the source of the curse was gone. I rejoiced at the thought that no more of these would ever be made again.

Since the sky was now clear, I could gaze upon a beautiful sunset. I could even see the ships of the people who’d escaped the *Novgorod*.

“Most of the noble clients managed to make their escape. Should we really just let them go like that?” Youko asked.

“It’s fine. We’ve made arrangements already,” I told her.

To be fair, Jirou had done most of the work. We weren’t the only ones

participating in today's mission.

Plenty of nobles were dying for the chance to prove themselves after we'd been the ones who stood out the most during the decisive battle against the Granfang Empire.

We'd tasked the military of Sentdrag, nobles with reliable navies, and adventurers and mercenaries who operated on the sea to catch the runaway nobles and slave merchants.

We knew from the start that we wouldn't be enough to handle all of that.

Some wanted to repay me for all I'd done for their nation, and it was also a chance for them to distinguish themselves.

As for the necessary proof to link the runaway nobles to the illegal market...we had one on Miida's ship: the magic item that had helped us get to the Phantom Blau. Anyone who had a similar item had something to do with the market. That was enough to at least detain them until a formal investigation could take place.

Jirou had already asked his men to start gathering more evidence. They were used to working from the shadows, and that made them very good at figuring out where people concealed things.

"Masaki-saaaaaan!" Akiha yelled, waving at me from atop the mast.

The slaver ship had suffered quite a lot in the midst of all this. There were holes all over, including in the mast.

Thankfully, everyone who'd come along on this mission was here. No one had lost their lives to the fighting or to the storm.

My eyes always seemed to go back to Barbarossa, but that was because he was still wearing his panda onesie.

"Let's go home, Youko."

"Yep! Let's join the others."

Youko took me back to the ship where my crew and friends were waiting for us.

May Emperor Sutoku's soul wend its path back to the capital with honor and reverence...

I hope I didn't mess up my classical Japanese grammar.

"Though a boulder may

Divide the impetuous stream,

Forward it rushes,

And before long I well know,

The swift flow again unites."

I had not read through the *Hyakunin Isshu* since studying it as a kid, but I still remembered this poem written by Emperor Sutoku.

Although his soul had been forced to manifest into this world, I prayed it would still enter the wheel of reincarnation and be allowed to return to its rightful place in our original world.

◆◇◆

A few miles off from the *Novgorod* was a very peculiar ship. It was shaped like an egg and had no sail nor a propeller, but, for some reason, it was still sailing forward slowly but steadily.

The strange egg almost seemed to be alive.

The man aboard the ship—Wataru—was watching the *Novgorod* sink through a pair of binoculars.

“Touji must be dead... They managed to defeat the infamous Emperor Sutoku and even the ship is sinking... I made the right call.”

Wataru placed his binoculars down before taking out the ring he had hidden in his pocket.

The cursed ring crumbled away in his hand, the sea breeze scattering away its remains.

“My next research topic will have to be that player. His powers ought to be analyzed thoroughly. But before that...I need to find a new place to establish my lab. The Dukedom of Miliaria or the university town of Sfenia are both decent options... No... There’s somewhere else I need to go.”

Wataru seemed to have thought of something, and he immediately sent a Whisper to someone. He chatted with them for a little while, nodding along as he spoke. After hanging up, he then went back inside the ship and let his fingers glide along a silver board to direct its path. It suddenly picked up some speed.

Wataru was satisfied. He took out a pillow from his inventory and lay down.

“All set. Time for a nap, then.

He wasn’t the least bit shaken after the events of the day and easily fell asleep without a care in the world.

He was currently sailing through a part of the ocean filled with vicious monsters, but none of them attempted to attack the egg-shaped ship. They paid it absolutely no mind

Wataru’s ship was fully automatic and had been created using an alchemy technique called Medusa’s Ship. He’d largely crafted it from the bodies of a specific species of jellyfish and was meant to be used for emergencies.

Monsters rarely went after jellyfish. They were not very nutritional and some were even poisonous, so monsters tended to leave them alone. Since the ship looked just like one from below—at least in their eyes—it was receiving the same treatment.

That wasn't to say the ship was defenseless, though. The tentacles attached to it were venomous and would repel any monster that dared to approach.

Wataru had been able to craft such an intricate ship by using alchemy, a skill he'd brought over from his many years playing *Atelier of the Gods Online*.

Atelier of the Gods Online was set in a city made up of impressive hanging gardens. Players had to use alchemy to craft weapons, armor, and items before fighting one another.

Wataru was able to make potent ointments and potions, levitating ropes, and exploding chestnuts. He could transmute lead into gold or even craft the philosopher's stone if he ever felt like it.

He had even made the pillow on which his head was currently resting. He had used the wool of sleepy sheep, and the resulting item allowed the user to recover from exhaustion much faster while also giving their mind the rest it needed.

Wataru was sleeping soundly with his head nestled against his favorite pillow when someone jolted him awake.

It was a very small person—a fairy, in fact. Such fairies were called "brownies" and accompanied the players in *Atelier of the Gods Online* to help them in various ways.

Wataru stretched. It looked like he'd reached his destination: an uninhabited island covered by a luxurious forest.

Wataru jumped off the ship and started walking with no hesitation. The group of brownies hovering around him followed him happily.

Wataru had reached the island in the middle of the night. Walking straight into a dense forest willy-nilly would normally be considered suicide, but the man didn't seem to care.

A monster pounced on him in an attempt to turn him into its late-night snack, but he barely glanced its way. He simply took out his staff.

“Get lost.”

A magic bullet came flying out of his staff, destroying the monster.

While Wataru had the air of a scholar and seemed frail, he was also an otherworlder—a former top player.

He easily took care of the monsters standing in his way and finally reached his goal: a gigantic tree. It seemed to be several centuries old.

Wataru stood still, looking at the tree, until a part of its base started to distort. The inside was hollow, but Wataru couldn’t see anything inside the gaping hole.

“I’ll take that as an invitation,” he said, jumping in. His little friends followed him, brimming with curiosity.

Inside the cavity was a very modern-looking pathway. Wataru walked a few steps before being greeted by an individual wearing a hooded cloak—No Face, the mastermind behind the events in the imperial capital.

“Welcome to Pavaria. I would never have expected you to contact us first, Wataru. What prompted this sudden change of heart?” they asked.

“Stop pretending to be so clueless. I’m sure you saw everything.”

No Face laughed. “Indeed. As a matter of fact, we were about to reach out to you. I knew you’d be wise enough to flee Touji’s mess.”

“Thanks for the compliment, but to be fully honest here, I’m just a wimp. I’m not into risking my life for no reason.”

“True cowards do not admit it so readily,” No Face said, shaking their head. “What happened today was truly unfortunate. What a waste... A terrible, terrible waste.”

Their words ticked Wataru off.

What’s unfortunate? What happened to Touji or the fact that the Five Bloody Sutras were destroyed? I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore... They’re both lost

forever, now.

The original one, at the very least... Wataru thought, glancing at the documents he'd salvaged from his laboratory. Among them was a copy of the contents of the Five Bloody Sutras.

"Anyway, I sure hope what you told me is true," Wataru said.

"Of course it is. We've been planning this from the start, but we didn't have anyone qualified enough to handle this project up until now. With you here, everything should go smoothly."

"I see. Well, you can leave it to me. I kind of wish I had gotten in contact with you sooner now that I know that," Wataru said, a smile on his face.

He looked like a kid on Christmas morning as he followed No Face excitedly. His enthusiasm rubbed off on the brownies, and they followed them, skipping around.

I'm not Touji. I won't die an insignificant death. I'll live on, no matter what! I used to be limited by ethics and the opinions of others, but nothing can stand in my way in this world!

"I expect a lot from you," No Face said, their warped smile hidden in the shadow cast by their hood.

On that day, one selfish man perished for the sake of his desires while another stepped into a web of intrigue for the very same reason.

Chapter 6

“Finally done! Phew... I’m so tired.”

I put down my quill and stretched.

Paperwork was always a tiring ordeal. I didn’t need glasses anymore, which made it somewhat easier, but staring at papers for hours still put a strain on my eyes.

“Good job, Masaki. How about taking some time to rest if you’re done?”

“I’ll take you up on that,” I said, putting the documents I’d been working on in an envelope and sealing it with wax.

The seal I’d stamped it closed with represented a bat wing with two swords crossed in front of it. It was the seal of the Bernstein family and had been passed down through the generations. I could have decided on an entirely new design after receiving this territory, but so as to not erase the Bernstein legacy, I decided to use their emblem for the Toudou family.

I plopped down on the sofa and sipped at the hot cup of coffee Adel had poured me. It had been made from very expensive beans and was a nice change of pace from the kind I usually drank.

I also snacked on a few biscuits. *Wow! They’re good! It must be thanks to the tea leaves!*

“You really went through a lot this time,” Adel commented.

“You could say that...” I answered.

I continued to munch on the biscuits while thinking back to the events a few weeks ago.

After destroying the Phantom Blau and its illegal slave market, we didn’t go back to Atami immediately. We first made a stop in Schutzwald.

A lot of people went through Schutzwald on a daily basis, and the harbor there was large enough for dozens of ships to dock at once. Since it was a

central hub, roads going in all directions extended from the city, and we figured the people we rescued would have an easier time getting home from there rather than from Atami.

Count Alan had assembled a great number of knights to greet us on the pier. Doctors were also waiting with them, ready to handle any medical emergencies.

Our crew docked slowly before lowering the gangway.

I then opened a door to my Room while we were still inside the boat.

Count Alan already knew about my ability, but I didn't want all the other knights to learn about it.

I'd told the women who had been hiding inside my Room that it was a type of magic item and had left it at that. Otherworlders tended to own peculiar magic items, so they had accepted my explanation at face value.

I had even left a few strange items inside my Room to convince them further if needed such as a music box—it played a BGM from *Britalia Online*—a sea glass—a large window that showed the ocean on the other side—and my beloved coffee maker. They usually surprised the people from this world, but they wouldn't give away too much about me.

As long as I pretended that all of these strange items were magical, it was easy enough to make people believe the Room itself was too.

Queen Gardenia had seen me create the door from nothing with her own two eyes, so I couldn't trick her, but she'd promised me she'd keep it a secret.

The people we'd rescued disembarked one by one and were led to a treatment facility in carriages. They were ecstatic to finally be free and most of them were smiling brightly as they left. For better or for worse, the women who'd been part of Touji's "collection" had almost no recollection of what had happened.

After we spoke to the doctors, they explained that their lapse in memory was most likely a side effect of petrification. Things were probably better off this way. At the very least, they wouldn't suffer the trauma of that time. We then made arrangements for the former slaves to be returned to their countries.

The impact of the Phantom Blau's fall ended up being much greater than I'd expected.

First of all, the nobles who had participated in the auction were severely punished. Slavery was completely forbidden in some countries and regulated in others. Either way, resorting to illegal markets was a grave offense.

In countries where slaves were regulated, only criminals were usually turned into slaves.

It was a way of punishing them. These people would work in harsh conditions until their sentence was completed in full. The type of work they were made to do depended on the gravity of their crimes. The worst offenders were often forced to enlist in the army where they'd fight on the front line during wars or serve in raids to protect the borders from monsters. They had to put their life on the line to make up for their crimes.

While these sentences were much shorter than prison sentences, barely any of them came out of this program alive. In other words, it was pretty much the death penalty. Still, every now and again, you'd see a few survivors, giving hope to the others and motivating them to fight with everything they had.

Occasionally, someone would make an attempt at freedom, but a curse prevented them from going too far. If they did, they'd die on the spot. I'd heard that in recent years, this curse had been replaced by slave collars. They forced them to obey without risking killing them.

Criminals who'd committed less reprehensible offenses were often assigned to mines, public construction worksites, or wasteland reclamation work. They'd receive a small monetary compensation for their work. It was meant to give them options after they were released. People with no money at all would have no choice but to turn to crime again immediately. That money gave them time to figure out their next step.

The nobles proven to have bought illegal slaves would either be stripped of their rights as nobles and forced to become slaves themselves or would be strapped with a fine of over ten million flans. The law was strict in that regard.

Naturally, forking out such a large sum was virtually impossible, and the nobles implicated in the Phantom Blau case lost lose their status and became

slaves. Their houses also lost their privileges, falling to ruin because of the actions of a few bad apples.

Among their family members, a few refused to accept this and tried to start uprisings, but Jirou wasn't about to let them gather troops. He worked with Hayato to nip their insurrection in the bud, suppressing them swiftly and efficiently. I was amazed by the speed at which they resolved everything.

Meanwhile, the assets of the implicated nobles and merchants were confiscated, and they were sent off to the northern fortress—a stronghold dedicated to fending off ferocious monsters.

The northern fortress was surrounded by swarms of monsters such as manticores, yetis, and even dragons that could only be defeated by entire platoons fighting together. Only strong fighters would survive there. I'd heard that Hayato visited from time to time to lend a hand to the struggling troops. It was good training for him, apparently.

Mountain bandits, pirates, and adventurers who were used to fighting for their lives could usually hold their own up there, but noblemen and merchants who had barely ever held a sword would most likely die off in less than a month. As a result, plenty of lands would become masterless, once again.

I felt a little sorry for Prince Leon, who was now up to his neck in work, but that was part of the job.

My comrades and I had accomplished two big things with this mission: first, we put an end to an illegal slave market, and second, we freed dozens of slaves.

We hadn't been asked to do so by any specific government, so there'd be no real reward for getting rid of the Phantom Blau. Taking care of threats to my territory was my job as a lord anyway. On the other hand, we'd saved members of noble and royal families, and they were eager to reward us for bringing their wives or daughters back to them.

These families mainly sent money, including a portion of the assets seized from the criminals in their respective countries. I was also offered the exclusive rights to an iron mine. The necessary equipment was prepared, and it was fully manned, so I wouldn't have much to do except receive a regular supply of top-quality iron. As for the miners, their daily lives wouldn't change at all. They'd

simply work for a different boss now.

This meant I now had a detached territory. I decided I'd swing by several times a year to check on the miner's working conditions and make sure there were no problems that needed addressing.

If I appeared to be gaining too much land and assets too easily, other noblemen might mess with my people, so I'd have to be careful not to antagonize anyone. That was also part of the reason why I'd asked others to help capture the runaway nobles. We would have had a hard time doing it all by ourselves, but I also wanted to leave some room for them to distinguish themselves. I wanted to make sure I had as few enemies as possible, so this opportunity had been a godsend. Thanks to that, most of them seemed to like me well enough. *Everything worked out in the end.*

Speaking of people liking me, I'd received a letter from the theater troupe saying that the Azure Hero saga was going to continue with a fourth play.

The first one focused on my meeting with Adel and my fight against the Leviathan. The second was about my time in the Sentdrag Kingdom and the battle of Lurf. And the most recent one recounted the events in the imperial capital of the Granfang Empire. According to their letter, the upcoming play would be about the Phantom Blau.

Wait, that's way too quick!

I was starting to wonder if someone close to me was feeding them information! The script was already written, it seemed.

I... I just finished writing my report. How did they write a script before that?!

Someone had to be talking to them. *I'll try to find them when I have some time on my hands.*

The countries of some of the women we'd rescued on Touji's ship had already been destroyed during the war. This meant that even though they used to be aristocrats, they had nowhere to go back to.

They'd received an outstanding education thanks to their privileged upbringing. They could read, write, and calculate with ease, so I invited some of

them to come work for me. With the addition of the mine, there was even more to do in my territory, so I hoped to hire more employees and their being educated was a huge plus. Naturally, they wouldn't enjoy the same luxuries as when they were noblewomen, but living in a pleasant city with hot springs sounded attractive enough, and most of them agreed readily.

I was a bit surprised at how happy they'd seemed when I offered them the position, but I later learned that women usually weren't hired as officials. As far as I was concerned, I didn't see the point in refusing to hire qualified women just because of their gender. It was ridiculous.

There were three people I wasn't sure how to treat, though: the queen, princess, and noble lady that Touji had first kidnapped. Touji had taken over their country back then, and after he gave it to the Granfang Empire, the rest of the royal family had been executed.

I've been racking my brain for days, but I guess it's not my job to decide what to do with them.

In the end, I let King Laurent deal with this. I trusted that he would treat them well and figure out the best course of action. I learned a few days later that the queen had become a royal tutor in another land thanks to her experience as a ruler, while the princess married an influential aristocrat. As for the daughter of the knight commander, she'd sworn never to lose to a bastard like Touji ever again and had decided to become an adventurer. The queen and princess had chosen paths befitting their station, but it seemed like the daughter of the knight commander had decided to embark on a difficult one.

It must be in her blood, I thought.

There wasn't much I could do besides wish her luck.

I brought another black tea-flavored biscuit to my mouth. Adel and I were sitting together quietly when we heard a knock on the door.

I said they could come in, and a young girl with animal ears in a maid dress—Ferran Aural Fermina—entered. She was the very shaman Nemea had tried so hard to protect. As for the reason why she was wearing a maid outfit, well...it

was because both she and Nemea were currently staying at my mansion.

Fen was the shaman of some religious group, and Nemea was a battle priest tasked with her protection. They hadn't told me anything about their cult, and I had decided not to pry. Ever since becoming the shaman, Fen had been forced to live a very strict life, and she wasn't allowed to go out either. Nemea had always watched over her, and he'd felt so sorry for her that he'd secretly wished he could show her the outside world.

As fate would have it, his wish had been answered in a twisted way. Their group had been suddenly attacked by mysterious people, and he'd fled with Fen all the way to Rand...only to be captured by Touji's men.

The village where Fen, Nemea, and the rest of their group used to live had been entirely destroyed, and since they still had no idea who had attacked them or why, they couldn't risk going back to Arth.

Nemea could have made a new life for himself as an adventurer anywhere, but Fen had been sheltered all her life. He wanted to let her experience the world without exposing her to danger and had come to me to ask if they could stay in Atami.

Nemea had been a lot of help during our mission on the Phantom Blau and I completely understood his feeling. Fen was still young, she deserved a shot at a normal life. Therefore, Nemea started working with the Adventurer Guild, and we enrolled Fen in a nearby school. She was also learning how to work as a maid at my mansion.

She didn't really need to work but she'd insisted so much that I'd hired her as a maid in training. As the shaman, Fen had always been taken care of, but she was now taking care of people. She wasn't used to it, but she was working hard every day. She seemed to have made friends at school already, and on her days off, she went out to explore Atami.

My work here had truly been worth it. Atami had become a safe place where children could play and have fun.

"Excuse me, Big Brother... They said to tell you that...the preparations are complete."

Although Fen was learning how to clean and do laundry, she was also tasked with passing on messages between Jimmy, Ludrig, and myself. She was a bit clumsy, but she had a good memory. Jimmy and Ludrig had only good things to say about her.

Ludrig was a little forgetful so Fen sometimes stepped in to help him out. *He could just write memos regularly like Jimmy does, though.*

You might be wondering why she was still calling me “Big Brother” even though she now worked for me, but that was what felt most comfortable to the both of us. I didn’t dislike being called “Master” from time to time, but hearing it from a kid felt kind of wrong.

“Thank you, Fen. Well, then, shall we, Adel?”

“Yes, let’s go. Fen, would you like to come too?”

“I-Is it okay...for me to be there?”

“Of course it is. I’m sure you want to say goodbye too,” Adel reassured her.

“Y-Yes,” Fen said, nodding timidly.

Adel and I stood up and each took Fen’s hand before leaving the room to head to the harbor.

There, mountains of luggage were being loaded onto a large ship.

The ship was one of the frigates seized from the empire after the end of the war. It was a top notch ship, from its equipment, to its capacity, and to its armaments and firepower. It had also successfully traveled very far in the past —up to the Arth continent.

The crest of the empire which had once adorned several parts of the ship had been removed and replaced by the crest of the Sentdrag Kingdom.

We were all gathered in front of the ship.

“Sir Masaki, I must thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“There’s no need, it truly wasn’t much,” I said.

Queen Gardenia turned to glance at the workers working tirelessly to load all

the luggage onto the ship and nodded, a satisfied smile on her face. “Good. This shall last us through the long journey ahead.”

Queen Gardenia was sailing home today, and

Adel, Fen, Youko, Akiha, and I had come to see her off.

Jirou had already returned to the royal capital, and Tatsuma was busy patrolling. As for Haruka, she had a prior engagement that couldn’t be rescheduled and hadn’t been able to come.

The people who’d been abducted from Arth, including Queen Gardenia, hadn’t been able to go home as quickly as the others. The trip to Rungard would take about a month, and fully stocking and readying the ship for such a long journey had taken quite some time. On top of food and water, we also had to make sure there were enough medical supplies for the crew and passengers during the trip. At first, it was supposed to be getting ready for the journey in Schutzwald, but we soon realized that goods of high enough quality to please Queen Gardenia would be easier to find in my territory.

Medicine, clothes, and even foodstuff were of better quality in Atami thanks to Haruka’s overpowered agriculture skills. Here, the crew had been able to stock up on high-grade detoxification potions, motion sickness medicine, and both HP and MP potions.

They’d also acquired a large number of halite mikans—a type of citrus fruit full of vitamins that could be preserved for a long time if it was dried. They’d be of great help in fending off scurvy. We’d also prepared plenty of other vegetables and meat that were easy to preserve, such as cavern bean sprouts. They could even be grown aboard the ship in dark places, and it was perfectly all right to water them with salt water.

Haruka had really been instrumental in developing this territory. Both the medical herbs and foodstuff she produced were incredible.

Queen Gardenia herself could have stayed in Schutzwald, but she’d decided she wanted to try the hot springs. In the end, she and the rest of the beastmen waiting to go back to Arth had decided to wait in Atami until the ship was ready.

Beastmen already visited the city from time to time before, but recently, it

had become a popular tourist destination for them. Some traveled over great distances just to come to Atami. The girl with the Flydragon Axe I'd run into in front of the Adventurer Guild some time ago was a good example of that.

Now that the city had been entirely rebuilt, it was even more prosperous than before the war. The new hot spring facilities, including the saunas, sand bath, and family-friendly pool attracted countless visitors, and the surrounding businesses were booming as well. More and more were popping up.

I made sure the original atmosphere and landscape of the city were preserved when delivering approvals to new businesses.

There were more wooden structures here than before, but that also had its charms. The citizens of Atami had taken to the additions very quickly. The elderly often commented on the pleasant scent, and I'd heard that a few wealthy families had already decided to trade their old bathtubs for wooden tubs.

While they were waiting for the frigate to be ready, the beastmen we'd rescued enjoyed themselves in Atami. They bathed in the hot springs and tasted the local cuisine. Some of the beastmen decided to head to the dungeon to test their strength or joined Tatsuma during his training sessions. His training regimen was hellish, and like the men under his command, the beastmen also ended up worn out.

Another popular attraction was the brushing service offered by young male prostitutes.

These kinds of services *are popular in every world.*

In this case, they really only brushed the beastmen's fur, but I'd heard it wasn't unusual for a client to run off to the redlight district with one of the boys in tow immediately after. As long as they handled this part of their business outside of the hot spring facilities, I had absolutely no qualms about it—the choice was up to the prostitutes themselves.

Queen Gardenia had told me her favorite was the rose bath—a fragrant tub in which rose petals were scattered.

"I wish I could have enjoyed the hot springs for a while longer, but I can't

forget my station. Now that the ship is ready to sail, I must leave this lovely city behind and return to my duties," she said.

I let out a laugh. "I'm happy to hear you took a liking to Atami. I hope the next time you visit will be under better circumstances. We'd love to have you here again," I answered.

"I shall bring my family along for a vacation next time."

Queen Gardenia and I had just finished our discussion when Fen nervously appeared. She'd been hiding behind me the entire time.

As soon as Queen Gardenia saw her, her face lit up. "Fen! Are you here to see me off?"

"Y-Yes... You've looked after me...a lot, Your Majesty..."

Fen and Queen Gardenia had gotten close while they were hiding in my Room, and the echidna often took Fen to the hot springs.

Apparently, Queen Gardenia had been moved after seeing Fen working so diligently to help out the other women even though she was still so young. She now doted on her like the girl was her own daughter or granddaughter.

The queen hugged Fen tightly, and the latter relaxed in her embrace.

"Fen, are you sure you don't want to come to my country? I'll make sure you're treated like a princess," Queen Gardenia offered.

"Thank you...so much...for the offer... It makes me...really happy...but I...I've always wanted...a normal life."

"A normal life, you say... I can see how living in my castle would compromise that."

Fen didn't want to be sheltered or protected anymore. She wanted to work and make decisions on her own like an ordinary girl. Just like some nobles wished they could become commoners and be freed from their duties, Fen had always wished for freedom.

Queen Gardenia understood her feelings and did not push her.

"You just have to promise me one thing," she said. "If you ever find yourself in

need of assistance, come to me."

"Y-Yes... I promise...I'll come to you... Your Majesty, please take care...of yourself," Fen answered.

"Of course." The queen nodded, satisfied. "You stay healthy too, Fen," she added before reluctantly letting go of the girl.

Fen sheepishly bowed her head several times. She must have felt bad for rejecting Queen Gardenia's offer.

"Are you done bidding them farewell, Gardenia?" Shou said from the ship.

"Shou!"

I had no idea when he'd gotten on board. He put his hand on the gunwale and jumped down.

"I had a feeling you'd leave too, Shou," I said.

"Sure am. Who knows? Enemies might be lying in wait. And the situation in Rungard is far from stable. Gardenia needs a reliable escort, right?" he boasted.

Shou had a tendency to get carried away easily, but he wasn't wrong. His skills were top-notch.

Queen Gardenia nodded fervently. "Indeed. Shou wields extraordinary powers. He's strong enough to face an entire army by himself, so I can think of no other fit to accompany me. Especially since you are not available yourself," she told me.

Damn right. The war is finally over. I'm not about to involve myself in another country's troubles.

"See? I have no choice but to take on this mission," Shou joked. "See you around, Masaki. Thanks for helping me out."

"You've helped me just as much. Next time you're free, come and enjoy the hot springs. Hopefully, you'll be able to relax."

"Will do. We're already regulars there. That hinoki tub really hit the spot."

I wasn't surprised to hear that Shou liked Atami's hot springs—he was Japanese too, after all.

Japanese people sure love hot springs.

“I won’t be able to for a while, but I’ll make sure to drop by when I’m in the area again. Colona was dying to try new desserts here too.”

“My lord, please refrain from saying nonsense. I’m certainly not dying to try anything,” she said, shooting Shou a frosty stare.

Desserts, huh?

“If I may... We should be able to cultivate azuki beans soon, so I was thinking of making youkan. It’s not as sweet as most cakes, but it’s still very good. It has a distinctive flavor,” I said.

Colona paused for a moment. “Leaving the dessert talk aside, I had a pleasant time in the hot springs, so I will come again. I reiterate this has nothing to do with the dessert you plan to make.”

She said it twice... It’s all right, Colona, I got it.

Even though she was a cyborg, Colona was still a young girl. She liked her sweet treats.

Youkan were pretty easy to make. You just had to make red bean paste and use agar-agar to solidify it.

The seaweed needed to make agar-gar grew in the vicinity of Atami. The people here used it to make jelly, and it was fairly cheap. Even commoners could easily acquire some.

The only difficult part would be getting a stable supply of sugar—the last necessary ingredient.

Shou suddenly clapped his hands. “I almost forgot!”

“What is it?”

“Here, take this,” he said, throwing a small pouch my way.

I was surprised by its weight as I caught it. What could it be?

I opened it up and found several stones of different colors. There were translucent and appeared to be precious gems.

Adel looked into the pouch and exclaimed, “Those are magic crystals!”

Magic crystals? Like the one I had installed in the pirate ship's kitchen or the ones that light up the castle at night?

These crystals were used as catalysts when creating magic items, so they were worth a lot of money. There were only two ways to acquire some: you had to either dive into a dungeon or get lucky and find one naturally in an area with a lot of ghosts

They were so scarce that I'd heard they were sometimes worth more than solid gold.

"Shou... What's up with these?"

He laughed. "While we were on the Phantom Blau, I looked around a little to see if there was anything of value, and I happened to see these stones abandoned in a corner."

"I'm pretty sure they *weren't* abandoned."

"Come on, don't say that. We were planning to sink that ship anyway. It would have been such a waste if perfectly good magic crystals had ended up at the bottom of the ocean."

He had a point. The *Novgorod* had sunk, and no one would ever come to claim these stones anyway. I'd heard that, in this world, those who rid people of violent bandits and pirates were entitled to the spoils. What we'd done pretty much fell under that, right? Shou was right—there was no need to throw away valuable stones for no reason.

I thanked Shou and pocketed the crystals.

The ship's captain approached us. "Queen Gardenia, the ship is ready to depart. We can raise the anchor at your command."

"Is that so? Then we shall depart," she answered.

"Looks like we're leaving. I know you have a lot on your plate, Masaki, but keep at it, okay? I don't know when we'll get a chance to see each other again, but when we do, I'll gladly lend you a hand if you need me," Shou said with a wave.

He wrapped his right arm around Colona and his left around Queen Gardenia

and walked to the ship. It was an absolutely outrageous gesture considering Gardenia was a queen, but she didn't seem to mind. She was blushing and wagging her long snake tail—just like a dog. I'd learned a little bit about echidnas after meeting Queen Gardenia, and from what I could tell, they tended to express their emotions through their tail a lot. She was enjoying this.

If she's good with it, it's not my place to butt in.

"My lord, will you stop already?" Colona complained.

"Is someone a little jealous?" Shou taunted her. "That makes me very happy —OW! That hurt!"

"No one's jealous here. No one at all," Colona shot back, pulling on his ear.

They're...getting along, I guess?

Before they disappeared into the ship, Colona looked over her shoulder and bowed once as if to apologize.

She has it hard, huh?

The crew unfurled the sales, and the wind mages that had been on standby up until now started casting their magic. Wind filled the sails, and the frigate soon started sailing away.

Our hair fluttered in the breeze.

Shou and Colona had caused an uproar right after arriving in Atami, and they were now leaving with much fanfare. *That's very like them.*

We stayed on the wharf for a while, watching the ship disappear beyond the horizon and praying for their safe voyage.

Chapter 7

After Shou and Queen Gardenia's departure, we settled into a routine once again.

With Atami's restoration just about wrapped up, I was spending more and more time doing office work.

The roads had been completed, the waterway was restored, the streets were clean, and the new farms and fields were coming along nicely.

The city was improving bit by bit every day.

Nemea also seemed to be doing great as an adventurer. He'd recently faced a goblin horde all by himself and had won the respect of all his fellow adventurers. And despite her age, Fen was very hardworking, and the head maid often praised her.

The city's businesses were also booming. Bicycles, in particular, had received a stellar welcome and sold like hotcakes. Most of the buyers were adventurers. Walking to the closest dungeon took a little over a day, but with a bicycle, the journey only took half a day. It hadn't occurred to me before, but since adventurers were incredibly fit, they could easily overtake carriages with their bicycles.

If they all went around at this speed, though, it was only a matter of time before accidents occurred. I had decided to start regulating before some unfortunate soul died and had forbidden the use of bicycles within the city during the day—just like carriages.

Bicycles were also quite popular with merchants. Some of them stocked up to go sell them in other cities, but many had also bought one for their personal use. They often had to travel from town to town, and getting their hands on a new means of transportation was bound to help them a lot.

Carriages were still the best option for merchants who had to carry things around but those were expensive. Not everyone could afford to buy one. On the other hand, bicycles were affordable and adaptable. If you added a cart to

them, they could hold quite a few items—not as many as a carriage, but it was still something. Bicycles still weren't cheap per se, but they were still within most people's budgets as long as they saved for a little while. As such, lots of merchants who sold vegetables and other light merchandise bought bicycles.

Even the merchants who already owned carriages often bought a bicycle too. They usually kept it around for situations when they needed to be on the move fast—to run away, for instance. If their carriage were to be attacked by monsters or brigands and they managed to survive, they'd still have to walk back to the city. They wouldn't be able to salvage much of their remaining wares and would have to rush to the city to get a new carriage to do so. With a bicycle, they'd be much faster, so any merchant with some confidence in their leg muscles had decided to buy one.

A few people had also realized how pleasant riding a bicycle could be or were just using them for sport, which was also great.

Maybe I should organize a race sometime.

The adventurers and merchants weren't the only ones who appreciated Atami. Many nobles also enjoyed their time here.

After news that Queen Gardenia was fond of the rose bath spread, many noble ladies rushed to try it. It was constantly packed nowadays, and I'd even received requests to expand.

We couldn't afford to expand right away, because we couldn't yet meet the demand for growing roses, so we ended up having to start taking reservations. We gave rose-scented bathing powder as a freebie to the people who made a reservation to keep everyone happy. Therefore, rose-scented bathing powder became our newest product.

It was created by using the rose perfume made by Haruka as a base. It was then mixed with oil, potato starch, baking soda, and a few other ingredients. The mixture was then dried out.

Akiha used to watch educational shows a lot, and she'd been the one to come up with the recipe. The two sisters then worked together to adapt it and develop this product. I'd wondered how they managed to get their hands on baking soda, but it turned out you could easily buy some at the Alchemist Guild.

Taking apart the different components of all kinds of solids and liquids so they could be merged in different ways was the bread and butter of alchemists. *Alchemy's the closest thing to science here. I can see why the two were often presented as similar in books and such.*

We couldn't leave the trade of bicycles and rose perfume to just any merchants, so Haruka's company—she'd recently started one and had named it Kisaragi Inc.—was handling everything. Kisaragi Inc. had initially been created to sell the crops harvested in the farms Haruka had started all around Atami. There were no large companies in Atami, and you had to trade separately with every guild and retail shop, so Haruka figured that putting one together would make it easier for her products to hit the shelves.

Thankfully, she already had ties with nobles and influential merchants, which made her venture easier. As a result, Kisaragi Inc. had a monopoly on the trade of rose perfume, as well as all of the original crops produced by her sister. The other merchants couldn't regard her lightly. She had strong ties with Prince Leon and was able to produce entirely new crops.

Those with a keen sense of business had immediately understood the potential of her products and hadn't hesitated to enter contracts with her company. Naturally, some idiots still looked down on her because she was a woman. One had even offered to take her as his third wife, assuring her she should be thankful for such a great opportunity. He must have thought that she'd eagerly follow his orders and that he could hit two birds with one stone—marry a beautiful girl and take over her promising business.

Obviously, she'd declined on the spot. *Who wouldn't?* He'd flown into a rage at her refusal and ordered his guard to grab her. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Haruka would have easily managed to ward him off on her own, but that man's timing had been particularly awful.

Albert, the chancellor of the Sentdrag Kingdom, was in the next room and had heard everything. He'd come to get advice from Haruka because a disease had infected the potatoes in another region. Before the guard could reach her, Haruka'd used Sticky Trap to pin him into place. Her bodyguard—one of Tatsuma's men—had then stepped in to knock him down. As for the merchant, he'd been arrested and Albert had revoked his trading license.

I was pretty sure that even without him, the result would have been the same, though. Haruka could take care of herself. Haruka's guard worked for Tatsuma and was fairly skilled. Regular mercenaries and adventurers were no match for him. As for Haruka, she had plenty of connections. If she'd told any of her influential noble friends about what had happened, they'd have destroyed that man for her even without Albert's intervention.

Potatoes were a staple in Sentdrag, and while the disease hadn't spread far enough to cause widespread famine, it was starting to be a real issue for the farmers of that region. They soon wouldn't be able to deal with the losses. There was also no guarantee that the disease wouldn't eventually spread to other regions. Haruka had carefully instructed the chancellor. According to her, the next harvest would be safe as long as the farmers followed her advice to a T.

She'd told Albert the farmers needed to reduce—or stop altogether, if possible—the use of agricultural lime. They also had to use a large black sheet to cover the fields. They should only open up small holes for the sprouts to grow, she'd said. I recalled seeing potato fields covered just like that close to my parents' house when I was a kid.

They'd decided to use the wings of large monsters—giant bats—to replace the sheets. Their black wings were very large and sturdy and didn't let the rain through. Yet, the fact that they were incredibly light made them the perfect fit.

There was no need for adventurers to attack the dwellings of giant bats. These monsters were found in pretty much every dungeon, so there was always a large supply of wings on the market. Now that this new use had been found, there'd been a hike in price, obviously, but that was the only change.

Kisaragi Inc. was growing every day and showing great promise. One day, their president, Haruka, came to visit me.

"Masaki-saaaan," she called for me with her usual carefree tone. "Are you free tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow morning, huh? Jimmy, do I have any urgent business to attend to tomorrow?"

"No, sir. It wouldn't appear so, sir," he said meekly.

“Great! There’s someone I want you to meet,” Haruka said.

“What kind of person are they?” I asked.

“Hm... Hmmm... It’s kind of hard to explain. We’ve been talking a lot, and we became friends, but they keep telling me they need to talk to the lord.”

“They should request a meeting and come here themselves, then. That would be customary,” Jimmy stepped in.

“Well, the thing is...they can’t because of...reasons,” Haruka answered.

Jimmy didn’t seem convinced. “I see...”

Haruka seldom asked me for help. She was the type to do anything she could herself and since she was a competent person, that usually meant she handled everything from A to Z herself. She did rely on Tatsuma from time to time when it came to fighting, and she made sure to foster strong ties with everyone she met—nobles and commoners alike.

But if she’d come to me, it meant that neither Haruka nor Tatsuma could deal with this themselves.

“Well, it’s not like I’m swamped with work or anything, so I don’t see the harm. Tomorrow morning, right?”

“Yeeees! Thank you very much,” she said, a smile on her face.

Just as the first Japanese character in her name—“Haru” meaning spring—suggested, Haruka’s smile was as bright and cheerful as a beautiful spring day.

Haruka and Akiha truly were sisters. *Akiha has the same smile*, I thought. However, Akiha’s smile was more... How to put it... It just moved me more, somehow.

It sounded like that person was quite desperate to meet me. I wonder who they are and what they want to talk about.

I hope it’s nothing too troublesome...

On the following day, I hopped into a carriage with the Kisaragi sisters to see the person Haruka had mentioned. Akiha was free, so she’d decided to tag

along. We told her she should take some time for herself, but she retorted that she had nothing better to do and would rather come with us.

In this world, neither TV nor the internet—the most convenient modern inventions—existed, and there was hardly to do to kill time. Lazing around at home was nice, but without any entertainment, it got boring pretty quickly. Going out was a much better pastime.

“You don’t have anything left to do at the Carpenter Guild, Akiha?” I asked.

“No, I just finished teaching them everything I knew. They’ll be fine on their own, now.”

“I know you worked hard to finish things up as fast as you could. It was all worth it, right?” Haruka said. “Now you’re free to be with Masaki and—”

“W-Wait! Onee-chan!” Akiha exclaimed, clasping her hand over Haruka’s mouth.

With me? What does she mean?

“So... Hm... Oh, right! I didn’t want everything to get delayed again if we had to suddenly leave like last time! That’s why I taught them as fast as I could!”

Did she just say “Oh, right!”?

She had a point, though. It was important to have other people ready to keep things moving along in case of emergencies.

I guess that’s why she’s free now.

“Good thinking, Akiha. You’re such a hard worker,” I said, impressed.

“N-no way... I just did what I thought would be best...”

“Still, it must have been hard to teach your successor how to deal with everything. Thank you, Akiha.”

I meant it. You’d only realize such things after being assigned subordinates or juniors at your job for the first time, but teaching someone was a lot of work. Akiha was still a minor and yet she’d handled everything like a boss. She was amazing.

Her cheeks were still red from the praise, but she was smiling. *Yeah, her smile*

is just like Haruka's.

"D-Don't mention it... I'll keep doing my best."

"I'm glad to hear that, but don't overdo it. And don't forget I'm always here for you if you need help. I don't want you to suffer. It'll make me really sad if you do."

"Wh-What...? M-Masaki-san, you can't say things like this..." she mumbled, her entire face turning bright red. She quickly brought her hands to her face to hide her expression.

Why can't I say stuff like that? I meant every word...

After approximately ten minutes, she finally calmed down and raised her face to look at me.

"I... I got it... I'll ask you for help if I need anything."

"Perfect. No need to be shy," I concluded.

"Excuse me, Masaki-san, Akiha-chan, you do remember I'm here too, right?" Haruka said, pouting. "It's all right, though! I'm used to being kept in the dark and ignored, right, Akiha-chan?"

"Onee-chan, stop acting like a kid!" Akiha admonished her.

"I am a kid!" she retorted.

"You're too old to be a kid!" Akiha exclaimed. "Come on! Stop sulking!"

"Pffft!"

"Ha ha ha! I'm sorry Haruka. I'll bake something for you later, so cheer up," I tried.

"Then I want a tart," she stated.

"Sure. I'll make you an apple custard tart."

"For real?! Whoopee!"

"Onee-chan... Stop that!"

Haruka brightened up almost instantly while Akiha looked exasperated.

It was easy to get Haruka to cheer up by promising her food. She absolutely

loved the tarts I made using Quintessential Flavor.

I'd only made her one once before, but she'd already declared it her favorite dessert in the world.

I usually left the cooking to my chef, so I seldom had the chance to cook nowadays. This meant the treats I made had become much rarer. I now used them as rewards, and they worked wonders to motivate people. Even the maids of my estate loved them.

Our conversation had taken up most of the journey, and the rocking of the carriage finally stopped. We'd reached our destination.

"We'll be here for a little while, so wait for us at the neighboring village," I told the coachman.

"All right."

It'd be too risky for him to wait here the entire time. The monsters of this area had been eradicated, but goblins had recently reappeared—an abnormal occurrence. Tatsuma had gotten rid of the horde, but a few had escaped. They were a headache for those that lived here.

We'd sent in a request to eliminate them to the Adventurer Guild. Only inexperienced adventurers usually bothered with goblins, but since the reward we offered was over the market price, experienced adventurers in need of money also joined the hunt.

Goblins were small fries for otherworlders like us, but they were a threat to ordinary people. We followed Haruka into the newly developed farmland. As we walked, the amount of grass around us seemed to increase until the soil was eventually covered by layers of abundant greenery. There was also a dense grove ahead.

"Didn't your reports say that this area had been turned into a field? And I know you planned to have grass around the fields, but this is ahead of schedule, right?" I asked.

"That's the thing. Something unexpected happened and... Oh, here we are. Yoo-hooo!!!" Haruka greeted, waving in the direction of the trees.

The tree started shaking before moving away.

Akiha yelped.“Th-Th-The trees moved?!”

A woman with green hair and wearing a light pink outfit appeared in between the trees. Her top was cropped and I could see her midriff.

Her clothes would definitely make a lot of heads turn.

A woman appearing among moving trees certainly couldn’t be a regular person, and I could see lilies of the exact same color as her clothes blooming in her hair. On top of that, while her legs looked like those of a human, she was floating above the ground.



“Lady Haruka, thank you for fulfilling my unreasonable request,” she said.

“No problem!”

“And you must be Lord Masaki,” the mysterious woman said, looking at me.

“Oh, hm... Indeed. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m Masaki Toudou, the lord of this territory. I’m a count.”

“Count Masaki, then. Thank you very much for coming here to meet me.”

“It’s fine. I couldn’t say no to Haruka,” I told her before turning to Haruka. “Hey, Haruka... Who is this lady?”

“Lady Haruka...did you not tell him who I am?” the green-haired woman said, visibly shaken.

“Ah.” Haruka clasped her hands together. “I forgot.”

“You... You forgot... I-I see...”

“Onee-chan...”

“Oh my...” I sighed.

Haruka was an airhead and always forgot things.

The woman seemed to be flabbergasted, but she cleared her throat. “Please allow me to introduce myself, then. I’m Aura, an alraune. As you can see, I’m not human. I’m a spirit of the forest.”

An alraune...

The alraunes were usually classified as fairies or spirits and were said to live deep in the forest. They didn’t meddle with human affairs and were in charge of taking care of their realm. Or so I’d learned in a book when I’d decided to read up about the different races that made up this world.

“You’re a spirit... May I ask why you’re here if your dwelling is the forest?”

There was a grove here, but that hardly counted. It felt more like a bunch of trees that had been planted close together to provide some shade. It was strange for her to be here.

Wait, did all this grass grow because she’s here?

“I’m here with a request, Count Masaki. I beg of you, could you allow us to live on this land?”

“What?!”

I didn’t know how to answer her.

“Are you aware that goblins have started wreaking havoc and appearing in unusual places recently?” she asked.

“I am. I hired people to take care of the ones that appeared on my land before they could cause too much damage...”

Hunting goblins was like sweeping a room. You couldn’t help the specks of dust that’d fly around and escape your broom.

“I believe the birth of a goblin lord to be the cause of their strange behavior,” Miss Aura said.

According to her, the goblin population had grown a lot during the war with the empire. Everyone had been too busy to organize regular raids and keep their numbers down. Eventually, a goblin lord—an individual strong enough to become their king—had been born.

After the birth of a goblin lord, goblins would start breeding at a much faster rate, which meant that they’d inevitably run out of food in their usual dwelling.

“To my great dismay, the goblinlord was born rather close to our forest,” she continued. “When they started running out of food food, their first target was our realm.”

The starving goblins had invaded the forest and had started to furiously devour everything they found like a swarm of locusts. They’d laid their hands on the plants, the animals, and even the monsters that lived there.

Apparently, there were powerful monsters in the forest, but the goblin lord was nothing like an average goblin. It grew stronger when it consumed the flesh of other monsters.

After the goblins had fell the strongest monsters—the tigers—they’d moved onto the alraunes in the deepest part of the woods. The alraunes had barely succeeded in driving them away, and apparently, these very goblins had been

the ones that ended up in my territory.

“While we succeeded in driving them away, goblin mages and even powerful goblin wizards were part of the horde. They burned down half of the forest during their retreat, and we cannot remain in our dwelling anymore.”

I remembered reading about that. One of the reports I’d received mentioned a forest fire. I had assumed a bold of lightning had started the fire, and since it was an area where no one lived, we’d only issued a warning for people to be on the lookout for dangerous animals and monsters escaping the forest.

“We have been tracking down the goblin lord ever since in our pursuit of vengeance,” she continued. “When goblin lords are left unchecked and permitted to devour an abundance of monsters, they can become strong enough to rival dragons. We wanted to find it before it came too powerful for us to handle. However, we suddenly lost track of its presence.”

“Ah. I might know what happened, then,” I said.

That goblin lord she was looking for had most likely been killed by Tatsuma.

According to what she’d told me, if the goblin lord was still alive, goblins would still be breeding and propagating at an unimaginable rate. Since this trend seemed to have stopped, it was most likely dead already.

Tatsuma had taken care of the goblin horde with his men, and I remembered him saying that he’d had to face a pretty strong goblin. He’d been forced to use Peerless Mode—a first against a goblin. *Yeah, probably the goblin lord.*

“With that threat out of the way, our next goal was to find land to settle on for the time being,” Miss Aura continued her explanation. “We wandered until we happened upon ground filled with strong earth energy. That’s when I met Lady Haruka. She was busy spreading fertilizer.”

“The flowers on Miss Aura’s head were almost all wilted and looked so pitiful! I couldn’t just leave her alone! Look, they’re beautiful now that they’re blooming, right?” Haruka said. “She told me that had happened because the land she was on before didn’t have any nourishment.”

“Thanks to Lady Haruka’s nutrients, we were able to regain our vitality. I cannot thank you enough.”

Miss Aura seemed to be talking about nutrients for plants, not food. She looked very similar to a human being, but it was plain to see that she wasn't one. *I mean, she's floating.* She was also nothing like those Fake Humes I'd seen in the empire.

"What do you mean when you say the land was filled with strong earth energy?"

"It's probably all thanks to the special fertilizer I made," Haruka chimed in.

"People often mistakenly think that alraunes only settle in the deepest parts of the forest, but that's not exactly true. We settle there because earth energy is usually concentrated in the depths of the forest, not the other way around."

So that's why she picked this place.

The special fertilizer Haruka had made was nourishing this area's land, so they wouldn't have to worry about wilting if they stayed here. Usually, a crop would drain agricultural soil of its natural nutrients. However, the special fertilizer that Haruka had created out of weeds and organic waste could instantly replenish the soil's nutrients thanks to some mysterious power.

Miss Aura must have sensed that power and compared it to what she usually felt in the forest.

"I think I got the gist of it," I said after a pause. "This occurred on my territory, so I ought to take responsibility. As long as you promise not to hurt any human, you're welcome to settle here. May I ask where exactly you'd like to settle, though? Does it have to be a forest?"

"Thank you very much for your understanding. As long as we have some trees to settle in, we'll be fine. We do not require a large forest."

That should make things easier. I was worried we'd have to grow one, but that doesn't seem to be the case. I was planning to grow some groves anyway to beautify the territory. I didn't see any issue with them moving there.

"While I'm open to you moving here, I'm afraid I cannot allow it for free. This area was meant to become a rose garden. It would have attracted tourists and brought in revenue," I stated.

“You require some kind of...compensation, is that so?” Miss Aura said. Her face fell, and she seemed almost scared.

You don’t need to look so wary. I’m not gonna ask for anything outrageous.

Miss Aura was a beauty, so she might have some bad memories from meeting weird people.

“Masaki-san! Alraune nectar is super duper good! I’ve heard from Prince Leon that it exudes a sweet and elegant aroma, and royal families all over the continent fight to buy it!” Haruka exclaimed.

Expensive nectar *was* attractive, but I was actually planning to ask for something else entirely.

“I have something else in mind,” I said.

“‘Something else’?” Miss Aura repeated.

“As I mentioned earlier, I was planning to turn this entire area into a large rose garden. The thing is, I’m still looking for people to manage it. Miss Aura, do you have any experience growing roses?”

“I do, in fact. They’re different from the seeds I can sense around here, but beautiful blue roses grew in the forest.”

“Then that settles it. Would you agree to take care of the roses in exchange for moving here?”

“What?” Miss Aura blurted out as if I’d just said the strangest thing ever. “Is that truly enough?”

Is it really that weird of a request?

“Of course. If I were to hire human workers, I’d need guards as well as several gardeners to take care of a garden as large as the one I envision. On the other hand, you’d be able to care for the roses and protect them. It might be a little much for you to handle alone, though. What do you think?”

“That’s not a problem at all. Even if this entire area were to become a rose garden, we would still be able to watch over every single bud.”

We?

Actually, now that I thought about it, she'd been saying "we" the entire time.

"Please allow me to introduce the others to you," she said. "Everyone, please show yourselves! This human is worthy."

At Miss Aura's call, the trees started shifting once more, and other alraunes started appearing.

Various flowers bloomed in their green strands, and their clothes were almost the same as Miss Aura's. The only difference was the color: instead of being light pink, they were the same as the flowers that bloomed in their hair.

I quickly counted them: there were 47 alraunes. I couldn't help but feel it was a shame that they were one short of a famous group. I wasn't about to say that out loud, though.

The sight of all these beautiful women standing side by side was quite something. I could only assume that they'd been hiding up until now because they were wary of me.

It must mean they trust me now. That's great.

"Hey, isn't that guy a catch?"

"I know, right?! It's rare to see such a kind human. His magic is strong too."

"Isn't his face kinda plain, though?"

I felt like I was standing in the middle of a bunch of high school girls.

I'm sorry my face is so plain!

"Please quiet down, everyone!" Miss Aura said. She was smiling, but her voice commanded authority, and the others alraunes immediately stopped blabbering.

"Allow me to apologize on their behalf. They are quite excited to be on human land. I'll make sure to educate them *properly,* so please forgive their rudeness."

She was still smiling, but her tone had changed for a brief moment there. A few alraunes were shivering already, their faces pale.

I let out an awkward laugh. "I'll leave that in your hands. I'm not offended

either way," I said.

"What a relief... Thank you very much."

"Masaki-san," Haruka started. "Shouldn't we tell the mayor of the neighboring village about this?"

"You're right. Who knows how people will react if they stumble upon alraunes before hearing the full story? Miss Aura, would you agree to meet the mayor in charge of this area?"

"Of course. I'll have my girls start plucking weeds in the meantime, then," she said.

Miss Aura was already giving them work to do to prepare the land. Talented leaders like her were valuable human resources. *She's not technically human, but let's not sweat the details.*

Come to think of it, that *should be happening right around this time... Considering the number of alraunes... Yes, that would be perfect. What good timing.*

We left for the closest village, Primrose, without delay. It was around noon, and the sun was shining brightly in the sky.

This village greww a variety of small, lovely roses.

Just like the other villages of the region, Primrose had suffered because of the war. Most of the farmers had passed away, and the cultivation of roses had only recently been restarted thanks to a few hardworking men and women. Instead of wallowing in self-pity after the war ended, they'd risen to the task and had given everything they had to revive their village. Their tenacity was astonishing and deeply touched me.

Giving them a push was my job as their lord, so I was giving them generous financial support to encourage them to keep working at it. The large rose garden was to be part of this initiative. I usually left all agricultural matters to Haruka, but I figured this would help her too. She'd told me she wanted to mass-produce her rose perfume, so if this project came to fruition, everyone would win.

A few goblins suddenly attacked us on the way, but I won't go into details. Dealing with six little goblins was a walk in the park for us.

The only thing of note was Miss Aura's surprise when she saw Akiha's gun.

"What an impressive weapon! You can hit distant targets even faster than with arrows!"

"It's called a gun. I can summon such weapons thanks to one of my abilities. In the world we're from, guns had entirely replaced swords," Akiha explained.

"I wonder if that will happen here too."

"It's possible, but I expect it will take a very long time. I don't know much about guns, but even if we showed Akiha's to a blacksmith, they'd need to go through a long process of trial and error to replicate it. They're very intricate," I said.

"They are," Akiha agreed. "I'm not very knowledgeable about their structure either. Not to mention, I can't even give one to someone else for them to take apart."

"Isn't it easier to use magic spells to go *BOOM* in this world?" Haruka said cheerfully. "Speaking of which, Miss Aura, your magic was incredible just now!"

"Thank you for your kind words, Lady Haruka. I must say I was a little anxious after witnessing the might of Lady Akiha's weapon, but your explanation put my mind at ease."

I could understand why guns scared her. You only needed to pull the trigger to kill your target. Unlike magic or bows, anyone could use them with minimal training. Even in a fantasy world like this one, guns were still fearsome. However, their greatest weakness was how difficult it was to mass-produce them.

As Haruka had pointed out, magic, which had been extensively studied, was much easier to use here. While mages with the ability to use healing magic were incredibly scarce, a lot of people were able to use other types of magic, and some of them were probably able to fire rapid bullet-like blasts. On top of that, magic won in terms of destructive power.

Haruka had praised Miss Aura for her magic, but to be accurate, what she'd used was fairy magic. It was different from the kind of magic that we were able to wield. While we had to use the mana contained in our bodies to open the door of the Material World, fairy magic relied on the natural mana contained in all things that surrounded us, including the air, the soil, the grass...

"Can I learn to use magic like you?" I asked, hopeful.

"I'm afraid not... Only spirits and fairies can wield fairy magic..."

I thought it'd be nice to learn fairy magic just in case, but I'd have to give up on the idea.

We continued to talk until we reached Primrose.

A ditch had been dug all around the village's wall, which made it look closed off and gloomy at first, but when you got closer, the village's vibe started to change.

"This place is beautiful," Miss Aura complimented with a clap of her hands.

I had been expecting such a reaction. After all, the surface of the wall was covered with flowers. It was almost a vertical garden where morning glories bloomed beautifully. It was a lot like the outer walls of the Koushien Stadium.

We'd dug the trenches recently, but these walls were here from the very start. There seemed to be very small particles of magic crystal in them, which explained why plants grew so well. This incredibly vertical garden never withered either. Thanks to the power of the magic crystals, the flowers bloomed all year round. At night, some small flowers would even glow, making the scenery appear even more magical. It was the kind of place you'd never forget after seeing it once.

As we got closer to the renowned main gate of Primrose, the merry melody of a flute and drums reached our ears.

"Are they holding a festival?" Miss Aura asked.

"Yes. They're thanking the flower fairies. This festival is held once a year at this time. Quite a few people come from afar to take part in the festivities."

Miss Aura nodded at my explanation. We greeted the gatekeeper and entered

the village.

I'd been here several times already, and Haruka visited even more than I did to discuss matters related to the fields, so the gatekeeper knew our faces. According to the gatekeeper, the mayor was home, so we headed straight over.

As we walked through the streets, we got to enjoy the bustling festival. I was getting used to it—no, who am I kidding? I wasn't—but people were glaring at me, their eyes full of envy, as I walked around with three women in tow.

"Hey, pretty ladies, wanna hang with me for a bit?"

"Shut up, idiot!" someone shouted. "Please excuse him, he's drunk."

"What the hell! Lemme go!" the man groaned as his friends pulled him away.

Festivals meant alcohol, and the man—most likely an adventurer—who'd bothered us was clearly intoxicated.

I'd been here a few times and had introduced myself as the lord of these lands, so his friend might have remembered that and gotten that man out of here before he could offend me. A few other adventurers came to apologize earnestly, but I decided not to push the matter. I waved my hand and told them not to worry about it.

I know today's a festival, but everything in moderation, guys.

After that pointless—and short-lived—quarrel, we continued our way to the mayor's house.

"Mayor, are you here?" I called out.

"That voice... Oh! Count Toudou! Come in, come in! Welcome to my humble abode. Lady Haruka, please come in as well! I don't think I've ever had the chance to meet these two ladies. Your new wives, perhaps?" he asked, looking at Akiha and Aura.

"E-Eh?! W-What makes you think that?!" Akiha objected, her voice shaky.

As for Miss Aura, she brought her hand to her cheek, a satisfied air on her face.

Could you please not act like we're married?

“They’re not,” I refuted. “Don’t joke around too much, mayor.”

“Ha ha ha! I see you’re still devoted to your lovely fiancées. It’s a shame, you could certainly wed another young lady or two... Well, I won’t say anymore, lest I incur your wrath.”

“I would certainly appreciate that.”

I sighed and looked behind me. Akiha was adverting her eyes and muttering things to herself. She looked incredibly tense.

“It really does look that way...right? Imagine if I could call him d-dar... It’d be so nice... Heh heh... Heh heh heh...”

“Akiha?”

She yelped. “M-MASAKI-SAN?! Y-Yes?”

It’s cute when you stammer, but try to stay with us.

“The mayor was only messing with you, so don’t let it get to you, okay?”

“Y-Yeah... I know... He was just joking...”

She sighed and glared at me as though I’d done something terrible to her. *What did I do?!*

“So, Count Toudou, what brings you here?” the mayor asked.

“Right! I’m here to introduce you to Miss Aura here,” I said gesturing at Miss Aura.

“I’m pleased to meet you. I’m an alraune, my name is Aura.”

“‘An alraune’?!” the mayor all but yelped.

He must have been surprised the pretty lady he’d assumed to be my wife was in fact a spirit. It took him some time to calm down, and, after he did, I explained how we’d met and why we were here to see him.

“I understand... The alraunes are known to take care of entire forests, so a rose garden will hardly be a challenge. However..while they did not kick up a fuss about the beastmen, I’m not sure the villagers will accept them so easily.”

Adventurers and nobles were well-versed in the various races that made up

this world and knew that the alraunes were a type of spirit close to fairies. However, commoners may not understand it. If they saw them hover above the ground, they might mistakenly think them to be ghosts or worse, monsters, and lash out at them.

I had even heard that one greedy noble had branded them monsters and organized an expedition to capture them. His goal had most likely been the nectar they produced or their bodies themselves. While enslaving and selling *people* wasn't allowed, trading monsters was perfectly legal.

He had probably been hoping to justify his actions by playing on this distinction, but in the end, he'd suffered a crushing defeat and had himself become a part of the forest.

After this incident, the alraunes had stopped showing themselves to humans as often. The mayor only knew of them because he'd traveled the continent as an adventurer in the past.

"That's exactly why I wanted to talk to you. Mayor, if I'm not mistaken, during the festival..." I whispered my idea to him. "What do you think?"

"Oh! What a wonderful idea! I'm sure everyone will love it. Pretty girls always fire up crowds."

"Are there requirements for the choreography?" I asked.

"Not at all. As long as their dance isn't too...eccentric, anything is fine."

Not too eccentric, huh?

Well, I did get where he was coming from. A breakdance in the middle of a traditional festival wouldn't cut it.

"Count Masaki... I'm not sure I follow. Could you tell me what you're talking about?" Miss Aura said.

"She's right. Please don't leave us in the dark," Akiha complained.

Oops. I was so engrossed in my chat with the mayor that I'd forgotten to keep the others in the loop.

"Sorry, let me explain. Miss Aura, I would like you and the rest of the alraunes to give a dance performance during the festival."

“All of us?”

“That’s right. There will be a little show tonight to conclude the festival. I want you to perform there.”

A few hours went by in the blink of an eye, and the sun had just set.

I'd gone back to Atami to take care of my work for the day and was now on my way back to Primrose with Adel, Youko, and Fen.

I'd hoped to invite Nemea as well, but he'd left with Tatsuma to track the last remnants of the goblin horde, so the two of them wouldn't be here tonight.

I hadn't quite planned it out this way, but I'd ended up alone with a group of women once again.

Some people would surely call me lucky, but it was at times like these that I truly realized how valuable male friends like Shou—with whom I could just have fun without much thought—were.

We had decided to fly there instead of using a carriage. The roads were dangerous at night—the monsters and bandits wouldn't be difficult for us to defeat, but I liked to avoid needless battles as much as possible.

In the sky, only wild griffins and wyverns were a threat, but those species didn't dwell in this area, so it was very unlikely we'd encounter any.

I was carrying Youko on my back while Adel carried Fen.

It was Fen's first time flying. At first, she'd been stressed out and couldn't relax at all, but she'd gotten used to it fairly quickly. She was now able to appreciate the view.

From up here, we could see the faint glow of the village walls and the lights of the festival. Bonfires were burning here and there, lighting up the entire village as well as the beautiful green walls. The scenery had an almost ethereal air about it.

"It's my first time flying with you in the night sky, Masaki! I'm loving it!"

Youko seemed to be in a good mood as she rubbed her cheek against me.

"You're not feeling too cold, Fen?" Adel asked.

"N-No...I'm...all right. This is...amazing. The village is so pretty..." Fen answered, her eyes sparkling as she took in the view.

We landed at the entrance of the village and walked through the gate.

The atmosphere in the streets at night was completely different from the day. First of all, there were a lot more tipsy people around. They went about enjoying the food stalls and singing along to the melody of the flute. I wouldn't call their singing good, but they seemed to be having fun, and that was the most important.

I even spotted a member of the Pirate of the Round Table. His name was Torry—he was a skilled archer, and he seemed to be on a date with one of the maids who worked at my mansion.

They seem to be having a good time—it'd be rude to interrupt them.

We walked away in a hurry so they wouldn't see us. *Good luck, Torry.*

Even though Primrose was a fairly large village, the streets were absolutely packed. It was the first time the festival had been held ever since the end of the war, and I assumed that meant it had attracted even more people than usual.

I suddenly felt someone squeeze my hand tightly. It was Adel.

"I don't want us to lose sight of each other so...can I hold your hand?"

"That goes without saying. Youko, here," I said, extending my other hand toward her.

Youko grabbed my hand with a smile. "You too, Fen," she said. "Let's hold hands."

"Y-Yes."

Now, we wouldn't risk getting separated by the crowd.

As we got closer to the center of the village, the sounds of applause and music got louder.

Akiha noticed us and started waving. "Masaki-san! This way!"

She was on the mayor's balcony on the second floor. It was the best place to watch the stage that had been set up in the main plaza right in front of his house.

Akiha had told me she'd reserve the best seats for us. *So* that's *what she meant.*

No one else but the mayor and his family were supposed to have access to his balcony, and I felt a little guilty for imposing on them like this, but we joined the Kisaragi sisters regardless.

“You sure found the best spot in the entire village,” I commented.

“We asked the mayor for a recommendation, and he insisted we should stay. You won’t find a better view anywhere else, he said,” Akiha explained.

“I see. I feel a bit guilty, though... What about him and his family?” I asked.

“They’re all working to keep the festival running. The mayor himself left a while ago to go help out with the stage preparation. He said his balcony would be empty anyway. so I decided to accept his kind offer.”

Now I could enjoy myself without feeling guilty.

“Masaki-saaaan, these drinks are yummyyy!” Haruka was already drinking.

She didn’t look like the type, but Haruka actually drank quite often. She was also good at holding her liquor. She often drank with Youko, and while Youko ended up dead drunk more often than not, Haruka was usually perfectly fine. Actually, I didn’t think I’d ever seen her drunk. Or perhaps I just never had noticed because of the way she normally behaved.

Youko was always fast to react when it came to alcohol. “Haruka! Pour me one too!” she exclaimed, her eyes on the bottles. A famous Japanese saying went “dumplings over flowers,” meaning that we should prioritize function over form. Youko had taken it a notch further: “Alcohol over festivals.”

“Coming right up!” Haruka said, pouring a drink for Youko into a wooden cup. The liquid was a beautiful ruby-red color and the sweet fragrance of roses wafted in the air.

“Is that rose liquor?”

“Yup! I was testing out a recipe, and it turned out pretty well! I was thinking commercializing it using the roses produced here would be nice,” she explained. “It’s a bit too strong to drink as is, so I cut it with carbonated water,” she said picking up another bottle.

This water must be from the hot springs, I thought.

The sound of bubbles popping filled the air. It would probably turn out like a soda-based cocktail.

Youko took a big gulp and sighed contentedly. “It’s my first time having rose liquor, but it’s really good!”

Haruka poured Adel, Akiha, and me a drink as well, and we each took a sip.

“I didn’t steep the roses for a very long time, so the aroma is rather faint, but it’s still tasty, right?” Haruka said with a smile.

I wonder if this should be classified as liquor or a liqueur. Either way, it tastes good. If it’s a liqueur, maybe I can use it for baking or even to add depth to my tea...

“Erm...Mister Masaki...” Fen started, looking at me as if she wanted something.

I can’t give alcohol to a minor... Speaking of which, I wonder what the age of majority is here.

Fen looked like a grade schooler, so she was definitely too young to drink regardless.

“Here you go Fen, this one is for you,” Haruka said, pulling out another bottle and pouring her a glass. While it wasn’t rose-based, the liquid was just as red—berry juice, I assumed.

Fen seemed sad not to get the same beverage as us, but after taking a sip, her face lit up and she happily gulped down the rest of her glass. We continued to sip our drinks as we enjoyed the lively atmosphere of the city from the balcony.

Adel must have missed me while I was away fighting on the Phantom Blau, because she’d refused to leave my side ever since. Akiha was sitting next to me on the opposite side. As for Youko, she’d taken out an armchair from her item box, and she was currently sprawled on it.

We couldn’t always be inside my Room, so I’d given Youko an armchair she could pull out at any time. She absolutely loved the idea. The only issue was that she now used it *everywhere*.

“I still can’t believe alraunes agreed to come to a human village. I’ve only ever

read stories about them, and I thought they didn't mingle with humans," Adel said.

"You've never seen an alraune, Adel?" I asked.

"No. I've read about them, but I've never met one. Speaking of which, where are they now?"

"Seems like you won't have to look hard," I said, pointing at the stage.

Cheers suddenly erupted around the stage, and a happy tune started playing. The catchy rhythm almost had *me* dancing. It was time for tonight's highlight: the dance of the fairies.

At the center of the stage were a few girls—most likely local kids—dressed as fairies. They seemed to be having the time of their lives.

After a few moments, a larger group of women joined in and started dancing around the little girls. A few took the girls by the hand and danced with them while the remaining women formed pairs of two. Each pair danced in perfect unison as if one was the reflection of the other. The audience was entranced.

Suddenly, one man in the audience realized that he'd never seen these women before. "Huh? Who are they?" he asked, confused.

"I heard they're friends of the mayor," another answered. "They're amazing dancers, though! They have to be professionals, right? They're beautiful too. It feels good watching them have so much fun on stage."

"I agree! Their performance is beyond amazing, and theyseem to be enjoying themselves a lot! I don't mind having outsiders on stage if they're like them! That and..."

"They're drop-dead gorgeous," the two men said in unison.

So that's the part that actually convinced you, huh?

"Masaki, are they...?" Adel trailed off.

"The alraunes," I confirmed.

With long skirts concealing their feet and hats covering the flowers blooming on their heads, alraunes looked exactly like regular human beings.

The dance of the fairies was nearing its climax, and the entire stage lit up with a light green glow. The audience let out little gasps as they watched, enraptured.

That glow had been created by Miss Aura and her friends' magic. *Looks like they're about to go all out.*

The little villager girls seemed to be somewhat nervous amidst all this light, and they squeezed the hands of the alraunes. Sensing their worries, the alraunes smiled at them before gathering magic under their feet. Before long, they all started rising into the sky, along with the little girls. Dainty white petals were scattered in the wind, dancing in the air.

The villagers were flabbergasted, mouth agape for a few seconds, until finally, they started cheering loud enough to shake the entire plaza.

In the mind of villagers who barely knew anything about fairies, the first thing that came to mind when they heard that word was the image of a beautiful creature flying in the air. They were now witnessing that very fantasy.

The little dancers were also taken aback at first, unsure of what to do, but they soon started dancing in the sky with Miss Aura and her friends. Kids all dreamed of flying at least once in their lives, and they were beyond themselves with joy at the chance to experience it.

With each dance step, more white petals fluttered in the air. They fell toward the villagers but disappeared before they reached them, adding to the magical atmosphere. In time with the music, the alraunes descended onto the stage once more. They formed a circle and simultaneously raised their hands, lighting up the night sky with glittering cherry blossoms.

The whimsical spectacle charmed everyone, including us.

We remained silent for a while, taking in the view, until someone started clapping. More and more people joined in until the entire village was applauding.

"That was incredible. I'm glad I came," Adel said.

"Yes! It was amazing! I even forgot to drink!" Youko exclaimed.

They were both clapping as well, a satisfied look on their faces.

“Masaki-san! It’s a cherry blossom, right?” Akiha asked, showing me a petal that had found its way into her hand. It had started melting away, just like a snowflake, but it definitely looked like a cherry blossom.

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “They created these petals with their magic, but they look just like Japanese cherry blossoms...”

“I never would have thought I’d get to see cherry blossoms again in this world,” she said.

“Magic is really incredible,” Haruka chimed in. “Their performance truly touched my heart.”

“Me...too,” Fen added, still clapping.

Thus, the festival of Primrose, organized to celebrate and thank the flower fairies, came to an end. It had been a resounding success, and the closing party was set to continue deep into the night.

I made an appearance there as the lord of this territory and formally introduced Miss Aura and the others to the villagers. After I revealed their identities, the villagers seemed surprised at first. However, the performance they’d just seen helped them accept my words fairly quickly.

This festival had a long history, and the people of Primrose strongly believed in the existence of flower fairies.

Since the alraunes were spirits of the forests and flowers grew on their heads, the mayor and I felt like the villagers might see flower fairies in them. That was what prompted us to organize this dance. We wanted to play on that belief to make sure the villagers would accept them as part of the community, even though they were outsiders.

When we saw that the villagers reacted well, we took the chance to announce that the alraunes would make use of their natural talents to help revive Primrose’s rose industry. Thankfully, the villagers’ response was quite positive. The men were especially enthusiastic at the idea of so many beauties frequenting the village.

I have a feeling the young men are going to go all out...

The alraunes also seemed to be having a lot of fun and were merrily chatting with villagers while enjoying the food and drinks offered to them. I noticed a lot of people crowded around Miss Aura—mostly children and women.

All in all, everything was going well, and the presence of the alraunes further livened up the closing party.

After a while, I quietly slipped out and walked until I found myself at the village outskirts. I could barely hear the noise of the party anymore.

The night breeze felt good against my skin, and I could smell the faint scent of flowers carried by the wind.

“Masaki.”

I heard Adel’s voice and turned to look at her. She wasn’t alone, Akiha, Youko, and Miss Aura were also there.

“I can’t believe you! You were going to take care of something alone again, weren’t you?” Youko scolded.

“She’s right! We’re here too,” Akiha said.

They were quick to notice. *And here I was hoping everyone could enjoy the party.*

“What about Fen?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, we left her with my sister,” Akiha said.

“Count Masaki, something must have happened for you to leave the party and come here in the dead of the night, right?” Aura enquired.

“Well... It would seem like unwelcome guests decided to try and crash our fun,” I explained.

I always stayed on my guard—even in the middle of a party—and I’d noticed a group of goblins approaching the village on my map.

More and more goblins had joined in as the group progressed, and it was now a rather large horde, heading straight toward Primrose. They might have been

drawn in by the sight of the petals the alraunes had created.

If such a large horde reached the village, the party would quickly turn into a picture of Hell. I had no intention to let that happen, though. The goblins losing their lord meant that they normally wouldn't gather together like this. It was the perfect opportunity to wipe them out once and for all. After tonight, I wouldn't have to worry about goblins roaming my territory again.

Our party was more than strong enough to handle goblins—regardless of their numbers. We couldn't use flashy spells like Flame Javelin or noisy golems like Exmizer in the wee hours of the night, but that wouldn't be an issue.

"Masaki-san, I can see the goblin's vanguard. They're marching forward, approximately two kilometers away."

"Got it."

Akiha had night vision goggles on, and thanks to her skill, Hyperopia, she could determine their distance. We all readied our weapons while Youko called forth two of her golems: the headless armor, Dullahan, and another that resembled a tiger.

"Akiha, let them get as close as possible before you start shooting. In the meantime, Adel and I will fly and get behind them so we can attack from the rear. Youko, I'm leaving the flanks to you—put one of your golems on each side. Miss Aura, please stay with Akiha and help her with the vanguard," I instructed.

"Yes!"

"I understand."

"Leave it to me, Masaki!"

Akiha lay face down on the floor and took aim with her MK9. She was ready to shoot at any time. As for Youko, she hopped on her tiger and disappeared into the night.

Adel and I exchanged a look, and, without needing to confirm anything, we soared at the same time. It'd been quite some time since we'd last flown together, just the two of us. The last time was back when we were headed to the Sentdrag Kingdom. I still remembered us dancing awkwardly above the lake.

This really isn't the time to fondly recall our romantic moments, huh?

The horde of over five hundred goblins had been heading straight toward Primrose, but suddenly, they stopped. The goblins seemed agitated. I took a look at my map and saw that a part of their vanguard had disappeared already. It had to be Akiha and Miss Aura's handiwork.

I hadn't heard any bullets, so I figured Akiha must have used a silencer. If she equipped one to her gun, the gunshots were almost inaudible.

Now that the horde had stopped moving, Adel and I lowered our altitude so that we could attack their rear. I activated Oversword, while Adel created a red sword with Mana Coagulation. We both slashed at the goblins. They hadn't been expecting us, and their agitation increased tenfold. The goblins didn't seem to know how to react or which way to go anymore.

Adel and I didn't give them any time to collect themselves—we continued to swing our swords, cutting off their heads or bisecting them as we moved forward.

While I was busy slaughtering any goblin that entered my range, I suddenly sensed something dangerous on my right thanks to Heightened Senses. I took a look that way and saw a goblin wearing a hat and holding a staff. It was a little larger than the others and was dressed like some sort of stereotypical sorcerer—it even had a long beard.

It was one of the goblin wizard Miss Aura had warned us about—a high-ranking wizard, at that.

This one must have survived and continued getting stronger even after the death of the goblin lord.

I'd heard goblin wizards were crafty, and, sure enough, it was using its comrades as meat shields to cast its spell unnoticed. It wasn't a bad plan. It'd just been unlucky enough to end up fighting me. The hobgoblin wizard was still gathering mana into a large fireball, but I wasn't about to let it fire it.

Fire magic in the middle of a plain is sure to start a grass fire, you dumbass! I kicked away the goblins that continued to rush at me and pointed one hand at the hobgoblin wizard.

“Air Pressure!”

Air Pressure was a wind magic spell that allowed me to slam condensed air violently on my target from above. I condensed the air to its very limit before unleashing it upon the goblins’ heads. The large fireball the hobgoblin wizard had been working so hard to create scattered in an instant as the goblins were crushed by the merciless pressure.

Only a circular bloody crater was left in the wake of my attack.

Urgh... There’s nothing but blood left. As always, I have a hard time adjusting the strength of my spells when I use them for the first time.

I’d need to be more careful the next time I used it, especially if it was against people. If I messed up, I risked hurting my friends as well.

That one spell had taken care of a good chunk of the goblins.

Y*eah, I really need to practice magic some more when I have time.*

I checked my map while going after the goblins that were trying to escape, killing them one by one.

Youko had done a good job of closing off the sides. She’d summoned another golem—a wolf—that was acting just like a hunting dog, relentlessly dashing about and directing the goblins that tried to run back toward the center. It moved in such a clever way that I had to remind myself it was only a golem.

Let’s take a look at the vanguard... Yeah... Akiha also did a number on them.

The goblin marks on my map were disappearing at an alarming speed. Akiha’s machine gun was firing round after round, and she was basically creating a barrage all on her own. Every few moments, an additional group would disappear in a split second. *Looks like Miss Aura is working hard too.* I looked in their direction and saw a green tornado blowing away a dozen goblins at once.

The rest of the fight was fairly easy. We chased down the remaining goblins and finished them off up until the last one.

I understood afterward that another goblin lord had been born and had been the one to lead this group, but since it had been killed almost instantly by my spell, I hadn’t seen what it could do at all.

Just like that, the dangerous horde that threatened Primrose disappeared before the villagers could notice anything. They were still enjoying themselves at the closing party.

Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. Especially when some rude monsters try to crash your party.

Miss Aura used her magic to return the goblins' bodies to the earth. Human magic could only burn corpses, at best, but fairy magic had interesting characteristics. Even with my game master abilities, I didn't think I could imitate her. If I tried to, I'd only end up burying the corpses, but that wasn't really the point.

Even if we didn't mention what had happened tonight to the villagers, we couldn't keep it from the mayor.

The next morning, while many were busy tidying up the streets after the festival, we once again went to knock at the mayor's door. Since Youko had been awake since dawn, we'd left Youko to sleep in my Room. *There's no point in bringing everyone here anyway.*

"Count Toudou! Thank you so much for your suggestion yesterday!" the mayor exclaimed as soon as he opened the door. "The festival has never been so lively! How can I thank you?"

"I didn't do much," I objected. "Please thank the alraunes instead. And I must say, the festival could never have gone ahead so successfully after such a long gap without your efforts. The entire village should be proud to have kept its tradition running for so many years. This is your triumph."

As a matter of fact, some people had been against the idea of bringing the festival back. A few of them had been worried it would attract goblins while others insisted the timing wasn't right. The war had just ended, and they didn't feel like it was appropriate to hold such a celebration so soon. The mayor hadn't given up, though. He had personally talked to each of them, addressing their worries and reassuring them until they came around. He had also invited adventurers, asking them to patrol the village surroundings in the days that preceded the festival to take care of any goblins.

Naturally, hiring adventurers came at a cost. The mayor had paid for it

entirely out of pocket, refusing to use the village's funds. It must have cost him a small fortune, and when we first visited him the day before, I'd noticed his home seemed more empty than when we'd last visited. It was easy to imagine the sacrifices he'd made.

"It was all worth it," he said, nodding, a soft smile on his face. He seemed proud of what he had accomplished, and I could tell how attached he was to this tradition.

The festival will surely continue to be held for years to come, I thought.

"Leaving the matter of the festival aside," I started. "I have something to tell you, but I'd appreciate it if you didn't let anyone else know about it."

"I can be discreet."

"Thank you. I don't want to worry the villagers with this."

"I see..."

I shared what had happened yesterday night with the mayor but omitted my suspicions that it had been the alraunes magic that lured them in.

He opened his eyes wide, shocked. "I can't believe this... Count Toudou, I don't know how to express my gratitude to you."

"I don't deserve your thanks. If anything, I should be the one apologizing to you."

"Why in the world would you say that?!"

"Because I had an inkling this would happen," I said.

Goblins had good night vision and sharp hearing. The village was always quiet at night, but yesterday, people had sung and played music deep into the night. They had also lit up the streets. When you thought about it that way, it was likely for the goblins to target the village.

Especially if a goblin lord was around.

The goblin lord was supposed to be much stronger but also much smarter than regular goblins. It would have understood that a festival meant that a lot of humans, including women and children, were gathered in the same place—a

feast for any goblin.

Goblins could hardly attack cities—they were too well protected—but villages were another story altogether. There weren't that many guards around, so they made for easy targets.

I'd heard that goblins sometimes learned from the goblin lords. They became smarter and more wicked as they spend time around them and retain the knowledge they'd accumulated even after their lord dies.

This was part of the reason why the Adventurer Guild had been so quick to dispatch adventurers to hunt down the remnants of the horde. Regular goblin hunts were never usually advertised as urgent.

As it turned out, the festival had indeed attracted goblins; worse even, it had attracted a newly born goblin lord, and while I had predicted the attack, I never would have thought another goblin lord could have been born so quickly.

In the end, we had gotten rid of all the remaining goblins. This was good news for the village, but the hard truth remained: I'd used them as bait.

After listening to my explanations, the mayor stopped to think for a while. After organizing his thoughts, he looked me in the eyes.

"You're right. You did use this village and its people as bait... However, isn't this the very reason why you attended the festival and remained here well into the night?" he asked.

"Well... Yes, it is."

I wouldn't have left when I knew full well there was a high chance the village would be attacked. If I had sent knights and soldiers to deal with the goblins, the villagers wouldn't have been able to hold and enjoy the festival properly. It made more sense for me to go without saying anything. After all, the villagers wouldn't have thought much of my presence at a long-awaited local festival.

"Then I have no intention of blaming you. You see, Count Toudou, I want nothing more than for the villagers of Primrose to smile and live freely. I'll do anything to protect their happiness. Seeing them smile is all I need, so worry not; I will take this secret to my grave."

I could respect the mayor and his love for Primrose and its inhabitants. With him by their side, the villagers would surely recover from the deep scars the war had left in the region.

I thanked the mayor and told him to come to me if he ever needed anything before ending the discussion.

I greeted his successor—his son-in-law—before heading out. He was a sociable and agreeable young man. He didn't seem intimidated in the slightest when talking to me and greeted me with a smile. His nejiri hachimaki headband somehow suited him.

He loved festivals just as much as the mayor and, until the older man took him under his wing, he used to be an adventurer. I'd heard he traveled a lot and visited all the festivals he could.

I was glad to see the future was assured and went back to Atami.

After a few weeks of work, Miss Aura and the other alraunes, helped by the villagers of Primrose, finished preparing the rose garden and we were able to open it to the public. Usually, such gardens were reserved for nobles, but we also welcomed adventurers and commoners. We'd created a designated area for nobles to avoid backlash, though.

The alraunes relied on their numbers to take on the duties of both gardeners and guards. They also chatted happily with the visitors, having no issue mingling with humans.

Roses were rarely seen in public gardens and only nobles usually got to buy them, so some people had tried to steal some stealthily. However, this garden was the alraunes' territory—their home. They were fast to notice and immediately arrested any culprits.

Rose-based products had already hit the shelves—including rose soap made from rose oil and rose-scented bathing powder—but they were so popular that they were constantly out of stock.

While the alraunes were originally a race that kept to themselves, they were kind to most people. However, when they got mad, they were scarier than

anyone else.

Female gardeners were fairly rare, and the garden was so popular that before long, it received a nickname: the Fairy Garden.

It would go on to become one of the most beloved places in my territory, popular among nobles and commoners alike.

Chapter 8

I was currently visiting Aquarea, a gigantic brand-new hot spring facility. Here, you could enjoy a wide array of baths and even spend the night. Aquarea was without a shadow of a doubt the largest hot spring inn in Atami, and its biggest selling point was a bath so large that it might as well be a pool.

There were several old inns in this corner of the city, and we'd decided to modernize them and use them as the basis for Aquarea. The construction work here had started before the events of the Phantom Blau.

A good chunk of the inns had been partially destroyed by the war, and while the owners who had adequate funds hadn't waited for us to rebuild their business, not everyone could afford it or was in a position to do so.

For one, quite a few innkeepers had lost their lives fighting in the war. Others had become so poor that they could barely keep themselves fed, let alone fix an entire inn. I'd gone to them with my plan of building Aquarea.

I'd started thinking about this project because while there were still quite a few inns operating, the recent work in the city had brought in a large influx of tourists, and it was gradually getting harder to house them all.

I just know the existing inns are going to get overcrowded soon enough.

I didn't want people to travel all the way to Atami only to be forced to sleep out in the open because the inns were all fully booked. I could already picture families having no choice but to sleep in their carriages. *That'd be a sorry sight.*

To be fair, it was also possible to camp in Atami. We opened up the guards' training area at night for adventurers who were on a budget, but while adventurers were used to sleeping outdoors, regular people weren't. They'd struggle, especially with small children.

Anyway, there clearly was a need to increase the lodging options, which had motivated me to create a facility that could welcome a large number of guests at once.

I'd gathered the innkeepers who wanted to restore their inns but couldn't, as

well as the families of the innkeepers that had lost their lives in the war.

In the end, I got in touch with the owners of five inns: the Priming Pavilion, Golden Wheat, the Black Bear's Inn, the Serenity Pavilion, and Ranran. I hadn't told the owner, but I was incredibly curious about the origin of the name "Ranran."

I wanted to merge these five inns into one gigantic inn that would be part of a single hot springs resort: Aquarea.

I'd taken a lot of inspiration from a hotel famous for its hot spring pool back in my home world. I couldn't really build a ten-story building in this world, but three floors were completely manageable.

By merging the five inns, we could also use a larger part of their respective surface for rooms and thus, increase the number of visitors we could host at once.

I intended to keep some of the original baths intact, but most would be destroyed to become part of the pool. I expected a lot of backlash and had been ready to work hard to convince the owners.

However...

"What a great idea! I'd love for my inn to be included in your project."

"Me too!"

"Same here! I was at a loss since I couldn't figure out a way to pay for the repairs..."

They'd agreed so quickly that the meeting had been a bit anticlimactic. *Huh?*

"Hm... I know I'm the one who brought up the idea, but are you sure you don't need more time to think it over?" I asked. "These inns have a history, so I thought you may be attached to them in some way..."

Don't people always disagree at first when these kinds of initiatives are brought up?

I remembered people opposing apartment complexes and highway projects so that their ancestors' fields or houses wouldn't be destroyed in my old world. There was always a lot of back and forth before the construction work could

start.

Naturally, I intended to hire these people and their workers if they had any, but I still thought they'd reject my proposal.

Merdha, the lady who owned the oldest of the five inns, the Priming Pavilion, stepped forward.

The Priming Pavilion had been in business for decades until a cannonball went through it and destroyed most of the guest rooms during the war. The bath had been left unscathed, so the owner was still operating it, but she couldn't host guests anymore. She lived with her family in a detached building that had escaped the damage.

She'd been forced to let go of most of her employees. Her husband was also unable to help her much. He had a bad leg and struggled to walk. I would have been able to heal him if it had been caused by an injury, but magic couldn't undo the effects of old age.

"I'm sure I speak for everyone here when I say that our inns are our source of pride. However, pride doesn't put food on the table. I can't say I have no lingering attachment to my Priming Pavilion... However, I don't want to continue looking at broken walls every day. I'd rather start from scratch and welcome guests to a beautiful inn once more. I want to watch them leave with a smile and know they'll remember their stay here fondly. As you said before, we would still be allowed to work here, right?"

"Of course," I confirmed.

These people were experts when it came to customer service. They knew better than anyone how to care for hot spring facilities and had the experience necessary in dealing with unforeseen issues on their own. I would be a fool to drive them out.

They'd also be able to train any new recruits efficiently. We needed enough staff for everyone to have days off. We'd discuss the details later, but they were more than welcome to call back their former employees if they were still looking for a job.

"Then I give you my formal approval. There's only one request I'd like to

make,” she added.

“What is it? If it’s in my power, I’ll gladly allow it.”

She remained silent for a few moments, gathering her thoughts. “I’d like to leave something behind... Proof that the Priming Pavilion existed... Would you please allow me to put up the inn’s sign somewhere in the new resort?”

“If possible mine too!” another owner exclaimed.

“I’d like to make the same request as well...”

They weren’t asking for much.

It would be a bit confusing if I put all of their signs outside, but we could definitely find an appropriate spot inside the building.

“All right. We’ll put your signs where each inn used to stand inside the building,” I said.

“Thank you very much.”

And that was how the anti-climatic negotiations ended and the construction of Aquarea was decided.

Aquarea was to become a public facility managed by the city of Atami, so the lord—or in other words, me—was to pay for all of the expenses. It was a lot to fork out, but I expected it to quickly start turning a profit, so that wasn’t an issue.

The people in charge were all very experienced. The owner of the Priming Pavilion, Merdha, was especially apt at dealing with most issues, so I asked her to lead the innkeeper team.

Since it was a city project, Jimmy and Ludrig were also involved and ended up with quite a lot on their plate. However, the promise of promotion after Aquarea started bringing in money motivated them. On top of that, the ladies I’d hired after rescuing them from the Phantom Blau were doing a good job taking on a part of their workloads.

The construction had taken a toll on everyone, but it had been completed in a little over a month. This was incredibly fast for a building of this size, but it was all thanks to the use of magic.

In my old world, laying the foundation for a regular-sized house usually took around three days, while a larger building could take up to a month—or more in some extreme cases.

However, here, quite a few carpenters were able to use earth magic. After we gathered the construction materials, they were able to lay the foundation of the large facility in three days flat. They'd apparently made use of the existing foundations, adding to them and merging them together with magic instead of redoing everything.

While I'd been talking about merging the five original inns, I hadn't wanted to erase everything and turn them into a square building that looked like a modern hotel. Instead, the shape of the newly made building was uneven. We'd also left a large open area in between the buildings—a courtyard of sorts—where the pool had been installed. You could even see the sea from there.

With the construction finally finished, the large bath I'd been wanting to create was finally ready to open.

As soon as it did, I invited Adel and the others to go try it out with me.

For once, Mr. Plain... Erm...I meant, Jimmy, was accompanying us.

"I can't wait to see what kind of baths we can enjoy here, sir."

"You always go above and beyond to make sure your work is completed to perfection, so take all the time you need to rest today," I told him.

"Thank you for your thoughtfulness, sir. I appreciate it, sir."

Since Jimmy and Ludrig gave their all for me and the estate, I'd invited them both to rest and enjoy the hot springs but Ludrig had declined, saying he had work he needed to finish by the end of the day. Jimmy, on the other hand, didn't have anything urgent to handle and had recently been suffering from lower back pains, so he'd gladly accepted my invitation.

Most of the baths here were mixed-gender, so swimsuits were compulsory. Only the saunas and two baths—one for women and one for men—were separated.

Everyone was already familiar with swimsuits in this world, and they were

readily available on the market. *I guess a previous otherworlder popularized them.* From what I'd heard, they were made from the waterproof skinsof monsters.

We could have bought new swimsuits for the occasion, but I had plenty of them in my inventory, so I'd given them out to the people around me. They were much better looking than what they sold here.

Adel had chosen a bikini that came in a set with a white pareo, and, if I may, she looked glorious in it. As for Youko, she'd picked a flower-embroidered orange swimsuit. The color made her golden tails stand out beautifully, and she looked amazing as well. Akiha had decided on a black swimsuit. Its modern design made her ample bosom stand out in an...appealing way to say the least. Haruka...wasn't here. She was busy picking out what species of roses to grow next with Miss Aura. I had no doubt that Haruka, with her perfect figure, would be a force to be reckoned with if she wore a swimsuit.

Prince Leon will die of jealousy if she wears one while he isn't around.

Last but not least, Fen was wearing a pink swimsuit with plenty of cute frills. That one, we'd bought, though. Akiha had helped her dye it and tweak it a little to give it a more modern look. There were barely any children-sized swimsuits in Britalia Online as most people played with adult characters.

There was a race in the game that had a smaller body type—they were pretty much the height of a child—but the swimsuits they wore all showed the midriff.

Fen thought it'd be too embarrassing to wear a two-piece swimsuit, and I couldn't really bring her here in a school swimsuit. She was happy with the one Akiha had touched up for her, and it was definitely more age-appropriate.

All in all, there wasn't much variety available for men's swimsuits but the developers had really gone all out with the options for ladies. There were plenty of designs that enhanced the chest area, as well as daring and revealing bikinis. *The developers really fed us well.*

I took a look at the girls in their swimsuits while mentally praising the developers. They truly were a sight for sore eyes and looked very different from their usual selves.

Going the extra mile to get this place running was so *worth it!*

We’d just started playing in the water when Youko’s eyes wandered over to Adel and Akiha. Their sizeable breasts were poking out from the water.

She smirked and jumped on them.

“Youko! What are you doing?!” Adel exclaimed.

“Y-Youko... You scared me!” Akiha shrieked.

Youko, whose bosom wasn’t quite as ample, grabbed their chests with a pout on her face. “My hands can’t stay put! You’re both so unfair! Gimme some too!” she whined.



Adel and Akiha both squealed.

It didn't take long to calm her down, but I noticed a few men leaving in a hurry, slouching as they walked. The scene they'd just witnessed had obviously been a little too titillating for them to handle.

I also saw a few men getting scolded or pulled away by their fuming girlfriends. *My condolences, guys.*

After soaking in the pool for a while, I then decided to go to the sauna. They were separated by gender, so I went alone.

I sighed contentedly. It was very hot, but sweating it out felt nice. *Having a nice chilled beer after this would be amazing...* It wouldn't do to start drinking in the middle of the day so I wouldn't actually have one, though.

I hope the others are having a good time too, I thought as I relaxed in the sauna.

I eventually exited the sauna and headed into the lounge. I bought a bottle of orange soda made with the hot springs' carbonated water. The cold fizzy drink was more than welcome after the heat of the sauna.

In spite of the springs' particularity, drinking carbonated water wasn't really a thing here until I introduced people to it. And when I did, it didn't take long for fruity sodas to quickly gain in popularity. They were cheap to make since carbonated water was readily available, and even kids could afford them with their pocket money. Now sodas were one of Atami's specialties.

We mostly imported fruits from the neighboring territory. For the time being, we'd prioritized cultivating rice, wheat, potatoes, and other such vegetables with high nutritional value, as well as products that were very profitable like sugar. We'd move on to growing our fruits locally later on.

We'd actually planted watermelons and strawberries—fruits that could be harvested on the same year they were planted—but there was still some time left until they were ripe.

I did intend to plant orchards eventually, though. The territory I had received was vast and plenty of land was still left unused. I especially wanted to grow

halite mikan—the same fruits we'd given Queen Gardenia for her journey.

The skin of halite mikan was full of minerals, while the fruit itself was sweet and rich in vitamins.

Last time, we had no choice but to have Haruka use her skill, Light of Plenty.

According to the documents I had in my possession, several vineyards were located on my territory, but they'd been burned to the ground during the war.

I'll have to put some energy into restoring them as well once the rest are settled. I wanna have wine and grape juice.

Some guy tried cutting his coffee with carbonated water and passed out after one sip.

Why did you even mix those together?

People learned from their mistakes, but sometimes you just had to wonder why they'd even try those things in the first place.

"Oh, Masaki-san, you finished bathing too," I heard someone say behind me as I was gazing out an open window, enjoying the cool breeze.

"Hey, Akiha," I said after a short pause. "I almost mistook you for Haruka."

With her hair down, she looked just like her sister.

She laughed. "I hear that often. We look a lot like each other; that's why I always braid my hair."

"Now that you mention it, I've only seen you with your hair down on one other occasion, back when we talked in your room."

"Y-You remembered that?"

"Yeah. And I'll commit what you just told me to memory too so that I don't mistake you for her again," I said.

For a second, I'd really thought she was Haruka. The two of them were just too similar, even for sisters. I'd known them for a while, and while they looked the same, they did not carry themselves in a similar fashion at all, so that cleared things up pretty quickly. However, I expected strangers would have a harder time telling them apart.

Even if they tried to pretend to be one another, I was sure Prince Leon could tell which one his beloved Haruka was at first glance, though.

“You should still let your hair down from time to time, though,” I told her. “It suits you. It looks especially good with your swimsuit.”

“Eh?! Hmm... F-Flattery will get you nowhere, you know?”

“I’m not trying to flatter you. It gives you a different vibe and makes your hair color stand out even more. The contrast with your skin’s nice.”

“Gee! Stop that...” she protested, flushing red. “Thank you...”

Ha ha, she’s really cute when she’s feeling embarrassed. I wonder if this is what having a little sister feels like.

To be fair, I usually heard people complain that their little sisters were annoying and not the least bit cute, but, as the youngest in my family, I was still jealous.

Fen was also almost like a little sister to me. Actually, considering her age, she was more like a niece. I was already old enough to have a kid her age after all...

I reined in my thoughts and stopped them from wandering to my ex-girlfriend. *I have Adel and Youko now, and I’m plenty happy.*

“Where’s Adel, by the way?” I asked.

“She’s brushing Fen’s hair and tail.”

“Taking care of her tail is a lot of work,” I commented.

I sometimes brushed it for her. It was incredibly soft, and while it wasn’t as fluffy as Youko’s, it was smooth as a sheet of silk.. Fen loved having her tail brushed so much that she all but purred in the process.

“I ran into a beastman who speaks just like an old-timey gentleman in the sauna,” I told Akiha. “A Siberian husky.”

“Really?” she seemed puzzled.

I’d frequently run into him and we were pretty much friends by now. He was completely hooked on hot springs and had decided to stay in Atami. He worked as an adventurer while visiting the baths as much as he could. He didn’t seem to

know I was the lord of this territory and spoke to me casually. It was nice to have such a candid relationship with someone.

“Yup. I was pretty taken aback the first time I heard him speak.”

“I have a feeling I’d be just as surprised,” she said. “I’d like to meet him sometime.”

“He told me he wasn’t yet satisfied and headed to another bath right after the sauna.”

Aquarea’s biggest charm was the variety of baths you could enjoy here.

Footbaths, basins, herbal baths, baths that included an electric current thanks to rare lightning magic crystals, and many more were available. Apparently, the beastman intended to go through them all today. I was worried he’d get dizzy from the heat, but I assumed a hot springs veteran like him would be fine.

I’d launched a stamp rally a while ago. People had to collect stamps from all the hot spring facilities in the area, and he’d been the first one to complete the challenge. People who managed to collect all of the stamps received a towel with a little bath logo as a present.

I’d heard that right after receiving the prized towel, he’d gone right back to the water.

He really loves hot springs, doesn’t he? I wouldn’t be surprised if he eventually bought a house in Atami and settled here. Apparently, he’d be staying at Aquarea tonight.

Most of the first floor was dedicated to the various baths while the second and third floors were for guests staying overnight. We had loads of rooms available but even so, I’d heard that over half were already booked. Considering it was still the middle of the day, this was beyond impressive.

I was a bit worried the surrounding inns would suffer because of Aquarea, but plenty of people were staying there while still swinging by Aquarea for the pool, so it was a win for everyone.

The others returned while I was chatting with Akiha.

“You’re already here too, Masaki! What are you having?” Youko enquired. “I

don’t think I’ve seen a drink like that before.”

“It’s a mix of fruit juice and carbonated water that they sell here. It’s made with the same water we used to cut the rose liquor, do you remember? I bought some for everyone. Fen, you like milk, right? Would you rather have that?”

“Hmm... Yes... Thank you...very much,” she answered.

I took out the bottles of soda and milk I’d bought earlier from my inventory. Adel and Youko had both gotten used to drinking fizzy drinks during the festival, so they weren’t surprised by the bubbles popping in their mouths. As for Fen, she seemed to be loving the rich flavor of her bottled milk and she looked adorable as she gulped it down.

We were all taking it easy, relaxing with our drinks, when suddenly, someone contacted me using Telepathy. It was one of the soldiers guarding the city.

<Count Toudou, I’m sorry to bother you on your day off. Do you have a moment?>

<What happened? Is there an issue?> I asked.

<Well... A young girl barged into the city and is demanding to see you. She’s out of control.>

<Huh? Can’t you handle a young girl? Calm her down with a cake or something.>

<We tried to. We brought her some food, but she started screaming that it wasn’t what she was here for right after she finished eating. She’s incredibly strong and—oh, Lord Tatsuma just got blown away,> he said with a deadpan tone.

What the?! Tatsuma was sent flying by a young girl?! Why are you saying it as if it’s the most natural thing in the world?!

<I-I got it! I’m on my way, so please hold on! Start evacuating everyone nearby and distract the girl with some more food. She gets mad after she finishes eating, right? Keep her occupied. Don’t worry about the cost, just feed her whatever you find!>

<Understood.>

I immediately opened my map and checked Tatsuma's position. He was in the east of the city...in the square next to the food stalls.

Why's there a girl looking for me? I have absolutely no idea who she could be.

Adel and the others noticed I was flustered.

"Masaki, what's wrong?" Adel asked.

"I don't really know... Apparently, a young girl is fighting with the guards, looking for me. Tatsuma tried to stop her, but she sent him flying. I'll have to see what's happening myself."

"She flung *Tatsuma* in the air?!" Adel yelled in astonishment.

Everyone turned around to stare at her. They were whispering among themselves.

Urgh... I hope they didn't hear everything I said. We'd better get out of here before we start a commotion.

"Not so loud," I admonished. "We'll scare everyone if we continue talking here. Let's go, we'll discuss the details on the way, "I said quietly.

"O-Okay..."

"I'll come with you," Akiha butted in. "I might be able to help."

"I'll watch Fen, so don't worry and go ahead," Youko said.

"Thanks, Youko! We're going east," I told Adel and Akiha.

We changed back into our clothes in a hurry and rushed toward Tatsuma's location, leaving Youko and Fen behind. I kept an eye on my map while bringing Adel and Akiha up to speed. They asked me what my relationship with that girl was, but I had absolutely no idea who she could be.

What in the world is going on? Right on my long-awaited day off, too...

We approached the square, but I couldn't see anything because of the sheer amount of people who'd gathered. Thankfully, I didn't hear people brawling. She must have settled down.

“Excuse me, please let me through!” I said, trying to get to the center of the square.

“Don’t cut into the line!”

“Hey!”

“Oh my, you’re just my type.”

“Stop pushing!”

Amidst the complaints, I heard an unpleasant remark as someone tried to touch my butt. I marked the pervert on my map and made sure to avoid them as I continued to push through the crowd. Adel and Akiha followed close behind me.

We finally got through the crowd and into a large open space. A few cooks were working as hard as they could to put out dish after dish while guards carried them away. Tatsuma was still lying down in a crater—he probably hadn’t managed to get up after getting blown away by the girl. He reminded me of Ya*cha.

He’s not moving one bit... He’s not dead, right?

I watched the girl eat in awe. She was gulping down entire bowls of soup as if they were filled with water and devouring skewer after skewer of grilled fish—fish bones included. I had no idea how all that food could even fit in her tiny body. She was going through the food like a ravenous beast, but she seemed to be enjoying every second of it. The cooks were struggling to keep up with her, but they seemed proud of themselves, secure in the knowledge that their culinary skills weren’t going unappreciated.

I spotted a few guys running back and forth, buying food from the stalls located a little further away and relentlessly bringing it to the girl. They looked like zookeepers trying to appease a ferocious beast. *What on earth’s going on here?*

The girl suddenly noticed me. She noisily swallowed the piece of meat she was holding, casually throwing the large leftover bone right into a trashcan.

“There you are!!!” she screamed, pointing at me with a skewer.

She started running toward me, kicking up a cloud of dust. As she got closer, I could see the bits of food stuck to her face.

She's fast!

She was almost in front of me when she suddenly stumbled on the paving.

"Ah," I let out, watching her tumble forward.

"Ah," she repeated.

Her speed hadn't fallen in the slightest, and I had no time to dodge. She crashed right into my stomach, and a whine escaped my mouth.

"Masaki?!"

"Masaki-san!"

I was sent flying backward by the impact and despite crashing into several trees, they weren't enough to halt my velocity, and I eventually went through a wall, which collapsed over me as I violently crashed into the ground.

I hadn't taken any damage, but I felt a bit sick after being hit in the stomach. I had a feeling I'd been pushed back like that in the past, but I couldn't pinpoint when...

"Ouch..." I groaned.

The girl had flown through the wall with me.

She's not hurt either?! How? Who in the world is she?

"Hey! Are you okay?" I asked, fishing her out of the rubble. "You're not hurt...right?"

I didn't get an answer. *She passed out...*

I was finally able to take a good look at her face. She seemed to be about thirteen to fifteen years of age. Her long hair was a very striking blue—I couldn't help but be reminded of the color of the sea when I looked at it—and it reached all the way to her ankles. She was wearing a long blue dress. The bottom part was made with some sort of translucent material I'd never seen before.

I could see Adel and Akiha rushing to me on my map.

“Urgh...” She opened her eyes. “Ah!” she exclaimed as soon as she saw me.

Even though she’d crashed into a hard wall, she’d only been unconscious for a few seconds. She was no ordinary girl.

Is she an otherworlder too? I wondered. *She has to be a strong one if so.*

“I finally found you, Hero. You sure are gutsy, making me waste so much time.”

“I’d say you’re the gutsy one, complaining about how I wasted your time when you seemed to be engrossed in a meal. Maybe wipe those crumbs off the corner of your mouth first,” I suggested, pointing at her face and handing her a handkerchief.

“Uh...”

She blushed as she accepted it and wiped her face. She seemed to have *thoroughly* enjoyed it, and I was a little scared to find out just how much I owed the stall owners by now. I’d said I’d take care of the cost, so I couldn’t really go back on my word...

“So, care to tell me who you are now?” I asked. “I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

I had yet to go senile, and I was fairly sure I’d remember someone with such striking hair if I’d seen her before. No matter how hard I thought about it, her face didn’t ring a bell either.

She stared at me in astonishment.

No need to act so shocked! I really have no idea who you are!

“I must say I’m heartbroken, Hero. To think you’d forget me even though you were so deep inside me last time,” she said, bringing her finger to her mouth and wriggling her hips suggestively.

Excuse you? What are you on about?

“What? Masaki, what is she talking about?”

“Masaki-san...”

Adel and Akiha had just caught up to us. At the worst possible time!

Damn, I can almost see *Adel's wrath... Scary!*

"Hang on, hang on! This is all a misunderstanding! We're never even met before today!" I turned to the girl once more. "Who are you?!"

"How could you forget the ardent oh-so-passionate moments we shared? You went so hard on me, I could never forget it..." she continued, casting her eyes down and pretending to be deeply hurt.

I could feel Adel and Akiha's gazes piercing me and even Invincibility was powerless to shield me from that. *My heart can't take this!*

"To think you're even wearing the bracelet I bestowed upon you... I'm disappointed, Hero," she said.



“What? A bracelet? Wait! No way... Are you...?”

We all stared at my bracelet. *I only ever wear the one bracelet, so that means she must be...*

“I see you finally remember me. Master of the whirlpools, god of the sea, Bahamut’s only match...those are all names conferred upon me by your kind. I’m Leviathan.”

“WHAT?!” the three of us shouted at the same time.

The Leviathan had turned into a young girl and was in my territory?!

I had no idea what the hell was going on, but I was sure of one thing: I could kiss my peaceful days goodbye.

Chapter 9

Empty plates and bowls were being thrown in front of me at a crazy speed.

I'd brought the girl who'd introduced herself as the Leviathan back to my residence, and the first thing she'd said was "I'm still hungry."

"You still want to eat more?!" I'd exclaimed, utterly shocked.

I called Lohas—who'd been out at sea with the rest of the crew—back in a hurry and had him and the chef cook enough food to feed the glutton.

I'd brought her back here to quell the commotion in the town square, but it wasn't as if things were any less of a mess here. We were currently in the midst of a war—a war between that girl and the kitchen.

I placed another pile of chicken skewers in front of her before sitting down in the seat opposite hers. She grabbed a handful of skewers and gobbled them all down in one bite. Before long, the plate was completely empty.

"Hey!"

"More!" she exclaimed, her mouth still half full.

The plate of fried fish that was set in front of her was emptied just as fast, and she held it out for Akiha to take back.

"CComing right up", Akiha said, picking up the plate.

Leviathan's lips and chin were covered in grease.

Now that's scary.

She'd already had so much food while waiting for me to show up, and she was still going through plate after plate. I'd gotten the bill, and I'd never seen so many zeros on a check for *one* meal. It wasn't even the full amount, since some people had bought her food out of their own volution.

She was now munching on corn noisily. "This corn is quite the delicacy! Can I have four—no, five more cobs?"

"I'll grow them for you, so please wait a little," Haruka said.

“You don’t need that many!” I interrupted, hitting Leviathan’s head with a paper fan.

It made a nice noise.

“That huuuuuurts!” she whined, glaring at me with teary eyes as she gently patted the top of her head with her hand.

I still couldn’t believe that this whiny brat was Leviathan, the god of the sea.

“What are you doing?! I’m one of the Three Dragons! Show some respect!”

“Who the hell would respect you?! Anyway, weren’t you looking for me? How about you tell me what you want?”

“Oh. Indeed, I was. The food here was so good that I forgot about it,” Leviathan said, wiping her mouth with a napkin she’d pulled from god-knows-where.

She straightened her back. Now that she was sitting properly, she looked like a princess, or at least, a noble young lady.

Couldn’t you have looked like that from the start? First impressions were important, and now I couldn’t find it in me to revere her.

“Hero, I came to find you to give my thanks and to make a request of you. I believe you’re qualified enough.”

“A request...?” I repeated. “Why would you thank me, though? I haven’t done anything, have I?”

“I believe you’ve recently saved a group of white vars.”

Ah. She’s talking about those whales that produced the magical fog around the Phantom Blau, isn’t she?

“They’re powerful creatures, but they have a mild temperament. They do not usually seek conflict and live quietly while protecting weaker species, such as the merpeople. Most of them suddenly disappeared one day, and while I looked for them, I was unsuccessful until they came back on their own a few weeks ago. They told me a human had put a strange seal on them, and they’d been forced to serve him for some time until you freed them. I had things to tell you regardless, but I believe this is a good occasion to offer my thanks on behalf of

my brethren. I truly appreciate what you did for them, Hero."

"It's no problem. Hopefully, such a thing won't happen again, but tell them to be careful in the future nonetheless. Moving on to your request, then. What do you need?"

"Have you heard about the neighboring continent, Arth?" she asked.

Of course, I do. I ended up sorting out their issues a few weeks ago!

"I have. It's mostly inhabited by beastmen and other such races, isn't it?"

"Correct. If you've heard about Arth, I can cut to the chase and move on to my request. I'd like you to accompany me to the Beastmen Kingdom."

The Beastmen Kingdom.

It was a large country located in Arth where various races lived in harmony. The people I'd saved on the Phantom Blau had told me that even elves, dwarves, and fairies lived there.

"That's kind of sudden," I answered, waiting for Leviathan to elaborate.

"Well... What do you know of the Three Dragons?" Leviathan asked.

"Not much. Just that it's a decoration and that they include Bahamut, the sky dragon, Jörmungandr, the earth dragon, and you, Leviathan, the sea dragon."

Count Alan had explained things to me a little back when Youko was awarded the Order of Three Dragons.

In this world, there were three divine dragons who were sometimes worshipped as deities. For instance, Bahamut was the guardian god of the Sentdrag Kingdom, while Jörmungandr was supposed to dwell in Arth. That was pretty much everything I knew.

As for the last dragon emperor... Well, she was currently munching on freshly boiled corn.

It was hard to believe the glutton sitting across me was the revered sea god. I even remembered her telling me she was too lazy to do things herself. *A glutton and a NEET...*

I grabbed a corncob myself and sunk my teeth into it. It had just been

harvested and was incredibly sweet.

She swallowed noisily before saying, “So, what I was trying to get at is that the old geezer Jörmungandr’s presence is too faint these days.”

“His presence is faint?”

She’s calling him an old geezer? Jörmungandr must be much older than her, then. I guess they’re both so old that it doesn’t matter much. I’ll only end up getting confused if I think too hard about this.

“We can sense each other at all times,” Leviathan explained. “That’s how I was able to find you too. I followed your presence through the bracelet I gave you.”

Figures. I’d never told her where I lived, but she’d been able to pinpoint this territory thanks to that ability of hers.

“Usually, I can sense them very clearly, but some things can disrupt our bond... I don’t want to believe anyone could have hurt him but...one can never be sure, can they? I was in trouble myself not too long ago, after all.”

“I remember. A weird tree was growing inside you. It started rotting and disappeared right after I cut it... Wait, do you mean to say that...”

“Jörmungandr might be under someone’s control, just like I was. Or he might have been sealed somehow... I can only sense his presence very faintly, but I can tell: the same ominous energy I felt then is on him.”

One of the Three Dragons might have fallen under someone’s spell... It wouldn’t be the first time. Barry, Iiro, and even Philia were being controlled because of a corrosion status, and while the effects had been milder on Leviathan, she had also been suffering from something similar. That was probably how she could tell something was wrong with Jörmungandr.

Shou’s words popped up in my mind. He’d warned me about the dangerous organization that had granted Iiro his powers—Pavaria. If they were powerful enough to turn the empire upside down, they could have harmed Jörmungandr too. Especially since they’d succeeded in controlling Leviathan before.

I’d always wondered why they hadn’t shown up during our fight against Iiro in

the empire, but it seemed like they'd already moved on to Arth at that time. They'd probably left Iiro behind as bait with no intention of helping him.

"I originally intended to go alone, but since I can't sense him properly, I don't know where he is. If I can't find him in his sanctuary, I'll have to search the entire continent. It's far too wide for me to handle alone."

"To put it in a nutshell, you're lacking manpower. Can't you just have your familiars look for him?"

I remembered the Leviathan summoning dozens of sea serpents during our fight. The seas were vast, and I had no doubt she had hundreds—if not thousands—of other familiars and retainers—mermaids, fishmen, maybe even penguins... *It'd be cool if she could summon emperor penguins.*

"They belong in the waters. They would be greatly weakened if they were to come ashore. Not to mention they cannot take on a human form like me."

"I see... I've heard the situation is pretty tense in the Beastmen Kingdom, so if you brought them along in such a state, you may face casualties if things were to go awry."

"Exactly I'm not asking you to help me for free, by the way."

"You're going to give me something?"

The Leviathan's Bracelet had come in handy quite a few times. Even though Leviathan didn't look all that reliable with all that sauce on her face, she was still one of the Three Dragons. I had great expectations.

"I have it on good authority that one of the ladies you've saved is still deep in slumber. I can awaken her for you," she stated.

"You could wake up Philia? Really?!" Tatsuma, who'd been standing in a corner of the room quietly up until now, shouted.

I know you're excited to hear your lover could wake up, but let's try to stay calm.

He didn't seem to care that Leviathan had sent him flying earlier. I suppose that was inevitable anyway. Leviathan *was* tough to handle.

"Yes," she confirmed. "I've felt that power within me, and I can handle it. I'd

need to see the girl to be certain, but I believe she hasn't woken up because there remains foreign matter in her soul. When the tree controlling me was destroyed, I felt something trying to slip into my soul. In my case, it was destroyed immediately. A dragon's soul isn't so easy to invade."

It's no wonder the elixir hasn't done much for her.

Elixirs, just like other potions, could only cure ailments of the body, not the soul. Leviathan had been targeted by the very same power, so she was most likely right. She'd been alive for longer than I could imagine and could rely on magic no human would ever be able to wield. She most likely had her ways to meddle with Philia's soul.

"I also have another reward in mind," Leviathan continued. "I'll lend you my powers. To be honest, I quite like this city. You have nice food, and those hot springs of yours are most comfortable. I wouldn't be opposed to settling here if you build me a residence."

I'd rebuilt Atami to suit my taste, but it seemed Leviathan and I had more in common than I'd thought. If she settled here and agreed to lend a hand from time to time, we'd become one of the world's top powers overnight.

It also came with some drawbacks, though... If she stayed here to assist us, I'd have to keep feeding her. I could already picture the costs... Speaking of which, Leviathan had already devoured every last bit of food on the table. I still couldn't figure out how she managed to fit everything into such a small body! Then again, her original body was gigantic, so there was that.

"That much could easily be arranged," I answered. "It'd have to fit in with the rest of the city, though, so don't expect a lavish sanctuary."

"I don't mind. I have no need for an opulent dwelling. I've seen several wooden houses. Just build me one like that."

Wooden houses... She's talking about the Japanese-style inns, isn't she?

If she wanted a wooden building, I could try building her a Japanese-style shrine. She was revered as a god, after all.

I could add her shrine to the stamp rally. I'm sure people will love a Leviathan stamp.

“If you’re all right with that, then I’ll have one built for you. I was thinking of using wood more anyway.”

“It’s settled then! I’ll be in your care, Hero.”

“Can I ask you to treat Philia first? It’ll take some time to erect your dwelling. I hope you don’t mind.”

I wanted the princess to wake up as soon as possible. She’d been stuck in her bed unable to do anything for far too long.

“I don’t mind at all. I’ll have you work hard to repay me afterward. I know you won’t disappoint me, Hero.”

“Hmm... I don’t mind helping you and all that but could you stop calling me “Hero”? My name is Masaki.”

“You are a hero, are you not?” she said with a sigh. “I’ll call you Masaki if you stop calling me Leviathan. Levia is enough. Or you could call me ‘darling’ if you prefer,” she teased.

“Levia it is.”

“How cold!”

She didn’t seem happy with my decision, but there was no way in hell I was going to call her “darling.”

I was open to the idea of lending her a hand, though. If Jörmungandr was truly being controlled by Pavaria, I couldn’t ignore it. It would spell trouble for everyone, including my loved ones.

I asked Levia what we could expect if Jörmungandr started unleashing his power.

“If the old geezer goes crazy... Arth would be split in two, at the very least.”

That’s drastic! Way worse than anything I could have imagined!

I really couldn’t leave this alone.

“All right... It’s getting late, but would you agree to accompany me to the Sentdrag Kingdom tomorrow? Adel, Tatsuma, you come too. I’ll need to discuss this with the king and request assistance to take care of my territory while I’m

away. And I'm sure the princess will feel safer if you're there when she wakes up, Tatsuma."

"I'll come along," Adel agreed.

"Of course," Tatsuma said immediately. "Philia... She'll finally wake up..."

He looked so happy. *Good for you, Tatsuma.*

"I don't mind going to that girl tomorrow, Masaki. But in the meantime, get me more of that," Levia said, pointing at the empty plates in front of her.

"You need to restrain yourself a little! I'm gonna go broke at this rate!" I exploded, hitting her with a paper fan for the second time in the day.

Levia shot a dissatisfied glare my way before picking up some discarded fish bones. She started popping them into her mouth like they were candies.

Leftovers won't be a thing with her around.

I would never have expected my day off to turn out this way. I felt bad for Adel, Akiha, and Fen. I'd have to make it up to them later on.

Speaking of Fen, something about her had been bothering me for a while. Ever since we'd arrived home, she'd stayed put, looking at her feet without a word. She'd never been the kind to run around, but she usually paid a lot of attention to the needs of the people around her. I was surprised she hadn't tried to bring Levia something to eat, for instance.

She seemed to be lost in thought. While she'd been fine back at the hot springs, she'd started acting strange after she saw Levia.

"What's wrong, Fen? Are you feeling sick?" I asked.

She didn't react. *There's no way she didn't hear me...right?*

"Fen?" I tried again, shaking her shoulder softly.

"Wh-What?! Oh! Hmm... Wh-What is it?"

"I just thought you looked a little down," I said. "If you don't feel good, you should go lay down and rest."

"You're...right... Then...I will excuse myself..." she said, bowing with an apologetic expression on her face before running off.

I was starting to get worried. *I should check on her, right?*

I felt a little guilty about using my map in this way, but I opened it and put a mark on her.

After that, I baked some cheesecake for Levia who'd been urging me to bring her a dessert. She threw herself at me after a few bites, clinging to me and repeating how good it was.

Are you sure you're a sea god and not a puppy?

◆◇◆

Fen was alone, late at night, looking up at the moon that hung high in the sky.

It's been so long since...I last received a revelation from the gods...

While Masaki and Leviathan had been talking, Fen had fallen into a trance and received a revelation. Even among the most devoted believers, very few could hear the voice of the gods. However, Fen was one of them.

This time, it was brief: "Head to the Beastmen Kingdom. Your power will be needed there."

While short, each word was a precious gift from one of the gods Fen revered. As a sincere believer, she knew she had to obey and head to the Beastmen Kingdom.

After receiving the revelation, Fen couldn't help but think of what Leviathan had told Masaki. According to her, something might have happened to Jörmungandr. That was the moment when Fen received the revelation. It couldn't be a coincidence.

The young girl couldn't decide whether to keep it to herself or inform Masaki and Leviathan. If she wanted to follow through with the orders, the easiest way would be to tell Masaki about it and follow him to the Beastmen Kingdom. However, Fen couldn't bring herself to do that. Something was still weighing on her mind: the attack on her religious group.

As a shaman, Fen was most likely the only one who had noticed, but those who had attacked her and her people weren't human. They weren't beastmen, nor monsters for that matter. They weren't living beings at all.

Those repulsive things had easily destroyed their group. She was afraid of what would happen if she encountered them again while traveling with Masaki. She already owed him her life, and she didn't want him to be hurt, or worse, die because of her. It terrified her much more than the prospect of losing her own life.

Moreover...the Three Dragons had reason to want to slay her. Taking that into account, she was even more reluctant to bring up the revelation in front of Leviathan. No matter how hard she thought it over, Fen couldn't reach a conclusion. She let out a big sigh and decided to seek Nemea's advice regardless of the late hour. She couldn't go to the Beastmen Kingdom alone. Even if she didn't involve Masaki, she'd need Nemea's support.

Nemea was working as an adventurer for the time being, but she knew he was still a reliable ally and would never hesitate to protect her. He surely wouldn't mind her visiting so late either, she resolved, turning her back to the moon as she got ready to pay him a visit.

Suddenly, she noticed a large shadow looming over her.

"Eh?" she yelped, turning around in a hurry.

A masked man clad in black waved at her. He was almost unnoticeable amid the dark of the night.

He lightly struck at her throat and everything turned black. She was losing consciousness. The masked man supported her so she wouldn't hit the floor before quickly stuffing her into a large bag. He picked it up and jumped down from the balcony, landing without a noise.

Five men who'd been lurking in the shadow stepped forward.

"Leader, is she the one?"

"Yes. What of the men guarding the residence?"

"It was close, but we subdued them all."

"Good. We're out of here, then," the leader said with a nod, concluding the short exchange.

The group of men jumped over the walls that surrounded Masaki's residence.

In the bushes closest to the wall lay the bloodied bodies of Jirou’s men.

At their leader’s orders, the group of men dashed through the night. A pack of night foxes noticed them but ran away in a hurry. Before long, the men had left the main road and entered a forest located on the outskirt of Atami. They hadn’t run into a single guard or monster.

The masked man let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. He couldn’t allow himself to lose focus, he reminded himself. He knew that letting your guard down meant failure. However, even if you were perfectly prepared, you sometimes ended up facing impossible odds anyway.

“How about you stop running?” a voice came from behind.

The man hadn’t sensed anyone in the area, and he and his subordinates turned back in a hurry, shocked.

In front of them was the very personification of these impossible odds. The rumored Azure Hero, Masaki, and a girl they’d never seen before were hovering in the sky in front of them. Under them, standing on the ground was...

“Return the shaman... Return Fen to me this instant!”

The person they’d been most wary of: Nemea Londwell, the battle leo.

◆◇◆

When I suddenly saw a bunch of unknown entity marks around Fen on my map, I wondered what was going on, but I would never have thought people would try to kidnap her! I shot a telepathic message to Nemea without a moment's delay as soon as I realized what was going on.

Nemea lived in the same building as my servants along with Tatsuma and the others. We'd decided it was better for him to settle in my estate in case there was an issue with Fen and, sure enough, something *had* happened.

<Nemea, please come out at once! Fen's been abducted.>

<WHAT?! How could this be? Who did it?!>

<I don't know! The only thing I can say is that there are six of them. They just fled. We'll follow them from the sky, so get ready as quickly as possible!>

<I got it!>

I opened my window without bothering to change into something more suited to combat. I was about to give chase when I noticed Levia standing on the windowsill.

"Oh, Masaki, I see you noticed this rude bunch too."

"As did you."

"Well... I had my eyes on the girl. I wanted to have a little talk with her, but she was taken away before I got the chance to. Let's follow them."

"We will. But first, I'm needed here," I said, hurrying over to the bushes next to the wall.

I could see three marks there—Jirou's men. They always protected my residence from the shadows. While I could spot intruders with my map, it was impossible for me to look at it twenty-four hours a day. I wasn't the only one to employ such people. Nobles often hired *shadows* to keep an eye on their estate. In my case, Jirou had sent men over out of worry. They all looked like ninjas—Jirou's influence, I assumed—which was pretty cool in my opinion.

They'd naturally noticed the intruders, but I hadn't seen them move in a while... It most likely meant that...

I took in the gruesome spectacle in front of me. They were laying in a puddle of blood and even the leaves scattered around them had been dyed red.

“They’re still alive, Masaki,” Levia pointed out.

“Yes,” I confirmed, rushing to the men. “Area Heal!”

“C-Count...” one of them said, struggling to open his eyes.

The other two were still unconscious—they’d probably lost too much blood to wake up so quickly.

“I apologize...” he continued. “We let the intruders...slip away...”

“It’s fine. Thank you for slowing them down. Leave the rest to me and focus on recovering, all right? I healed your wounds, but you lost quite a bit of blood. You’ll need to take it easy for the time being. I have to hurry after them, but don’t worry—I’ll send someone to help you.”

“Sorry...” he said again.

Although he’d woken up, he was in no condition to stand.

“We need to get someone,” I told Levia after we soared into the air once more. “We’re headed to the annex.”

“Okay.”

While we were flying, I opened my status window and used a shortcut key to equip a set of equipment. My appearance changed in a split second, and my blue cloak fluttered in the wind as we cut through the air.

“Y-You changed in an instant! How peculiar. Is this another of your otherworldly powers?”

“Yeah. As long as I have the proper items in my inventory, getting changed is quick enough.”

It was especially quick if I used shortcut keys to equip sets I’d previously set up such as this one. In *Britalia Online,* you often had to change your equipment to fit the situation. Having to go through your entire inventory to find the proper items was a pain, and the developers had eventually added this function —that already existed in several other games—to pacify the players who

complained. It was definitely welcome and much more practical if you asked me.

I could still use that function in this world, and it made it much easier to get ready for combat at any time. Whether I was in my pajamas or wearing ceremonial clothes, I was always one click away from being combat-ready.

Nemea was already waiting for me in front of the annex.

“Nemea!” I called out. “Let’s not waste any more time! Raise your arms!”

He followed my instruction and I grabbed one of his hands, lifting him from the ground without slowing down.

“Any idea who would want to target Fen or why?” I asked him.

“I do... But before I say more, I need you to promise me something.”

“What is it?”

“No matter what happens... Stand by her, please,” he pleaded.

“I will. I’ll take her side no matter what. You have my word.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to repay this debt!”

“You’re so softhearted, Masaki,” Levia commented with a little laugh.

“I wouldn’t say that,” I retorted.

I could use Log Analysis. Uncovering the truth about Nemea and Fen was child’s play for me. I may have sounded like a naive hero right out of a fairy tale—ready to believe anything as long as a meek-looking child said it—but I wasn’t like that. I had responsibilities, and I couldn’t afford to let my emotions sway me. I was always on my guard and kept an eye out for spies.

Even though Atami seemed peaceful at first glance, Tatsuma had informed me that foreign spies had been spotted sneaking into the city recently.

Some of them had been after information on the bicycles we built here. I didn’t really care about that, though. I never intended to keep a monopoly on bicycles. After all, craftsmen were bound to learn how to copy them if we sold them, and I was fully ready to see imitations appear on the market. At the end of the day, it would only help make bicycles more popular the world over,

which would benefit us the most. *Go ahead, guys. Get your bicycles out there! We're struggling to meet the demand anyway!*

I always made sure to keep everything I didn't want the wrong people to see in my Room. I was the type to look before I leapt, and I made sure to exercise vigilance at all times. *Better safe than sorry, right?*

That is to say: I had already checked both Fen and Nemea with Log Analysis ages ago. I'd learned that Fen was the shaman of a religious group called the Church of Ouroboros. It was said to be a gathering of heretics. As for Nemea, he was a battle priest tasked with her protection. What they'd told me about being attacked by mysterious people and forced to flee was true.

I'd also been able to see that Fen held some sort of power—something strong enough to threaten the Three Dragons. I didn't know what it was exactly, but an elderly elf had screamed something along those lines in front of Fen: "How could such an ability fall into the hands of a little girl?! No—it's no matter! As long as we have this, we could surpass the Three Dragons!"

I had no way of knowing if that was true or not. However, Fen had been picked to become the shaman because of this, and she most certainly believed this statement to be true.

I thought she might run away, scared that Levia would confront her, but she'd been abducted instead!

"Nemea, can you tell me who you suspect now?"

"I can't be entirely sure, but...I believe she might have been kidnapped by people from our church... Even among us, few people knew of Fen's power, but I caught a faint scent... I think the secret faction might be involved."

He smelled something, huh? Beastmen were known for their exceptional olfactory capabilities. They could tell hundreds of scents apart even in a crowd. I'd never be able to do the same.

I remembered watching a documentary about police dogs in my previous world, and apparently they could track someone down based on a three-day-old scent. I assumed beastmen were just as sensitive, if not more, to smells.

"But why would they come after her now?"

“It’d be best to ask them directly,” he stated.

Their cult had already been destroyed. For some of them to kidnap Fen now... Were they hoping to revive their church? Or perhaps they had another goal in mind altogether. Nemea was right; there was no point in speculating. I’d ask them after I caught them.

We continued to fly in the dark of the night until we spotted a group of men. One of them was carrying a large jute bag. *Fen must be in there.*

Levia looked at me. “Masaki, what’s ahead?”

“Just a forest, I believe,” I answered, puzzled.

“A forest, huh? I see... I have a pretty good idea where they’re headed.”

“You got a plan?”

“We could subdue them here, but I think it’d be wiser to wait. Let’s stay on their tail for now.”

“All right. Give me your hand, then.”

“My hand?” she asked, holding it out toward me.

The pale dainty hand appeared to belong to a pure young girl who’d yet to experience the hardships of the world, and yet, I knew Levia could lay waste to entire cities with that very hand if she so wished.

I gently took her hand into my own and activated Stealth.

“What in the...?! Are we...transparent?!” she asked, looking at herself. “What is going on?”

“I used a skill to make us invisible. You’ll remain invisible as long as you hold my hand. but if any of us attack or use magic on someone—even healing magic—the skill will deactivate, so be careful. This should make our pursuit easier, don’t you think?”

“Interesting. I see you have some skills I’ve never heard about.”

Stealth wasn’t actually a skill, but I wasn’t going to mention that.

“We can peep at whoever we like with this, can’t we?” Levia added.

“Why do you have to think of the worst possible way to use it?!”

I’d be lying if I said the thought had never crossed my mind, but I felt like it’d be a waste to use such an overpowered skill for something like that. *Actually, maybe I would have if I’d been summoned into this world when I was still a stupid teen...*

We continued to argue back and forth as we followed the kidnappers. We could be as loud as we wanted—Stealth would conceal the noise.

After a while, the forest came into view.

“Here’s the place. Masaki, we don’t need to follow them anymore. Let’s catch them.”

“All right. Nemea, I’ll lower my altitude fast, so hold on tight.”

“Got it!”

Levia and I were still holding hands as we descended quickly, heading straight toward the kidnappers. Our enemies had come to a stop after reaching the forest. They scanned their surroundings, focused.

They’re not messing around, are they? All the focus in the world won’t save them, though.

I exchanged a look with Levia and Nemea, and we all nodded. Nemea let go of my hand, landing behind the group while Levia started gathering her mana so she’d be ready to fight at any point.

“How about you stop running?” she asked.

“Return the shaman... Return Fen to me this instant!”

The clouds that had been obscuring the moon drifted, and I finally got a proper look at the assailants. I hadn’t noticed until now, but three of them were beastmen while the other three were half-beastmen.

Their leader—or at least I assumed he was—had the head of a wolf and was carrying the jute bag over his shoulder. The other two had the features of a leopard and a monkey. I’d almost mistaken the monkey beastman for a human, but his distinctive tail gave him away. As for the half-beastmen, one had sheep horns, the second had goat horns, and the last had striped cat ears.

Their leader carefully put down the bag on the floor before pointing a knife our way. Nemea responded by assuming a fighting stance.

“I knew I was you, Garm,” he said.

“It’s been a while, Nemea... I wish we could have met again under different circumstances.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

They seemed to know each other. Since they used to be part of the same organization, I supposed it was to be expected.

“Garm, I heard our church had been entirely destroyed. Why come after the shaman now?”

“I don’t owe you an answer,” the wolf replied after a moment of hesitation. “We need the shaman! If you insist on getting in our way, I’ll take care of you along with your hero friend!”

“Oh, so you know who I am?” I asked. “And it seems like you have no intention of returning Fen to us...”

“Never.”

Fair enough. He wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of kidnapping her if he was going to hand her back that easily.

“We’re taking the shaman home!” he said again. “Human hero, I have no qualms with you, but you’ll die here with Nemea. You’ll have time to regret your poor choice of allies on the other side!”

The six of them threw themselves at us at once.

So we can’t even try to negotiate first? Oh well, if they’re raring for a fight, they’ll get one.

Nemea and Garm clashed while Levia and I handled the other five. Beastmen had animal instincts. They studied their opponents, picking up on clues that could let them know whether to engage or flee. However, the beastmen we were facing had been all but brainwashed by their religious dogma. Their instincts could not deter them from taking on impossible battles anymore.

Garm may have let his guard down because he thought he knew Nemea, but the logical course of action would have been to run away with Fen while having his men slow us down.

He'd already lost the moment he had decided to fight us.

I took a step back and dodged the leopard beastman's sharp thrust. He seemed skilled, but as far as I was concerned, he was much slower than Barry or Touji. Touji would have had the time to slash at me ten times in the time it took that guy to manage one hit. *That comparison's a bit unfair, isn't it?*

I went for a foot sweep right after dodging.

He yelped.

He had yet to hit the floor before I activated Silent Blow and Non-Lethal Attack, striking his torso. "Take this!"

He'd underestimated me because I wasn't armed, but my hit sent him flying. He groaned as he lay on the ground, unmoving.

The others were more cautious now. The monkey beastman snuck behind my back and threw his dagger at me. *A decent move*, I thought. It was pointless, but he'd tried.

I caught his blade between two fingers and quickly switched out Silent Blow for Homing Shooter. I didn't have to actively open my skill tab anymore. If I focused hard enough, I could change my skills just like that. I needed a little less than a second to do it, but if I trained more, I'd surely be able to do it even faster.

I used Homing Shooter to throw the dagger right back at him, aimed at his legs. My opponent seemed surprised at first, but he switched gears quickly and focused on making his next move. He jumped sideways to dodge the dagger while taking out another one from his pocket. Even though he was my enemy, I couldn't help but give him a thumbs up in my mind. *What a smooth transition!*

Sadly for him, though, Homing Shooter came with a tracking function. Dodging the dagger wasn't enough. It rotated in the air, piercing into his thigh from behind.

“H-How?! I’m sure I dodged it!”

“Sorry, that’s just how the skill works,” I answered.

Homing Shooter was best used when you were trying to hit a particular spot. In the game, it was mostly used with throwing knives, stones, and other such projectiles, but in this world, I could just as well use it with swords or spears. A homing spear was pretty much a missile, wasn’t it? *How cool would it be if it always hit the bull’s eye just like Gungnir?*

The dagger dug into the monkey beastman’s flesh, stopping him from jumping around.

He whined in pain. He’d understood he wouldn’t win against me, but he clutched his dagger even harder and started raising it. *No! He’s going to commit suicide!*

“Don’t!” I screamed.

“Urgh!”

I’d moved before thinking and had ended up punching him in the face. Thankfully, I’d managed to send the knife flying, and it rolled on the ground a little further away.

The beastman lost consciousness. *Did I hit his chin?*

I’d used Non-Lethal Attack, so he wouldn’t die—he was just out cold.

“Enjoy your nap, buddy. Everything will be over by the time you wake up.”

I’d dealt with the two people that had attacked me, but I wondered how Levia was doing. *I hope everything’s all right on her side—and by that, I mean I hope her enemies are still breathing.*

Right as I thought that, I heard a loud bang.

I turned around at once and saw two half-beastmen lodged into the ground, headfirst. Levia had just blown the last one away with a single finger. *So she can K.O. people just like that, huh?*

She’d hit the man in the face, so I could only hope he was still alive. *Oh boy, there’s a crack on his horn.*

“Don’t worry. I hit him with the back of my finger. We can get them to tell us all what is going on in the Beastmen Kingdom, so I kept them alive,” she said, sensing my concern.

What in the world are you talking about? Is your finger a sword?

Now that I looked at the weapons scattered on the floor, I noticed that they were all broken. *I guess Levia’s finger* is *stronger than a sword.*

I still ran up to the man to check on him. He was convulsing, but he was still breathing. I used Appraisal to ascertain the extent of the damage. *His HP is on the one digit! He could die at any moment!*

“He’s on the verge of death! Levia, learn to hold back a little!”

She pouted. “My bad...”

I used healing magic in a hurry before turning to check on Nemea. His fight was pretty much over too.

A knife was lodged in his shoulder, and his cheek had been lacerated. However, he’d clearly returned the blows. Garm was on his knees, clutching at his stomach with a strained expression on his face.

It was clear who the victor was.

“It’s over, Garm. Take a good look around yourself. Your men are down too,” Nemea said.

“How could you defeat my men so easily... Urgh. Just kill me! I don’t need your pity!”

I want a beautiful female knight to beg me like that! Not an old beastman!

“Why would we kill you? We have tons of things to ask,” I butted in.

“You can torture us however you want, but we won’t say a thing!”

“You say that now, but I have my ways,” I answered. “I suggest you speak out of your own volution... You may regret it if you don’t. Oh, and...don’t even think of committing suicide. I’ll heal you as many times as I need to.”

“We live in the shadows. We’ll never submit to you, no matter what! Torture us if you will!”

Now, that's one cliché reaction.

"Masaki, I can't let you take on such an unpleasant task..." Nemea said.

"Don't worry! It won't be nearly as gruesome as you imagine, ha ha!"

"Huh?"

Heh, heh, heh! I can't wait to see how long they'll withstand this.

"I see... So you had a crush on that cute bunny girl in your class? She has a nice smile, I'll give you that."

"Aaaah! No! Stop! Don't say anymore!"

"You took your courage in both hands and finally confessed that summer... Oh my, I never would have excepted this turn of events! 'Sorry, I'm a boy,' he said! What a way to lower the curtain on your first love!"

His scream echoed through the forest. "Shut uuuuup!!!"

I was currently using Log Analysis to go through his embarrassing memories, *one by one*. It would take too long to actually go through everything, so I was waiting for him to crack—and having a blast in the meantime.

His men were currently speechless. They were put off by their stern leader's unthinkable past, their faces pale as they looked at us in horror.

I was nowhere near done, though!

"Ha ha! You wore your clothes inside-out on your first date with your wife? You don't do well under pressure, do you? You even brought her a hundred red roses?! Wow! Wait, you ran into that bunny boy? And then—"

"STOP IT! PLEASE! NEMEAAAA!!! MAKE HIM STOP! I'LL TALK! I'LL TALK, SO PLEASE!"

Garm was tied up so he wouldn't try to take his own life as I peered into his past with Log Analysis. I'd kept on bringing up embarrassing memories he didn't want anyone to hear about, and he clearly couldn't take it anymore. *Man, that was effective!*

His men were shivering, scared out of their minds, but I didn't care. As for

Nemea, he was wearing a strained smile and was gazing at his former brethren with all the empathy in the world. Levia was standing a little further back. She was holding Fen in her arms and stroking her hair softly while looking at Garm with an amused look on her face.

“Was that...really necessary?” Nemea asked.

“Better than carving them up, wouldn’t you say?” Levia answered.

“Well, yes, but...I feel like the psychological damage they suffered from this interrogation won’t disappear anytime soon...”

Thanks to my painless interrogation techniques, the men told me everything they knew. The only thing was that...Garm looked terrible.

I was having so much fun that I took things a bit too far, didn’t I? Good thing Adel and the others weren’t here. I don’t want them to see me like that.

I swore to myself to tone things down the next time.

Chapter 10

I yawned. “So sleepy...”

“What were you up to yesterday, Masaki?” Adel asked. “Couldn’t sleep?”

“I’ll fill you in later... Sorry, I can’t anymore... I need a nap.”

“It’s all right. We still have plenty of time until we reach the Sentdrag Kingdom. Rest up.”

“Thanks. Good night...” I said, opening the door to my Room and heading straight to bed.

In the end, I’d barely gotten any sleep because of the kidnappers. We had to board the ship for the Sentdrag Kingdom early, so I hadn’t been able to sleep in either.

Levia was just as tired as me, and she was already nestled on a small sofa, fast asleep. Like this, she looked like a perfectly harmless young girl.

I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes. I decided to let myself drift off until we reached the Sentdrag Kingdom.

The previous night, we’d brought Garm and his men back to my estate after our little interrogation. Garm was still writhing in agony, deeply traumatized.

Even in this state, Garm and the rest of his men were incredibly good at concealing their presence, and not even Adel had noticed them. She and the others would have to wake up early too, and since I didn’t want to disrupt their rest for no good reason, that was pretty convenient.

According to Nemea, Garm and his group were the cream of the crop of their church. Even the skilled battle leo found it next to impossible to sense their presence if they were actively trying to hide it. Naturally, he hadn’t noticed their break-in until I contacted him, and he would have been hard-pressed to track them without a trail to follow.

They were undoubtedly strong, but this time, they had come face-to-face with

someone even stronger.

After we brought them to my office, Levia laid Fen down on a sofa so she could sleep a little.

“I wish I could have brought her to her room to let her sleep in a proper bed, but I have a few questions to ask her,” Levia said.

Nemea stiffened at her words. “Lady Leviathan...”

Levia continued to pat Fen’s head softly.

“Don’t fret. I don’t mean to harm the girl.”

“Truly?”

“Trust her for now,” I told him. “Let’s all calm down and have a cup of coffee first. You guys too,” I said, looking at the wannabe kidnappers.

I poured everyone a cup. Garm’s men were surprised to see me, the lord of the estate, serve people myself, but I had no intention to bother the maids or the butler so late at night. I probably should have, considering my rank, but I didn’t see the point. I’d lived my entire adult life doing everything by myself, and I couldn’t get out of this habit.

“Agh, it’s bitter!” Levia whined. “Masakiiiii! Don’t you have sugar and milk?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t aware you didn’t like it black. Here you go,” I said, bringing her a tray.

Levia added three sugars and poured some milk into her cup before taking a sip, looking satisfied this time. *She sure has a sweet tooth.*

Seeing Levia act like a kid seemed to help Garm and his men relax somewhat.

She was one of the Three Dragons and had just beaten them black and blue with a single finger. It must have been hard for them to enjoy a warm cup of coffee with her a few moments later.

They glanced at their cups suspiciously. They were used to doubting everything given to them due to the nature of their job, and Garm carefully took a sip.

Needless to say, I wasn’t trying to poison them. Their drinks were perfectly

safe.

After that first sip, he seemed to realize that I hadn't added any poison to their drinks, and he gestured at his men to drink before taking a bigger gulp himself. His men hesitated for a moment but eventually decided to help themselves. The leopard blew on his coffee several times before trying it—he probably disliked hot drinks.

Garm drank his coffee black, but some of his men added milk or sugar.

Did Levia ask for sugar and milk like that to loosen the atmosphere? No way, I'm overthinking it.

In spite of his sensitive big cat's tongue, Nemea didn't seem to have an issue with hot drinks and was already halfway done with his cup.

I'd always been curious about his heat tolerance, but I wouldn't ask.

As for Levia, she was sipping at her sweet cafe au lait like it was the tastiest thing in the universe. She truly looked like a spoiled little kid like this. I had a feeling she'd send me flying if I ever mentioned it, so I kept my mouth shut. I wouldn't die, but being blown away was anything but pleasant.

I enjoyed my coffee quietly for a while before focusing my attention on the intruders once more.

"I have heaps of questions for you guys," I stated. "First of all, how did you locate Fen?"

"Well..."

If you don't start speaking, we'll have to go through another round of interrogation...

I didn't even have time to threaten them. Garm just took a look at my expression and immediately opened his mouth again.

I still have plenty to say. For instance, I could tell your subordinates about that time you mistook a crossdresser for your mom. You held his hand until he turned to look at you and you burst into tears!

"Our investigation led us to the Phantom Blau," he said. "We learned that Nemea and the shaman were being held captive on this boat. However, only a

handful of merchants and nobles knew how to get to that floating fortress... Unless you received the permission of their leader, it was basically impossible to reach the Phantom Blau, so we decided to negotiate with them instead."

They'd been pretty efficient with the information gathering. They were right—it was virtually impossible to reach the Phantom Blau unless you had your hands on a specific magic item. Even if they'd managed to sneak into one of the ships headed there, they still would have had a hard time getting aboard and finding Fen.

"At this point, they asked us to help kidnap your fiancée, Adelheid. I had a bad feeling about it and we refused. We were right to do so. Not long after, we heard what you'd done on the ship. We learned that you'd saved every slave aboard, and the people who came back to Arth all mentioned that they'd been through this city on their way home, so we immediately headed here. That's when we found the shaman."

"Were you surprised to see how she lived? She's no shaman anymore, just a regular girl."

"Of course it came as a shock. The shaman going to school and acting like a normal child... We couldn't believe our eyes."

I'd figured as much. From what I'd seen in Fen's memories, she had a very high position in the church. They treated her like a goddess, so they must have been shocked to see her mingle with regular people.

On the other hand, I was happy to hear about Fen doing so well. Whenever I got reports about how she was doing at school or in the city, they mentioned she seemed to be having a lot of fun. That's what I wanted for her.

"All right. I get how you found her. But why did you decide to attack her now? Your organization is no more, right?"

"We were told by...someone...that as long as we brought him the shaman, we could make use of her power to easily revive the church... That, and—"

"They paid for your kid's treatment, right?"

"How do you know that?!"

“You’re wondering about that now?! I spent half an hour going through all of your embarrassing memories, why did you assume I hadn’te seen anything else? I only took a quick look, so I don’t know the whole story, though,” I said.

A person’s entire log was huge. There was no way I could read through it all in a few moments. My brain wouldn’t be able to deal with the information overload. I looked through hundreds of memories in a split second and tried to pick out the most useful information. It was kind of like watching a movie at high speed.

I’d seen a scene where Garm was talking to a robed figure. I couldn’t tell much from their appearance, but next to Garm was a woman with cat ears who’d lost an arm and a wolf child who’d lost both his legs.

I’d been watching the scene so quickly that I couldn’t tell what they spoke about, but I had seen Garm receive a bag full of money. I’d assumed it was meant to cover the treatment fees of his child, and, as it turned out, I was right on the money.

“And, who’s that person you mentioned?”

“That would be...Duke Zand Charlbarit. A member of the garuda tribe and one of the four Grand Dukes of the Beastmen Kingdom.”

The four Grand Dukes? Never heard of them. Well, Arth’s a whole other continent, so I guess that makes sense.

I asked about the dukes and was told that four illustrious ducal families had long supported the dragonian house that ruled over the Beastmen Kingdom.

The lunar rabbit tribe governed the south, the panda tribe governed the east, the north was under the rule of the battle leos, and, finally, the garuda tribe managed the west.

Their efforts kept the kingdom at peace; they were in charge of easing the relationship between the hundreds of races—including some right out of fantasy novels such as fairies, dwarves, or elves—that lived in the country.

Apparently, one of these grand dukes was targeting Fen.

Urgh. A powerful duke...and a foreign one at that. This is going to be a pain to

handle.

Levia, who'd been content to listen quietly up until now, tilted her head to the side and folded her arms. "They chose to target Fen *now*, right when something's up with Jörmungandr... I can't help but think there's a link somehow."

"Something is up with...Lord Jörmungandr?"

They seemed to have no idea that Jörmungandr's presence had faded.

"Yes. The old man's presence has become harder and harder to sense. I don't even know where he is. That's why I'm here as well. I came to ask Masaki for help. Haven't you noticed anything amiss in Arth?"

"Now that you mention it... One of the reports I received mentioned that Lord Zand was gathering priests from every race. Right, Morn?"

The young monkey beastman whose name had just been called perked up. He nodded. "Yes! I've personally seen insectians, chabians, beaards, and dwarves priests all being escorted to the Bestmen Kingdom by garuda knights. There were roughly a dozen of them."

Morn was a griffin rider—which was rare even in the Beastmen Kingdom. He made use of his mobility to take on reconnaissance missions. He pretended to be a delivery man but collected information wherever he went. Since they had to travel to a different continent this time, he'd entrusted his griffin to a reliable friend.

"Priests, huh? I assume this is somehow connected to his desire to get his hands on Fen. What do you think, Fen?" Levia asked.

The little girl slowly sat up.

Was she awake this whole time?

"I...also think so... Hmm...Lady Leviathan..."

"Levia's fine. And no need to be so stiff. I noticed your power a while ago."

"Eh?!"

"Levia, you guys keep bringing up Fen's power, but what is this all about?" I

asked.

They'd all gone on and on about Fen having some sort of power, but no one had said a word about what she could actually do. I'd seen some of Fen's past, but I still had no clue.

"I see your abilities aren't perfect, Masaki. Fen, do you mind if I tell him?"

"No... Big Brother Masaki...should know..."

"All right," she said softly before turning to me again. "Masaki, Fen has the power to devour the powers of the gods. She's a God Eater."

"She can devour the powers of the gods?"

I had a hard time picturing what that could mean. I asked Levia to elaborate, and she decided to start by explaining the powers of the gods.

"This is going to be a little long, but hear me out. The powers of the gods are derived from the Power of Devotion. Have you ever been told that as time passes, objects acquire a soul?"

"Yeah. People used to say that in my old world too."

We called such objects "tsukumogami" in Japan.

"That will make my explanation easier. For a soul to enter an object, enough people need to believe. That is what we call the Power of Devotion. Naturally, people can also profit from this power, although others aren't able to make use of it. In those cases, it simply vanishes just as quickly. However, those that can hold the Power of Devotion often become local deities. We, the Three Dragons, receive our power in a similar fashion—although the scale is on a different elvel."

From what I understood, objects or people who were revered by those around them could ascend to godhood. They became local deities thanks to that "Power of Devotion" Levia was talking about. The Three Dragons weren't local deities, though. They were revered by people all across the world. *They represent the sky, earth, and seas, so it makes sense.*

"As a God Eater, Fen can devour the Power of Devotion meant for others and make it her own. She's my natural enemy."

“I see... So that’s why she was acting so weird back then.”

“She probably assumed that I would go for the kill first so that she wouldn’t be able to harm me,” Levia explained.

She had hit the nail on the head and Fen curled in on herself, making her small body appear even tinier.

Levia affectionately patted her head a few times, smiling down at her. “Silly child. I told you not to worry. I won’t hurt you. If you must know, I intend to protect you.”

“A-Are you speaking the truth?!” Nemea exclaimed. His reaction was far more intense than Fen’s.

“I am.”

Nemea and Fen had most likely been targeted time and time again by local deities who feared her power or people who meant to use it to further their own agendas.

However, if Leviathan, a divine dragon—one of the most powerful beings in this world— decided to offer Fen her protection, even the strongest local deities wouldn’t be able to touch a hair on her head.

Levia seemed to have taken a liking to Fen, but she was still one of the fearsome Three Dragons. I doubted she’d make such a statement without a good reason.

“I trust you, Levia, but I assume you must have a reason to protect her, right?”

“I do. Fen, you received a revelation, did you not?” she asked.

“I... Yes, I did.”

“Shaman! Is that true?!” Nemea all but screamed.

He wasn’t the only one who’d been surprised by this statement. The other beastmen were all staring at her, mouth agape.

It was my first time hearing about revelations in this world, but I assumed it meant the same as in my old world. I asked to make sure, and, as expected, a

revelation was what they called a message from the gods.

“You must have heard Ouroboros’s voice,” Levia said. “What did he say?”

“It said...‘Head to the Beastmen Kingdom. Your power will be needed there.’ That’s all...”

“That’s very like him. Short and concise.”

“L-Lady Levia...”

“Drop the fancy title, will you? You can call me big sister instead.”

“E-Eh?! Are you sure? Hmm... B-Big Sister Levia...”

Levia had a smug smile on her face as she said, “Perfect.”

I get you, Levia... I asked Fen to do the same.

Fen was truly starting to feel like a sister to me.

“So... Hmm... Do you know Lord Ouroboros?”

“I sure do. He used to be our match,” Levia started. “However, his Power of Devotion was snatched away by influential individuals and he lost much of his strength. He got so fed up with everything that he decided to shut himself in a space he created. That being said... I’m sure of it now...”

“Sure of what?” I asked.

“We must follow the revelation and bring Fen to the Beasmen Kingdom. Something terrible must have happened to the old man if a shut-in like Ouroboros, who hates talking to people, sent a revelation to one of his followers. I fear he may be under someone’s control...”

Taking on the Three Dragons was reckless, to say the least. Even I struggled against Levia, and I didn’t want to fight her ever again.

“Fen, you might be able to do something about the old man’s powers, even if he’s going wild. That message was Ouroboros’s way of telling us that,” Levia added.

However, with Fen’s power, taking on the divine dragons might not be as daunting. Levia wouldn’t have said all that if she wasn’t sure, after all. I was starting to wonder what kind of guy Ouroboros was, though. Levia was treating

him like an antisocial shut-in.

“I’ve said my piece, but I won’t force you, Fen. You’re free to decide for yourself whether you want to go to the Beastmen Kingdom, right, Masaki?”

“I agree. What would you like to do, Fen?” I asked her. “No one will blame you if you prefer to wait for us in Atami.”

Forcing her wouldn’t help in any way.

Fen was still young enough to be in grade school, but she was mature for her age. She could think for herself and was the type to stick to her principles. Otherwise, she would never have thought to hide the revelation from me in the first place. She’d been abducted in the middle of her musing, but she’d been thinking hard nonetheless.

Fen cast her eyes down and thought for a while before raising her head to look at Levia and me. “Please... Please take me with you.”

She didn’t sound like her usual fidgety self. She’d made up her mind.

“Are you sure, Fen?” I asked. “If you come with us, you won’t get to see your friends for quite some time.”

“That...makes me sad, but...I’ll be with you, Big Brother Masaki, so I’ll be fine... And...if Lord Jörmungandr dies, many more people will be sad... Even people who were nice to me...and helped me...like Queen Gardenia... I...want to do what I can to prevent that,” she said.

“I see.”

She sounds determined enough for me to bring her along.

“Shaman, I will accompany you too. I promise to protect you, no matter who stands in your way! I won’t fail again,” Nemea swore.

“Thank you...so much, Mister Nemea.”

I never doubted that Nemea would tag along. He was like a father to her; he would never abandon her. On top of that, he was an impressive fighter, so I was more than happy to welcome him to our team. He also knew the Beastmen Kingdom better than any of us.

“If we’re to head to the Beastmen Kingdom,we’ll need a ship. We need to make arrangements.”

Securing a ship would be easy. I had a pirate crew on my side, after all. We’d been friends ever since I arrived in this world, and their ship had been upgraded quite a few times since those days. It was now much more powerful and able to endure long travels.

For instance, the wood that covered the hull had been changed for the Poseidon Wood—a very durable timber that was water-resistant, repelled insects, and could resist hundreds of storms—I had in my Room’s storage.

In *Britalia Online*, Poseidon Wood was said to be a legendary material and was incredibly hard to come by. If you used it to craft equipment, it came with extra perks. On top of giving good defensive stats, it blocked eighty percent of the damage dealt by water spells thanks to a skill called Super Water Resistance.

I’d been lucky enough to get my hands on a bunch of Poseidon Wood while helping members of my guild with a raid boss. I could have sold it since it was incredibly valuable, but I wasn’t really in need of money at the time, so I’d decided to keep it just in case.

I’d decided to use it lavishly now that I was in this world.

I’d shown it to some shipwrights, and they’d confirmed what I had thought: this wood—which happened to be named after a god—was both flexible and sturdy and would be the perfect material for ships.

This meant we only had to worry about packing enough provisions for the trip. We’d gone through this ordeal once before when Queen Gardenia departed—the second time would be easy.

Garm raised his hand, interrupting my train of thought.

“Count Toudou, you can reach the Beastmen Kingdom even without a ship”, he said.

“Really?”

“Yes. We were heading to the forest because there’s a Fairy Path there.”

“Oh! I had my suspicions, but it sounds like I was right! What an unusual place to find one!” Levia exclaimed.

“We were surprised too,” Garm agreed. “Fairy Paths usually connect places where mana is very dense—the kind of places fairies would settle in. And yet, we found ourselves in that forest after crossing.”

“Interesting... Well, then we won’t need to bother with ships, carriages, or even griffons,” Levia stated.

Could you not carry on without including me in the conversation?

I’d been in this world for a little over half a year now, but there was still a lot I didn’t know.

“Sorry, but what’s a Fairy Path?” I cut in. “What does it do?”

“You don’t know what they are, Masaki? Just as their name suggests, they’re pathways used by fairies. They exist at the junctions between the Physical World and the Astral World. Space is warped there, so they sometimes connect places that are very far away.”

I remembered the explanation I’d been given about magic, so I understood. The Astral World was the source of all magic. There, the flow of space and time was completely different. As for the “Physical World,” it was just another way of referring to our world as they sometimes did in games. Writers often used fancy words to describe different realms in fiction, didn’t they?

Lastly, the Fairy Paths seemed to be some sort of gaps located right between both worlds that linked places together. *Kind of like the Channel Tunnel, in a way.*

It sounded like the remodeled pirate ship wouldn’t get a chance to shine this time either. I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to drag them into this, and, at the same time, I felt a little disappointed. I hadn’t traveled with them in a while, and I enjoyed being at sea.

“So this Fairy Path thing connects my territory to the Beastmen Kingdom, huh? Can anyone go through these paths?”

If we could easily travel through the Fairy Path, our journey would be much

shorter. Maybe we could also create links with the Beastmen Kingdom going forward.

“No. You need a crystal blessed by fairies or you can’t enter them at all. Something like this,” Levia said, pulling out a crystal that emitted a faint glow out of her bosom.

Why in the world did you store it there?

I picked up the crystal she handed me and used Appraisal on it. It was warm from being—erm, never mind.

Fairy crystal: A crystal given to those deemed worthy by the fairies. It has the power to open up the way to the Semi-Astral Plane.

It sounded like this “Semi-Astral Plane” was what the others had been referring to as Fairy Path up until now. Apparently, fairies lived in that world.

I kinda hope they look like they do in your run-of-the-mill fantasy novel...I don’t want to see buff fairies.

“Now that I think about it, Garm, you and your men must have fairy crystals too if you came through the Fairy Path. It can’t have been easy to get your hands on them, right?”

“As long as you have money, you can get some on the black market. Not all fairies are virtuous. Some do not hesitate to sell crystals to fulfill their greed and others straight-up work in the underworld, like us. We got our crystals through such channels.”

I guess everything can be bought for a price.

Apparently, fairy crystals sometimes appeared in more respectable shops, but they were usually sold at crazy prices in underground auctions. Both rich merchants and successful adventures strove to obtain one. According to Gram, the crystals could go for the price of a house!

Garm took out the valuable crystal he’d been hiding in his pocket and had each of his men give him theirs before setting them on the table. He gestured for me to take them.

“Are you sure?” I asked after a pause. “You just told me they were very expensive.”

“Take them... We failed our mission. We have no use for them anymore.” He picked them up again and pushed them into my hands.

I returned three of them to him immediately. “Garm, I’ve seen some of your memories. I know your wife and child both lost limbs during the war. You dirtied your hands for the Church of Ouroboros and then for the garuda to earn enough money to treat them, right?”

“Yes... Everything I do is for the sake of my family...”

I felt sorry for him after watching his memories. He’d been through difficult times... After getting married, he’d lived happily with his wife for a time—they’d even been blessed with a child—until war destroyed their lives.

His wife and child had both been mutilated, and they’d been left crippled for life. Garm couldn’t keep up with the fees for treatment by working respectable jobs, and he was forced to join the Church of Ouroboros’s secret faction where he risked his life every day.

He’d put up with their hellish training and accepted every mission for the sake of his family. He hadn’t hesitated to use his men and his comrades as stepping stones to stay alive and provide for his wife and child.

His hands were stained with blood, but he still had my respect.

The right way to deal with him was probably to punish him and take those crystals away. The good thing was that I was in a position to decide his punishment myself.

Call me soft if you want, but sometimes, a lenient approach is best.

“I’ll help your family,” I said. “Have you heard about my magic?”

“Y-You would?! I’ve heard rumors... They say you can grow back limbs... That can’t be true, though, can it?”

“It is true. I’ve healed thousands of people, and I can tell you none of them has ever been left with so much as a scar. Won’t you work for me in return?”

To be honest, I was starting to feel a bit bad about having Jirou’s men protect

my residence at all times. Thankfully, none of them had died last time, but it had been close.

I wanted to have my own people who would move according to my orders. Garm and his men were stealthy enough to evade Adel and Nemea's notice and strong enough to defeat Jirou's men. I very much wanted to employ such skilled fighters.

"Naturally, my offer also stands for the rest of your men. What do you think?"

In this world, lofty ideals weren't worth anything. I needed to keep an eye on my neighbors. Some nobles wanted me out of the picture. I'd heard some unsettling rumors to be sure of it. For the time being, Jirou was keeping them in check for me, but I had no way of knowing what would happen in the future. I wanted to be prepared.

Garm remained silent.

"I understand this isn't an easy decision to make. Take some time to think about it. You have until I come back from the Sentdrag Kingdom to make up your mind," I told him. "Oh, and Nemea, I hope you won't mind, but I'll have Fen sleep inside my Room. It's the safest place for her to be."

"No, I appreciate it," Nemea replied. "Should I accompany you to the Sentdrag Kingdom as well?"

"No, I'd rather you kept an eye on these guys instead. You can house them in the annex. Take the chance to ask them about the goings-on in the Beastmen Kingdom."

"Understood. I'll do what I can," he said. "Take care of the shaman..." he added, standing up and bowing deeply to me.

He really treasured Fen a lot.

Fen was like a little sister to me, even more so than Akiha. I didn't know what Zand was scheming, but since he'd pretty much taken Garm's family hostage by agreeing to treat them and had sent Garm to attack us, it definitely wasn't anything good. I would never let Fen fall into his hands.

"You can leave her to me," I promised.

◆◇◆

After spending most of the night chasing after the kidnappers and hearing about the garuda tribe and the Fairy Paths, I hadn't gotten much sleep. I boarded the ship to the Sentdrag Kingdom and headed into my Room for a nap soon after.

Fen had cleaned up in here perfectly.

While the trash miraculously disappeared from the trashcan after a set amount of time, the dust and scraps didn't magically clean themselves, so I was very thankful to Fen for her hard work.

After opening my eyes again, I left my Room and stepped onto the deck. The cool sea breeze felt refreshing. I looked at the sea and noticed that the ship was sailing faster than expected.

"Aren't we going faster than usual?" I asked.

"We are. And it's all thanks to Levia," Adel answered.

"Heh heh, you can thank my familiars for that. And shower me with praise while you're at it!" Levia boasted.

"Thanks," I said, ruffling Levia's hair.

Levia let out a little groan but didn't move—she seemed to be enjoying it. *She's kind of cute at times like these.*

I walked over to the bow of the ship and took a look down over the railing. Levia's familiars were pulling the pirate ship forward, helping us go faster in a way that was both safe and efficient. They swam as fast as tunas and were collectively strong enough to carry the weight of our vessel.

According to Adel, Barbarossa, and Lohas, it hadn't made anyone—but Tatsuma—sick. In fact, the ship didn't rock much more than when we sailed normally. Two people weren't exactly happy about the situation, though—Paddle and Peddle. They didn't have anything to do and were sulking in a corner.

As for Tatsuma, he was feeling just as bad as usual. *He really can't handle ships, can he? Will he be able to see the princess in this state?*

Once we started to approach the harbor, I asked Levia to dismiss the sea serpents. I didn't want people to think they were under attack once again and panic.

This time, Paddle had contacted the royal capital beforehand and we were able to dock at the military port without any issue. Come to think of it, we weren't able to last time since we'd ended up fighting with Levia.

Count Alan was waiting for us. Apparently, he'd traveled to the capital for business and had come to greet us since he was there anyway.

"Hi, Count Toudou," he said. "I didn't think you'd be here so early."

"Levia gave us a little push," I answered.

"Levia? I assume you're talking about this young lady I haven't yet had the pleasure of meeting."

"I'll make the introductions. That idiot over there is Leviathan."

Count Alan seemed puzzled. "What?"

"Who are you calling an idiot?!" Levia whined, pouting and kicking me in the shin.

She'd kicked me strong enough to shatter my bones, but thanks to Invincibility, I was unharmed. I had a feeling Levia had only kicked me like that because she knew full well it wouldn't hurt me, though. Having someone to mess around with was fun in its own right. While Levia complained, I knew she didn't mind. This type of relationship suited us best.

Count Alan needed a few seconds to process what I'd just told him, but he eventually regained his composure and bowed deeply to Levia.

"Please excuse my rudeness, Lady Leviathan. It's an honor to welcome you today."

"You can just call me Levia," she said casually. "I want to talk to your king—lead the way."

"Certainly!"

Count Alan treated her like she was royalty, and, for once, Levia did sound like

a princess. I kind of wished she'd be that elegant at all times. Although, to be honest, she felt more like an annoying little cousin than a princess when she started eating like a pig and throwing tantrums.

It was usually impossible to be granted an audience with the king on such short notice, but we'd sent word before arriving with Telepathy, and Levia was sort of a VIP, so he made an effort to accommodate us.

The king had understandably almost fallen off his throne when he'd heard Levia would be visiting the castle. No one could have expected the divine dragon who'd once tried to destroy the country would suddenly turn into a young girl and return. To be fair, I'd been just as shocked.

Only Adel, Levia, King Laurent, Prince Leon, the prime minister, Albert, Count Alan, a few royal guards, and I were allowed in the throne room. Usually, powerful nobles could witness audiences with the king, but given the circumstances, they were asked to wait outside.

"It's been a while, Count Toudou," the king said. "I believe the last time we saw each other was during the banquet. You told me you hoped to stay away from wars and battles, but I've heard you haven't quite managed to do so."

"Sadly, fate forced my hand," I answered.

"Is the lady standing next to you..." he trailed off.

"It's our first meeting while I'm in human form. I'm Leviathan, King Laurent. Although while I'm in this form, it's more convenient to call me Levia," she said.

"I understand. Allow me to call you Princess Levia, then."

"Very well."

"Princess," huh? It's not a bad idea. The other nobles won't find it strange if they hear the king and Levia speak as if they were on equal footing now.

If the belligerent faction heard that Sentdrag had the support of Leviathan, one of the Three Dragons, they'd start wars left and right. It was better to pretend she was a foreign princess.

"Princess Levia, may I ask why you requested an audience?" the king asked. "I imagine something must have happened for someone of your high status to

seek me out."

"Indeed. I'd like to borrow Masaki for a while," she said. "In fact..."

Levia told King Laurent about Jörmungandr and explained that she thought one of the four Grand Dukes of the Beastmen Kingdom was involved. I was impressed. I'd always thought Levia was childish, but today she acted like a true princess. She must have learned how to read the room.

Wisdom truly does come with age, huh? Oh. Good thing I didn't say that out loud. Levia would have murdered me. I hoped to remain alive for a while longer, so I'd pretend she was wise because she was one of the esteemed Three Dragons and nothing else.

"I see... While this is happening in a faraway land, Jörmungandr, one of the Three Dragons, is in danger. Our kingdom will not turn a blind eye. Who knows what will happen if we do not react in time? Count Toudou," the king called for me.

"Yes?"

"I order you to accompany and protect Princess Levia. I shall make sure your territory and your people are taken care of in the meantime," he said.

I see... He just gave me the perfect justification to follow Levia. Since my job was only to protect her, I could deny any political involvement. Even if we ended up fighting subjects of the Beastmen Kingdom, I could pretend I had no other choice since I'd been ordered to keep her safe. Asking a nobleman to escort an important guest was quite common—with Levia being treated as a foreign princess, she'd naturally require one.

It was decided that Levia would pose as a princess of Atlantis, one of the territories that made up the Submarine United Kingdom. It was a lie at the time, but we later asked the Submarine United Kingdom and received their permission.

I was very thankful that the king would find people to oversee my territory. I had Jimmy and Ludrig, but they couldn't take responsibility for important matters. Adel and I were usually in charge of such things, but I had no idea how long I'd be away, and I didn't want matters to be delayed for too long.

I could have looked for a substitute myself, but I didn't want to give authority to just anyone. I would have needed time to find someone trustworthy *and* talented enough. Atami and Schutzwald had regular exchanges, so I assumed King Laurant would ask Count Alan to step in, but, surprisingly enough, someone else volunteered.

"I would be happy to go," Prince Leon said.

Apparently, he'd heard about Atami's fast development and had been dying to visit anyway.

As the king's successor, Prince Leon had been receiving a strict education, and, naturally, managing a territory was part of the curriculum. According to King Laurent, someone who couldn't deal with even a single territory had no business inheriting the throne.

From what I'd heard, Prince Leon was far from done with his education. He was currently twenty-five, but he'd still have to study for another five years at the very least. In Sentdrag, kings did not usually pass down their responsibilities to their successors before they were in their late thirties or even in their forties—much later than in most other countries.

There was a reason behind this late transfer of power. While the members of the Sentdrag royal family appeared to be human at first glance, dragon blood actually flowed through their veins. Although that part was infinitesimal, the Sentdrag royals still lived twice as long as regular humans.

Their life expectancy was around a hundred to a hundred and fifty years—longer than humans but still shorter than elves. The latter usually lived two hundred to four hundred years, while high elves could not die of old age at all. They were not immortal, though, and would oftentimes succumb to illnesses or flesh wounds—just like humans.

While Sentdrag's system prevented puppet monarchs and the dangers that came with them, the education was tough. You had to be committed and hardworking to complete it.

As far as I was concerned, Prince Leon had more than proved his seriousness by keeping up with it, and I'd happily entrust Atami to him. I'd heard that Prince Leon's personal territory used to be a wasteland when he received it. He'd

worked hard and had turned it into the biggest exporter of stones in the kingdom by investing in quarries.

He'd been struggling to figure out a way for his territory to become self-reliable when it came to food, though. After Haruka came along, she had helped him and introduced a variety of plants that could grow in difficult conditions, such as improved versions of potatoes and buckwheat.

This had probably made him fall deeper in love with her.

Speaking of which, I had a feeling he didn't care all that much about visiting Atami. His real motivation was most likely getting to spend more time with Haruka. As far as I was concerned, I had no issue with that as long as he did his job properly. I'd pretend to be clueless for the time being. *Or should I wish him luck instead?*

I would prepare the documents he'd need to take over while we got ready to depart. Under normal circumstances, it'd be virtually impossible to write everything down in such a short amount of time but my skill Transcribe would make it possible.

Since computers weren't a thing in this world, I had to make up for it with skills. Transcribe was normally meant for sketching blueprints or copying single-use grimoires, but in this world, I could use it however I liked, and I didn't see a reason not to make use of it.

We finished our discussion with King Laurent and headed to the infirmary.

Philia's room was heavily guarded and we had to go through several security checks. Officially, Philia had been declared dead. However, those who had a sharp mind had already deduced that this wasn't the entire truth. King Laurent had ordered that this room—usually used exclusively by members of the royal family—be protected, and he'd had summoned the best doctors in the land. This room was as well guarded as the king himself, and, on top of that, an ex-ally of the empire, Tatsuma, the Wei General, sometimes visited.

Tatsuma always did what he could to avoid being noticed when he sneaked in to see Philia, but walls had ears. Maids and officials walked around the corridors at all times; it was impossible not to be heard or seen by any of them.

As such, many had guessed that the mystery patient was in fact Princess Philia. For the time being, these gossips were still contained within the walls of the castle, but if it reached the ears of the radical imperial survivors, they'd likely try to abduct her. To avoid that, King Laurent was incredibly careful and made sure security was thorough.

As soon as we entered the room, Levia walked up to Philia and started opening up the buttons of her gown. She then pressed her small hand to her exposed chest.

"Masaki, Tatsuma, out!" Adel immediately exclaimed.

"At once!" we answered in unison.

I never would have thought she'd suddenly start undressing her. I'd been so surprised that I hadn't been able to advert my eyes in time. *Philia's skin looked so soft...* I hadn't seen much from where I was, but Tatsuma *definitely* had. His nosebleed was getting out of hand, and there was already a little puddle of blood under his feet. *How innocent can you get?*

I couldn't replenish someone's blood supply with magic, so I had Tatsuma sit down and rest for a moment.

Will these two be all right after Philia recovers?

After an hour, the door suddenly opened.

"Good grief! A human's soul sure is fragile! Thank you, Adel, you made my work easier," Levia said, giving her shoulder a twirl with a worn-out expression on her face.

"Please don't mention it, Levia. I barely did anything at all!" Adel said, stepping out of the room and joining me. She looked just as tired.

Levia was good at destroying stuff, but it looked like she wasn't used to fixing them.

"No, you did well. I'm the most amazing, obviously, but thanks to your Mana Coagulation and Mana Transfer, I finished twice as quickly as planned."

It sounded like Adel had helped Levia out. Thanks to the two of them, the operation (if you could call it that) had been a success.

“How’s Philia?” Tatsuma asked.

“She’s already awake. You can see her,” Levia answered.

“Thank you! Thank you!” he exclaimed, running into the room without sparing a thought for his anemia.

Good for you, Tatsuma.

I was still standing in front of the door as I watched Tatsuma take Philia in his arms. His tears kept falling. Philia was surprised for a second, but she quickly reciprocated, tears welling up as well. Seeing how happy they were really made helping them worth it.

“The corrosion had progressed much further in this girl. She would have died if we’d waited a few more weeks,” Levia stated.

Urgh... We cut it close, didn’t we? It could have been bad, very *bad.*

If Levia hadn’t come looking for me, we wouldn’t have been able to save Philia. I was really grateful. She’d agreed to give me such a valuable reward in advance. Now I had to pay her back and make sure I helped Jörmungandr!

“You may show your appreciation with a cake, Masaki,” Levia stated. “A huge cake!”

Sorry? Wasn’t my end of the deal helping her look for Jörmungandr? Whatever, I can bake her a cake. Actually, I’ll bake the best cake I’ve ever made to celebrate Philia’s recovery and share it with everyone.

It was time to use Quintessential Flavor again.

The three of us were watching Tatsuma and Philia with smiles on our faces. Tatsuma and Philia were still holding on to each other, sobbing. They’d been unable to be together for the longest time, so they didn’t want to let each other go again.

Tatsuma was twenty-five and Philia was fifteen, so there was a bit of an age gap, but in this world, that sort of disparity wasn’t strange at all—although someone as old as Iiro marrying Philia would definitely have been gross.

I looked down and noticed that Adel kept reaching out for my hand and shying out at the last moment. I took her hand in mine without a word. She

flinched before relaxing and smiling at me. She was blushing a little.

Tatsuma, now that you got her back, don't ever let go of her hand, I thought, squeezing Adel's hand in my own.

Even though we'd finished dealing with our business in the capital, we didn't immediately depart. Levia had woken Philia up, but the physicians of the castle still had to examine her thoroughly. Levia had messed with her soul, and we had to make sure it hadn't caused any changes. Had her five senses been affected? Was her personality different? Was the wavelength of her mana still the same? They had to check so many things that it was bound to take some time.

I'd helped out as well. I'd used Log Analysis to see if she had any gaps in her memories. It was my first time using it with such a goal in mind, but I'd been able to confirm there was no problem with Philia's memory.

She remembered the last meal she'd eaten before passing out, as well as the first gift she'd received from Tatsuma.

I hadn't spent much time thinking about it, but an ability like Log Analysis could be used in a wide array of situations, and, while until now I'd mainly threatened people with it, I hoped to use it to help people more often going forward. The usual way I went about it was plenty fun, but I sure felt less guilty today.

Incidentally, the first gift Tatsuma had given to Philia was a teddy bear. Anyone would agree teddy bears were a staple, but...he'd picked one that was as big as a bed. *A little excessive, wouldn't you say?*

Emperor Aldebaran had looked at it with a strained smile.

Anyway, after using Log Analysis on Philia, I ended up with a few days to kill in the capital.

I was able to enjoy some time alone with Adel for the first time in a while, and the two of us decided to walk around together. *This time I can hold my head high and say it's a date!* Adel and I hadn't gotten to spend a lot of time together recently, so I was over the moon.

We changed into new costumes before heading out. In my previous world, I

always struggled to dress up for dates, but here, I had plenty to choose from in my Room—including appropriate outfits for every season—so it was easy to pick clothes for every occasion. I settled on a brown jacket and paired it with a black shirt underneath. I also put on black pants. My shirt had white buttons which stood out nicely in the midst of these dark colors. This was one of my favorite outfits.

Adel had decided to go with something easy to move in. She was wearing a military-style jacket that showed off even less skin than the ones Akiha usually wore. She'd also picked a pair of matching pants instead of a skirt. I had some longer skirts in my storage, but since I thought pants looked nice on her too, I wasn't complaining.

I didn't really wear accessories, but Adel had decided on a red ribbon adorned with a red rose. If I remembered right, this specific accessory often sold at crazy prices during auctions. If you got your hands on one and sold it, you could buy most of the rare weapons of the game. I had Seven Arthur, and I was never in need of money, so I hadn't sold mine, letting it sit in my storage instead. I was surprised Adel had somehow dug it out.

Adel's fit was a little too formal, but the ribbon brought in a nice casual touch. Her military outfit was definitely eye-catching, but since the military school of a neighboring nation had a similar uniform, people didn't seem to think much of it.

Adel and I walked around the castle town, but I got a feeling there were even more people in the streets than the last time I was here. The entire city was bustling.

A war that had been ongoing for years finally ended. People are enjoying life again.

Merchants and travelers had traded places with the mercenaries and adventurers that used to fill the streets and were busy trading all sorts of things. Some sold spices they'd brought from foreign countries, others glass products, and I even spotted a stall selling lacquerware and potteries from Yamato.

As a Japanese man, lacquerware was so nostalgic to me that I couldn't help

but be interested. However, Echigo, a company from Yamato, was set to open up a store in Atami soon. I would be able to find better quality goods there, so there was no need for me to go out of my way to buy anything today.

We walked through the stalls until Adel suddenly stopped in front of one of them.

“Is there anything you want, Adel?”

“No. Hmm... It’s not like I need anything...” she mumbled. Her eyes were set on a hair ornament made out of coral in the shape of a rose.

Ah... I’ve seen one like that before...

The first mansion I received here in the Sentdrag Kingdom belonged to the Bernstein family. While I was putting everything in order right after moving in, I’d found a family portrait—it depicted Adel and her parents.

Sadly, I’d never be able to meet them no matter how badly I wished, but I remembered that, in the portrait, the woman that should have been my mother-in-law was wearing a similar rose-shaped coral hairpin.

I wonder where that hairpin’s from, I thought, looking at the one in front of us. Either way, it was beautiful and was most likely precious as it was locked up inside a glass case.

“How much is it?” I asked the merchant.

“You have a keen eye, dear client! This hair ornament was made using the most advanced magic and alchemy techniques and comes straight from the university town of Trigarland. Only a few such ornaments exist in this world, but to be entirely honest with you, I’m having a hard time selling it... The price is on the high side at thirty thousand flan. I assure you that it’s worth every coin, though.”

I could see why the merchant would struggle to sell it. Thirty thousand flan was three hundred gold coins or, in other words, a whopping three million yen. Even nobles would have a hard time spending that much money in one go.

I had a feeling the merchant was also overplaying the quality of the item, so I asked to take a better look and picked it up. I activated Appraisal.

Pure coral hair ornament: A beautiful rose-shaped hair ornament crafted out of pure coral. The mana of this rare material was preserved with magic before it was processed with alchemy to improve its durability.

INT +9 Max MP +5% Water Resistance

It had much better specs than expected. *That's actually a bargain!*

Adel sighed. "Thirty thousand flan..."

"Sold," I declared.

"Masaki?!"

I took out a bag of three hundred gold coins from my inventory and handed it to the merchant. "There should be three hundred coins in there, but feel free to check."

"I... Erm... Thank you very much, dear customer! I never thought I'd manage to sell it..."

The merchant counted the coins, a dumbfounded look on his face. He confirmed I'd given him the right amount and handed us the pure coral hair ornament in its glass case. Apparently, the case itself was included in the price.

"Here you go, Adel," I said while handing it to her.

"Th-Thank you... But...are you sure? Thirty thousand flan is a lot of money."

"It's fine. You've helped me more times than I could count, Adel. And it looks just like the hairpin your mother was wearing in that portrait, doesn't it?"

"Y-You remembered?!"

"Yeah. Though I'll be honest with you, that isn't the only reason why I decided to buy it."

"Why else?" she asked.

I felt my face heat up and adverted my gaze. *Urgh, this is so embarrassing.*

"I...just thought you'd probably look really pretty...wearing it..."

She blushed. "I-Is that so?"

Oh boy, I'm so lame. Why did I have to say she'd probably *look pretty? Why couldn't I just tell her how beautiful she is?*

I took her hand and started walking away to avoid thinking about how embarrassed I was. Meanwhile, Adel was holding the case close against her chest.

We stopped in a park after we both regained our composure, and I put the ornament in Adel's hair. She was just as beautiful as I'd envisioned. *A good buy, indeed.*



I guess I can't ever laugh at Tatsuma for being mushy again.

I wasn't penniless, and I wanted to show off in front of Adel from time to time. Especially since she wasn't the type to ask for things often.

Adel and I had lunch before heading toward our main destination of the day. The fried oysters we had were incredible. They were much bigger than the ones I was used to eating in Japan and had a rich flavor.

Our next stop was the Adventurer Guild.

It wasn't really the best date spot out there, but Adel had insisted I get my adventurer card done while we had some time. I didn't think it was particularly urgent, but she wasn't wrong—who knew when we'd have time to worry about something like that again?

And so, we made our way to the Adventurer Guild. Their office in the royal capital was a huge four-storied building. They also had a basement that served as a training area.

The reception was on the first floor. There, you could accept commissions and submit requests. The staff would organize them on different bulletin boards based on the difficulty. Making a new card was also done on the first floor.

The second floor was dedicated to storing all kinds of documents. Technically, all adventurers were welcome on this floor, but those of low rank could only access a very limited number of files. As your rank went up, you unlocked access to sensitive information. Transcribing documents was allowed, but taking out the originals was strictly prohibited.

The third floor was employee-only while the top floor had conference rooms as well as the guild master's chambers...or so said the floor plan by the entrance.

Adel and I followed the crowd of adventurers and lined up in front of the reception desk.

Our plans to come here today had played a big part in our choices of outfit. We didn't want to look too out of place—what if others picked a fight with us?—but we also didn't want to go on a date wearing full sets of armor.

Still, we'd brought weapons with us. I had the orichalcum sword I'd made while we rebuilt the roads of Atami. Unlike mithril, orichalcum looked almost like gold, and carrying a sword like that meant no one would dare look down on me.

As for Adel, she was carrying a rapier she'd owned for years. It also looked expensive and was sure to discourage idiots looking for a fight. The blade itself was mithril, so it was also sturdy.

A few unsavory characters sent glares in our direction, but thankfully, no one came looking for a fight. The last group in front of us accepted a request and our turn finally came.

"Welcome to the Adventurer Guild. How may I help you?"

"I'd like to have an adventurer card made."

"Of course. Does your companion need one too?"

"No, thank you. I already have one," Adel answered.

"All right. Please fill in this form and bring it to that person over there," the receptionist said, handing me a piece of parchment and pointing us toward the main room.

In the past, they had desks set up outside for people to fill in such forms, but newbie adventurers had been tricked, picked on, and threatened so many times that they now welcomed them inside and had an attendant watch over them.

I wrote down the necessary information and walked up to the lady the receptionist had mentioned.

"I see you wish to register as an adventurer. Please put your hand over this gem after submitting your form," she said.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a magic crystal. To put it simply, it will measure your magical ability and skill level. We'll also get a list of the skills you're able to use."

"Can I just...skip this step?"

"Sorry? Hmm... It's not compulsory so you can refuse, but...are you sure? It's

important that you learn what your strong points are.”

“I’m sure. I know myself well enough, don’t worry.”

Phew. If I’d touched that gem without thinking, I’d have given away all of my skills—something I absolutely did *not* want to do. Thanks to my GM powers, I could use pretty much every skill there was. I had plenty of maxed-out skills as well—my woodworking and cooking skills for instance.

“A-All right... Then... Huh?! Masaki Toudou?! You’re the Azure—”

“I’m sorry, but could you keep your voice down? I don’t want to create a commotion.”

“Y-Yes, I understand. I’ll have you wait in a separate room, then.”

Adel and I were shown to another room. While new adventurers usually started out at Rank F, I was told they’d decided to give me a higher rank to honor my previous achievements.

I couldn’t really object as I *had* done quite a lot since I arrived in this world.

Someone brought us tea, and Adel and I ended up waiting for around an hour until the lady who’d taken my form came back.

“Sorry for the wait. We had to discuss your achievements which ended up making the process longer,” she said.

“It’s all good. I completely understand.”

“Here is your adventurer card, Count Toudou. We had official records of you defeating sea serpents so you were bumped up to Rank D. War records are usually taken into account to revise adventurers’ ranks, but since you were not one at the time, we decided not to give you a higher rank based on that. I hope you can accept this result.”

It made sense. I hadn’t taken part in the war as an adventurer. It was already nice enough for them to give me credit for the sea serpents. I’d also killed my fair share of goblins—including a goblin lord—but I’d done so in secret, so it didn’t count. Plus, I’d fought Leviathan, but I hadn’t really beaten her—she’d simply left after I took care of her curse. Speaking of that fight, King Laurent had awarded me some money at the time. *I’ll buy her some food with that.*

From what I knew, D-Rankers were considered average while C-Rankers were said to be at the brink of greatness. Everything got harder from that point onward, and very few broke through that ceiling.

“How do I increase my rank?” I asked.

“You can either take on commissions or bring back materials from dungeons. There are hundreds of missions available every day, such as gathering medicinal herbs, fighting monsters, or escorting merchants. However...as a count, you may find it difficult to accept most requests...”

A count showing up to escort a group of merchants would definitely be weird. I could gather herbs, deliver monster loot and other such key items...and hunt monsters—but that was probably about it. Although for that last one, it’d probably be better if I kept my identity secret.

Apparently, how deep you managed to get inside a dungeon could also play into your rank. To prove it, you had to either show monster drops or items that only appeared on certain floors or meet one of the gatekeepers dispatched by the guild. Gatekeepers waited for adventurers on certain key floors and if you managed to reach them, they’d sign a document you could then bring to the guild to update your evaluation.

Speaking of dungeons, the one located near Atami was a bit special as its layout changed periodically. It had been built a long time ago by an otherworlder nicknamed the Dungeon Creator. Several such peculiar dungeons were scattered across the world.

From what I’d heard, in the Atami dungeon, some floors did not change in spite of the magic of the Dungeon Creator, so the dungeon keepers usually waited for adventurers there. They’d also installed inns and shops in these areas so that adventurers could take a break. As far as I was concerned, it reminded me of *Mystery Dungeon* and other such games—a classic trope.

As long the Dungeon Core was still intact, monsters respawned after a day or two no matter how many times they were killed. *Yup, totally sounds like a game mechanic to me.*

Dungeon diving sounded like the easiest way for me to up my rank. I didn’t have time for that at the moment, but after things calmed down, I’d probably

try entering one.

Now that I had my very own adventurer card, we didn't have much to do until Philia's medical examination was over, so we killed time training with Prince Leon and gathering what we'd need for our trip.

The royal capital had everything we could possibly need, including items that were harder to find in Atami. We'd concentrated our efforts on rebuilding the city and promoting tourism, but we had yet to open up stores that catered to adventurers. Haruka had opened up a business herself, but her main customers were merchants and nobles. The only item she carried that really appealed to adventurers was the bicycle.

We had installed a suggestion box to take into account everyone's opinion, and I remembered reading quite a few complaints from adventurers. I'd told Count Alan about it, and he'd assured me he'd help Kisaragi Inc. contact merchants and set up contracts while I was in the Beastmen Kingdom. Count Alan had helped me so many times. I needed to find a way to pay him back.

When we trained with the prince, we used wooden swords (ATK+ 0) to spar. While I had ways to improve our physical abilities, I couldn't do anything for my swordsmanship with skills—I had to train.

During our sparring sessions, I always deactivated Invincibility. If I didn't feel the blows, I wouldn't be able to give it my all, and I knew that.

Thanks to our training, I could now move my body the way I wanted to. *I guess it was worth being beaten up repeatedly.* At some point, Prince Leon had gotten a little too into it and had used Dragoon Force. Thankfully, Jirou had stopped him before things could get dangerous.

Don't you know how to hold back?!

He only had a wooden sword in hand, so I would have survived even if he'd hit me, but with a real weapon I might have died! To be fair, I wouldn't have because I would have had Invincibility turned on, but still!

Despite this incident, a few days went by without any major issues, and the results of Philia's examination finally came back. She was perfectly fine. Her body was weak since she'd spent so long in bed, but so long as she underwent

rehabilitation, she'd be all right.

The physicians agreed that she could do that much in Atami and simply wrote down instructions for her to follow. Philia would have to use a wheelchair for a while, and King Laurent had one made for her one as a parting gift.

"Your Majesty, thank you so much for everything you've done for me. You've given me so much. I don't know how I should repay you..." Philia said.

"Don't mention it. I'm sorry for what happened to your father," King Laurent answered. "Princess Philia—no, Philia. Please strive for your own happiness from now on. I'm such it's what your father would have wanted."

Philia smiled brightly. "I will, Your Majesty. And I shall pray for your health and happiness as well."

King Laurent stroked her hair a few times, as gently as if she were his own daughter. In fact, he'd known her father very well. Emperor Aldebaran and King Laurent had been rivals for their entire lives, and while they'd fought against each other for years, he must have been saddened to hear he'd died such a pitiful death.

If she continued to live as an imperial princess, Philia would be targeted by all kinds of people, but now she wasn't a princess anymore. King Laurent had made her a commoner.

Philia wouldn't be the only one to accompany us back to Atami—Prince Leon would join us too. We let the two of them pack everything they needed before setting sail once more.

As soon as we were away from the coast, Levia whistled. This was how she contacted her familiars. Sea serpents suddenly appeared all around our ship and Prince Leon jumped. He drew his blade, but after seeing Levia casually stroke the head of one of them, he sheathed it, looking at her, dumbfounded.

Philia was also looking at the sea serpents absent-mindedly. She looked incredibly calm, but when I asked her about it later, she told me that she'd pretty much passed out with her eyes open—it was her first time seeing monsters like these.

After understanding that the monsters meant no harm, the two of them enjoyed the rest of the trip. They were surprised to see the sea serpents pull the ship at first but thought it was quite a fun sight in the end.

The pirate ship cut through the waves like a motorboat.

I decided to ask Levia to get the sea serpents to pull the ships going from Schutzwald to Atami. If we could speed up merchant ships, Atami would develop even faster. Prince Leon even suggested that once the people of Atami and Schutzwald got used to seeing sea serpents, it'd be easier to use them when sailing to the Sentdrag Kingdom as well.

After we reached Atami, we headed to my residence.

Prince Leon and Philia kept peeking out of the carriage, but tourism would have to wait. We still had some preparations to finish before leaving for the Beastmen Kingdom, so I was sure we'd find the time to show them around in the coming days.

I asked everyone to join me to discuss our future plans. Although when I say "everyone," I obviously excluded the maids and butlers. I couldn't exactly bring up such sensitive matters in front of them.

"I will be leaving for the Beastmen Kingdom soon to fulfill Levia's request, and I'm hoping we can decide who will tag along," I said. "Levia will naturally be coming, and I was thinking of bringing Adel, Akiha, Youko, Nemea, and Fen with us."

"Fen? Why? She can't fight, can she?" Tatsuma asked.

"No, she can't. However, we know that someone's after her."

I explained Fen's situation while keeping some of the details secret, such as her identity as the shaman and the fact that she was a God Eater. I told them that Nemea had saved her from the clutches of a heinous religious organization and that they'd come to this continent in the hope to settle down and enjoy a normal life. I also brought up the fact that the garuda tribe of the Beastmen Kingdom had recently tried to kidnap Fen.

"I see... I did notice that Nemea and Fen weren't around as much these days, but I never would have thought something like that had happened. Where's Fen

now?” Tatsuma replied.

“She’s inside my Room. It’s the safest place for her since no one can interfere with it from the outside.”

It’d be impossible to watch over her twenty-four hours a day. It was a lot like house arrest, but she was still free to do whatever she wanted inside my Room. She might get a little bored, but she’d want for nothing—my Room was fully furnished. It was also rather large, so she didn’t feel confined—or so she’d told me the last time I’d visited her.

“If I head to the Beastmen Kingdom, my Room will automatically move with me, so Fen has to be a part of this journey,” I explained.

“I suppose it can’t be helped if she’s in danger.”

“Tatsuma, Haruka, I hope the two of you will watch over Atami while I’m away. Prince Leon will be in charge, but brigands have been sighted several times recently, so he’ll surely need your help... I wish we could have all gone together, but Atami’s still in development, so it’d be better if some of us stayed to oversee everything.”

Some former imperial soldiers had turned to crime. I’d heard they attacked villages and merchants very often these days, and I’d even received reports from some merchants that such attacks had happened in my territory as well. Tatsuma, Adel, and I had immediately suppressed them, so there weren’t as many cases as in other territories, but if they started targeting places further away from Atami, it’d be harder to respond.

On top of that, Tatsuma was busy with his construction work, and Haruka had to take care of her business and her farms. If they dropped everything to accompany me to the Beastmen Kingdom, it would have a huge impact on the city.

“I’m not done with the inn construction, so I can’t really leave now anyway,” Tatsuma said. “Don’t worry, I’ll watch over Atami for you.”

“I’ll help out as well,” Haruka added with her usual carefree tone. “But you have to come back in the fall. I’ll welcome you home with a beautiful harvest festival.”

Right. I'd completely forgotten Haruka was planning a harvest festival. Most of the construction work should also be done by then.

"Let's work hard, Masaki!" Levia exclaimed. Hearing about a festival had her all fired up. *I'll have to pay for her food, won't I?*

While we were chatting, someone knocked on the door.

"Sir, it's Jimmy. I've brought Mr. Nemea and Mr. Garm, as you requested."

"Thanks. Come in."

The door opened. "Sorry for interrupting," Nemea said as he stepped into the room with Garm at his back.

"Who are they, Masaki?"

"You know how I mentioned some people attacked Fen?"

Everyone tensed up at my words, so I quickly assured them that everything was fine.

"Garm, did you give my offer some thought?"

"While you were away, I went to get my wife and child with Nemea's help," he said after a pause. "They're sleeping in another room. Heal them—no, *please*... Please heal them. I just can't trust you until then..."

"You do have a point. Sure, I'll heal them."

I understood why he was having a hard time believing me. It wasn't every day you met someone who was able to grow limbs back. I could have been lying to him just so I could use him.

He'd suddenly gotten more polite in the middle of making his request. He must have realized he needed my help much more than I needed his. He probably thought I'd go back on my word if he was rude to me.

I excused myself and followed him to the room where a beastwoman with cat ears who'd lost had right arm and a child who'd lost both his legs were sleeping. They also had some light scratches here and there.

I took a better look at Nemea and Garm and noticed that they were also hurt. *They must have gone all out to rescue these two*, I thought.

I removed their bandages and took a look at their wounds—they looked terribly painful.

The woman shook from the pain and opened her eyes. “Who...are you? Wh-Where am I?”

“Garm, you should hold her hand,” I said.

“Yes.”

Garm squeezed his wife’s left hand in both of his while I equipped the Rod of Aleclepius. I pointed it at her stump and used Full Heal.

Full Heal was the most effective healing spell I knew. It used *a lot* of MP but could cure the worst of injuries perfectly. As long as the target wasn’t dead, it’d work. During the war, I had to go through so many patients each day that I hadn’t been able to use it at all.

I’d lost a third of my total MP in one go. *As always, this spell burns through my mana super fast.*

A ray of light came out of my staff and covered her stump. It then started stretching and taking the shape of an arm. *Phew*. I was worried we’d have to look at the flesh and blood vessels grow back. It would have been gruesome.

The light disappeared, revealing a pale arm complete with a hand covered in fluffy white fur.

“Could you try to move your right arm, ma’am?” I asked.

“I’m sorry? I apologize, but...I’ve lost my right arm and... I-I can move it! My arm! It moves!”

“Minny! Your arm is back... It’s really back...” Garm said, crying and hugging his wife.

The two of them were hugging one another tightly with tears streaming down their fluffy cheeks. Just as I’d promised, she’d made a full recovery. It didn’t look like she was experiencing any aftereffects either.

When I used Area Heal, I could not restore the blood people had lost, and patients would sometimes suffer from anemia. That didn’t seem to be the case with Full Heal.

I moved on to the kid and used the spell once more. A new pair of legs appeared as the light dissipated.

Garm helped him get up gently, but his son immediately lost his balance and fell to the ground. While Full Heal had helped with the anemia, it apparently couldn't do anything for that. He'd have to get used to standing upright again.

This had done nothing to dampen their joy, though.

Nemea and Garm's men, who were watching the heartwarming scene from the other side of the doorway, also had teary eyes. I even heard a few of them sniffle.

"I'm so happy for you, boss..." one of them said.

"Yeah..."

"I'm not good with people crying..." another mumbled, trying to hide his wet eyes.

His subordinates sure treasured him.

With the treatment out of the way, Garm and the others kneeled in front of me.

"I will devote what is left of my life to you, Lord Masaki," Garm swore.

"We will also serve you with everything we have!" his subordinates all said at once.

I was able to hire six competent shadows before my departure.

I headed back to the room where I'd gathered my friends earlier to sum up everything I currently knew about the Beastmen Kingdom. According to what Nemea and Garm had told me, most of the imperial soldiers who were there had been taken into custody by the Beastmen Kingdom's military. The cities that had been occupied by the empire had also long since been liberated.

However, another issue was troubling the kingdom at the moment: monsters they called "crazed beasts" were terrorizing the people. Not only did they attack beastmen, but they also caused trouble for fairies, elves, and the other races that lived there.

The garuda tribe was no exception. They could fly and were usually able to escape from most monsters even if they couldn't beat them. However, since some of the crazed beasts could fly, the garuda were just as vulnerable to attacks.

Fen had been targeted in the midst of all this, so I couldn't help but think all these incidents had to be linked somehow. We wouldn't know for sure until we headed there ourselves, though.

"The crazed beats are out of hand, huh? There's no doubt about it... Something *must* have happened to Jörmungandr," Levia said.

"Do you see a link?" I asked.

Youko and Levia nodded at the same time.

"Masaki, do you remember why I told you not to kill Leviathan when you were fighting her?" Youko asked.

"Hmm... You said something about her controlling the sea monsters and that no one could keep them in check if Leviathan died...right?"

"Exactly," Leviathan confirmed. "Crazed beasts are hard to handle. This is the very reason why the old man's in charge of them in the first place. He always makes sure to keep them away from other species, and yet, if they're attacking people..."

"Then Jörmungandr's control over them has weakened. I see, so that's why they're acting out..."

It wasn't like another war had started, but monsters running rampant was a serious issue in its own right. We still didn't know what the garuda were after, and the mystery behind the attack on the Church of Ouroboros had yet to be solved. *The problems just keep piling up!*

There was a chance Pavaria was involved, which didn't bode well either...

We'll have to proceed with caution...

◆◇◆

A few days passed before we were finally ready to depart.

I'd made sure my administrative work was in order and ready to be passed on to someone else. The next step had been to check everyone's equipment. We'd showed each other what we intended to use, and I made sure to give people some extra items.

I'd given Adel a ceremonial long sword called Dracul that was very permeable to mana. It could only be obtained by killing one of the raid bosses of *Britalia Online*, Count Dracula, although the drop rate was very, *very* low.

That boss was a vampire as well, and the sword seemed to be a good fit for Adel.

I'd also given her the full Dark Angel armor set, as well an Early Bracelet. These items would raise her INT, defense, and MP recovery speed.

I'd given Youko Cerberus's Ring, a ceremonial accessory. It was a good weapon for support classes and gave the user a boost in INT as well as the following skills: Magic Barrier, Magic Attack Boost, and MP Save.

I did not own Cerberus's Ring, but I had the main material—Cerberus' Fangs—in my inventory, so I was able to craft it. They were pretty rare, so I didn't have a large stock, and I'd ended up using them all in the process. I didn't mind, though. As long as she didn't run into an enemy with a similar weapon, she'd be unmatched.

I'd also given her the attribute gems Tatsuma had been carrying around until now. These gems were normally used to enhance weapons, but he'd given them to me because he didn't know anyone who could work with them in this world. They'd been left unused for a while, but I had a feeling Youko would figure out a good way to put them to use.

Nemea didn't need a weapon at all. He usually fought barehanded. I'd offered to give him fighting gloves, but he'd refused. The feeling wasn't the same apparently. He only used boxing bandages he'd gotten from his master which only gave him minimal protection.

Speaking of these bandages, I'd used Appraisal on them, and they were incredible, to say the least.

Bandages of the World Champion: Bandages given to the winner of a Martial Art World Championship. Crossing into another world granted them mysterious powers. STR+ ??% Gives a STR bonus based on the potential of the user.

What was that flavor text about a world champion? And the STR boost could apparently be unlimited? How broken was that item supposed to be?!

I was incredibly curious to meet his master if they'd given him such a broken item just like that. The only thing I knew about them for the time being was that they were strong enough to have won a world tournament, although I didn't know what fighting game they were playing.

I wanted to give Nemea some armor, but he'd also declined, saying it would impede his movements. In the end, we'd settled on two accessories: the Herculean Bangle and a Black Belt. They'd boost his STR and enhance his hand-to-hand combat attack speed. Nemea was *built*, and he relied on his muscles to attack and defend. A STR boost was exactly what someone like him needed.

Levia did not normally use any equipment at all. To be fair, she didn't need any to be stronger than all of us.

She'd still thrown a tantrum, whining that she wanted me to give her something too. I'd ended up giving her a gimmicky item: a Paw Hand. It didn't do much, but she looked happy, so I'd say it was a win.

The biggest issue was Akiha. She used guns, so neither me nor Tatsuma had anything useful to give her as far as weapons went.

That being said, the bulletproof vest she wore was pretty good, and after a conversation with her, I did find a few items that could help her increase her firepower even further.

She traded her usual survival knife for Vajra, a peculiar dagger. I also gave her an accessory called Yoichi's Thimble. Both of these items increased the damage dealt with projectiles.

We had Akiha test them out with a magnum, and she pierced a hole through the target *and* the mithril board that was holding it up. Her firepower had definitely increased. I wanted to see what would happen if she used her rocket-propelled grenades, but that would be a little too dangerous. The citizens were

also sure to think we were under attack. *Let's try it out in the Beastmen Kingdom if we have the chance.*

As for my own equipment, it hadn't changed much. I still used Seven Arthur as my main sword, but I decided to bring Lost Dominion, a long sword with a high attack stat as well.

Lord Dominion's only additional effect was to increase attack speed, but I might need it in some situations.

While we dealt with our equipment, I took the chance to give Akiha and Adel the necklaces I'd made for them in secret.

"What's the occasion?"

"Last time, while the three of us were hanging in Atami, I saw some pretty high-quality material at a stall, so I bought it. These are what I made with it. You can think of them as good luck charms," I explained.

I'd made these necklaces out of the meteoric iron I bought last time. I'd been very surprised when I'd seen that there was some crystal mixed into the iron after I started polishing it. The thin red veins looked beautiful.

I wished I could have made Youko a necklace as well, but I only had enough for two. I'd bought her some fragrant wood to make up for it at the time, and thankfully, she hadn't seemed mad.

"Th-Thank you," Adel said.

"Thank you so much... I'll treasure it," Akiha added.

They both looked delighted which made my efforts well worth it. Being thanked for something I'd made from scratch myself made me genuinely happy.

Before long, the day of the departure came, and we followed Garm and Nemea to the entrance of the Fairy Path.

Garm, Prince Leon, Haruka, Tatsuma, and even Philia in her wheelchair—with her guardian general pushing her—had come to see us off.

Jimmy was also trailing behind us, although, as always, his presence was barely noticeable. As for Ludrig, he had business in the neighboring town, so he

couldn’t be with us today.

The entrance to the Fairy Path was located in a lush bush. At first glance, nothing looked out of place—it was an ordinary bush.

“Let’s enter. Follow me,” Nemea said.

“Tatsuma, Prince Leon, Haruka, I’m counting on you,” I said.

“You got it,” Tatsuma answered. “May you be victorious!”

“I’ll do my best! You take good care of my little Akiha too, Masaki-san,” Haruka said.

“Make sure to come back in one piece,” Prince Leon added.

After bidding farewell to the others, we walked right into the bush. After making our way through the dense collection of leaves and branches for a few seconds, we eventually stumbled upon a translucent flower. It seemed to be made of glass, and unless I strained my eyes, I risked losing sight of it at any moment.

“This flower marks the entrance to the Fairy Path,” Nemea explained.

He held his fairy crystal over the flower. The bush split into two right before our eyes and a glowing path appeared. *It’s really just like a warp point.*

Nemea walked ahead of us. Apparently, the Fairy Path wasn’t only connected to the Beastmen Kingdom. It could lead to all kinds of places, so we had to follow him closely and make sure not to stray from the right path.

“From this point onward, we only have to follow this straight path until the Beastmen Kingdom. You can’t get it wrong, but make sure you *do not* fall. You might end up somewhere else entirely,” he warned.

I looked ahead and saw a wide passage. It was wide enough for a carriage to easily go through, but on each side was a deep precipice. The same pale glow was covering the bottom, so I had no idea what was there.

We all proceeded cautiously, following Nemea closely. I looked behind us, and the path we’d come from had already closed. We were all carrying fairy crystals, though, so if we decided to turn back, it wouldn’t be an issue.

After an hour of walking, I was starting to get tired of the unchanging scenery. I had a feeling I'd go crazy if I ever had to stay in here for an entire day, or worse, an entire month.

Right as that thought crossed my mind, the unchanging tunnel space suddenly shifted. Everything started shaking.

"Wh-What's happening?!"

"AAAH!"

"What...?"

"Uh oh... Not good!" Levia seemed to realize something.

We were all laying down on the ground, trying to withstand the violent shaking when Levia suddenly exclaimed "Start running! Now! A magic storm is coming! If we stay here, we'll get blown away!"

I'd never seen Levia look so frantic. We took her word for it. We supported each other and started running as fast as we possibly could with all the shaking. Not even five minutes had passed when a violent gust of wind stopped us.

This had to be the magic storm Levia had warned us about. We stooped down and pushed through the wind, moving forward as fast as we could. Violent gusts of dark wind periodically slowed our progress, but we put our all into it.

"I can see the exit!" Levia yelled.

I could see a black hole ahead of us. We all started dashing toward it, mustering all the strength we had left when...Akiha screamed.

She'd been running right in front of me, but a particularly strong blast had sent her flying into the air. It all happened in a second. Youko, who was in front of her, tried to catch her, but her hand didn't reach. "Akiha!!!"

I didn't hesitate and also extended my hand toward her, but the wind got even stronger and sent Levia—who was behind me—and me flying as well. We were about to fall into the bottomless precipice.

"Masaki-san! Levia!"

"Urgh!"

“Fuck!”

Since I’d been hurled into the air, I managed to grab Akiha’s hand, but we were already too far from the path... *This is bad! We’re going to fall!*

“Wing!”

I tried to activate Wing, holding Akiha’s body against mine, but while I got the impression we were floating for a split second, the skill immediately deactivated and we started free-falling. *Why?! What the hell is going on?!*

“You can’t use magic when the flow of mana is so disturbed! Masaki, take my hand!” Levia screamed. “We’ll get separated if you don’t! No matter what happens, don’t let go of either of us!”

“Understood!”

“Masaki-san... I’m sorry. I’m so sorry...” Akiha sobbed against me.

“Don’t worry, Akiha. Just focus on holding on to me for now. Don’t let go.”

“Yes...”

I tried to reassure Akiha with my embrace as I held Levia’s hand tightly.

“Masaki!”

“MASAKIIIII!!!”

I heard Youko and Adel scream, but Nemea quickly dragged them toward the exit.

“Nemea! Get them out of here! Adel, Youko!!! We’ll head to the Beastmen Kingdom no matter what! Wait for us there! Nemea! I’ll leave them to you!”

“I got it, Masaki! We’ll wait for you there!”

I watched Adel, Youko, and Nemea disappear. I held Akiha close and squeezed Levia’s hand as the three of us fell into the light.

Side Story: Shou's Leisure Trip in Another World 2

"*Laa laaaa... All the way across the sea la la laaa...*"

I was casually singing, enjoying the salty sea breeze, when Gardenia came up to me. "I've never heard this song before, Shou. Where is it from?" she asked with a flirtatious tone.

As always, her scales are beautiful.

I took in her smile and thought back to our first meeting. Gardenia and I met over a year ago. After Asta, she was the person I'd known the longest in this world.

To be honest, before being summoned into this world, the word "demihuman" only brought to mind elves, dwarves, and cute girls with bunny ears. *Silly, right?*

Anyway, I'd first met Gardenia when I stopped in Rungard during one of my trips.

Rungard wasn't only home to the echidnas. The lamias, the echidnas' distant relatives, also dwelled there. From what I gathered, since they got along great and had similar appearances, they'd figured living in close proximity would be nice—especially since the lamias were often treated like monsters and hunted in other areas.

The main reason they were treated like that lay in the fact that all lamias were women and that, to reproduce, they needed to secure men. Oftentimes, that meant they'd abduct them from a nearby village.

Now, you may be thinking "You reap what you sow, it's no wonder people hunt them," but not all lamias do that stuff! Some look for a consenting partner!

Regardless, the lamias were forced to flee time and time again until they finally settled in Rungard, the land of the echidnas.

Just like the lamias, the echidnas were also all women, and, let me tell you,

they were *fine* women. I'd never seen so many beautiful ladies gathered in the same place.

To be fair, their snake tails did freak me out a little at first, but I quickly got used to them. Their scales were smooth and glimmered in the sun like jewels.

As soon as I reached Rungard, I decided to go for a drink. Taverns were usually noisy and filled with adventurers, merchants, and travelers fooling around, but today, I was in the mood for a nicer atmosphere.

Colona couldn't hold her liquor and didn't particularly enjoy it anyway, so I left her at the inn. I'd feel bad forcing her to tag along. However, I did summon a little iron beast to placate her—Sunekosuri. It didn't take much energy, so I could easily keep it around all day, and Colona loved it so much that she'd spend hours glued to it. Cute animals were like a drug to her; she was completely addicted, and getting her to let go of Sunekosuri was a challenge every single time...

As I walked through the streets, I ran mostly into beastmen and half-beastmen. Beside me, there were a few human adventurers here and there but I could sense that some of the beastmen did not appreciate our presence here. *Makes sense. They must loathe humans because of what the empire did to them.*

I could see where they were coming from. I'd also react pretty strongly if someone I held dear was taken away from me. Actually, I'd do anything to get them back.

Anyway, I didn't mind the dirty looks I was getting. I was used to it, and as long as no one came looking for a fight, I didn't intend to start one either.

"Oho!"

Found the perfect place to drink.

It looked pretty posh, so I expected it to be an expensive establishment catering mostly to nobles. That being said, such places usually let anyone in so long as they looked the part.

I was wearing my usual robe—the one that made me look like a cool wizard.

Robes were considered formal wear for magicians, and most places accepted customers wearing them unless they were excessively worn out. In my case, I was wearing a high-quality artifact that even came with an array of additional effects such as Mana Cost Reduction and Auto-mend.

I opened the dark wooden door and took a peek inside.

“Excuse me,” I started. “Do you serve humans here?”

“Of course, sir. I’d just like to warn you that our establishment is on the pricey side. Would that be all right with you?”

“All good.”

Great. There weren’t that many of them, but some places refused to serve humans altogether. *I have a feeling this place is gonna be amazing. I just know it.*

“I’ll have whatever you recommend,” I said, sitting down on one of their stylish chairs.

“Understood, sir.”

There was a menu, but in places like this one, getting the barkeeper’s recommendation was always the best choice. *They almost never disappoint.*

I’d done well to follow my instinct. I was served a glass of fruit wine they called the Queen’s Berry. It didn’t taste like what I was used to, but it was definitely good.

A lady with gorgeous hair as red as a blazing inferno who’d been drinking alone came up to me. “You seem to be enjoying your drink,” she said.

“Well, it *is* delightful” I answered.

“I see. If you’re not waiting for someone, what would you say about sharing a glass with me, then?” she asked.

“I’d love to. A drink tastes better with a companion. Especially if that companion is a woman as beautiful as you.”

“You sure know how to flatter people, human.”

The lady I met that day was Gardenia disguised as a lamia. One of the defining

features of the echidnas was the small wings they had on their back, but, at the time, Gardenia was hiding hers with a magic item. I didn't notice a thing.

We enjoyed a first drink together and then another...and another. I had plenty of money, so I didn't have any worries on that front. I'd recently arrested a group of brigands and had taken home a nice share of their treasure.

As the alcohol started getting to her head, Gardenia started coming on to me a little stronger—both verbally and *physically*. She slowly wrapped her snake tail around my leg.

I was pretty used to dealing with girls in this state. I'd visited my fair share of hostess bars in my previous world, and I wasn't one to refuse when one of the ladies offered to accompany me to a different bar for another drink.

I was good at listening to women telling me their troubles. Some complained that their job was too demanding, others that their subordinates got on their nerves and didn't let them drink as much as they wanted... I even remembered a girl telling me how lonely she was ever since her husband had passed. The thing was, I could never bring myself to leave these poor, lonely women alone after hearing all that!

"They keep telling me to mind my position, but I can't take it anymore!" she groaned. "I really need another drink."

"I'll have to thank whoever annoyed you so much. I got to meet you thanks to them, and I couldn't feel any more blessed."

She laughed. "It's a nice way of seeing things. I suppose I haven't enjoyed such fine drink in a while... And yet, all I've been doing is complaining..."

"I can see you've had a tough time recently. Would you like me to help you forget about it? I'll show you a beautiful dream, just for tonight."

"A beautiful dream?"

"Yes. How could I let a beauty like you feel sad and lonely?"

Gardenia let out another laugh. "I may not look the part, but I'm much older than you, you know? And I have children."

"I don't mind," I said. "So? What do you say?"

“You’re an eccentric one. Is that dream truly as beautiful as you say?”

“Of course it is. I may not look the part, but I’m an accomplished magician, you know? I know some tricks.”

She let her tail travel higher. “All right, then...” she said, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

“I’ll have the bill. For the lady too, of course.”

“Oh. Th-Thank you very much. We hope to see you again soon, sir.”

“I’ll definitely be around. The drinks were amazing.”

The barkeeper was surprised when he heard I’d pay for Gardenia too. *I guess generous humans are rare around here.*

I couldn’t bring her back to the inn Colona was staying at, and the lady seemed to be quite the important person. She probably wanted this to stay low-key. I was thinking of where to go when Gardenia pulled on my sleeve.

“One of my hidden mansions is this way,” she said. “Shou... Let’s have a good time tonight.”

The alcohol was getting to both our heads, and Gardenia’s smile was bewitching. She brought me to her secret hideout and...let’s say I enjoyed her thoroughly.

I was woken up the next morning by someone’s bloodlust assaulting my senses. *Looks like this won’t be a peaceful morning*, I thought, opening my eyes.

“What’s going on...” I mumbled, still half asleep.

I sat up in bed and was met by a bunch of knights pointing their swords at me.

“You vile human! Who do you think you dared touch!” one of them roared, pressing the tip of her sharp blade to my throat.

Like hell, I know! Can’t you let me dress before trying to behead me? I’m still naked and so is Gardenia!

“Hang on! I did ask for her name and— Come on, put your sword down first!” I blurted out.

“Don’t you dare order us around, human! You’re laying next to our glorious

ruler, Queen Gardenia of Rungard!”

“Huh?!”

Boy, I still remembered how startled I’d been when I discovered who Gardenia was. I would never have expected the beautiful lady I’d hit it off with to be the queen!

I was astonished.

Gardenia whined, roused awake by the commotion. “Why are you all so noisy? I’m still sleepy...”

“Your Majesty!” the knights exclaimed.

“Keep it down! How can you be so loud first thing in the morning?”

“Hmm... Gardenia...are you really the queen?” I asked.

“I did hide my position from you. That was a little disingenuous of me, I apologize,” she told me before turning to her knights. “Put your swords away immediately!”

“At once, Your Majesty!”

Gardenia smoothed things over and left with her knights. However, it wasn’t the last I heard of them, and I was summoned to the palace.

I was forced to explain to Colona what had happened.

“My lord...” Colona said in an admonishing voice.

“Sorry...”

She sighed. “It’s all right, I’m not expecting anything from you anymore.”

Colona’s cold gaze stung. *I didn’t plan any of this, I promise!*

It wouldn’t have been the first time I played around with a noblewoman, but how could I have known she was a royal—the queen of a nation at that!

Colona and I made our way to the royal palace and we were asked to wait in front of the audience room. All the while, the lamia and echidna who guarded the room glared at me as though I’d personally offended them.

Urgh. They’ll come for my head if I mess up, won’t they? Not that I have any

intention of dying today.

The doors of the audience room opened, and we were shown inside by the guards.

The beauty with the fiery hair—Gardenia—was sitting on the throne. She wore a pale blue dress and looked more regal than anyone I'd ever seen. I couldn't believe it was the same woman I'd met at that bar.

Arranged neatly on each side of her throne were six younger women that looked very much like her—her daughters, I assumed. A dashing half-beastman with bull horns was standing next to the eldest princess. *That would be her prince.*

Just like the lamias, the echidnas could not give birth to men and also had to bring in partners from the outside so they could reproduce. They didn't kidnap anyone, though. They married eligible bachelors. Unlike humans, beastmen and half-beastmen usually didn't mind their snake tails.

I followed etiquette and got down on one knee, bowing deeply. Colona imitated me.

"I, Shou Sakakiyama, greet the queen. I didn't know who you were, and I apologize for my rudeness..." I said.

"You needn't bow so low. I didn't call you here so you could apologize. You only played along with me, after all," Gardenia said before dismissing her guards. "The lot of you, out!"

They hesitated briefly, glaring at me, but eventually followed their queen's command.

Only Gardenia, her family, Colona, and I remained in the room.

"I hope you won't mind me voicing my concerns, but are you sure you shouldn't keep some guards around?" I asked. "I could be an assassin."

"You'd still pose no threat to me. My daughters and I are proficient in magic and swordsmanship. I also happen to have an ace up my sleeve. Assassins don't scare me."

"I see. I apologize for running my mouth needlessly, then," I said.

I only heard about it later on, but the “ace” Gardenia was talking about was the royal family of Rungard’s special ability. They could transform into dragons. Regular swords couldn’t do anything to them; you needed a mithril blade—and the skills to match—if you wanted to so much as scratch a dragon’s scales. That explained why her guards had agreed to leave the room so easily.

Without her guards to watch her, Gardenia became bolder. She came slithering closer to me and beckoned me to stand up. “Shou, stop being so uptight with me... I enjoyed our talk so much the other day... Can’t we go back to the way it was then?” she asked.

Hang on, are you sure the queen can act like this? Your children are so surprised they froze, Gardenia!

“Your Majesty...”

“The queen is...”

“Your Majesty... Please take your age into considera—URGH!”

Oh my, looks like one of them ran her mouth a little too much. She was currently being strangled by a powerful tail and squealing like a pig.

Gardenia didn’t look away from me nor did she move as she constricted her...third (most likely, considering her appearance) daughter’s throat. The poor girl started turning blue. Her sisters were obviously panicking, but they couldn’t help her. She’d earned the ire of the queen, and they certainly didn’t want to risk being next. They were gesturing for me to do something, begging me with their eyes.

You reap what you sow... Although I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to help her out.

“We can’t,” I answered. “You’re the queen of a nation. That being said...that fact makes you very special.”

She smiled. “Am I special to you?”

She wasn’t the only queen out there, but she probably liked the idea of being more important than most people—especially in my eyes. To be fair, I wasn’t opposed to the idea of giving her preferential treatment. She was gorgeous. I couldn’t believe Gardenia was a widow—she didn’t have a single wrinkle and

still looked like she was in her twenties.

“The queen smiled...”

“I haven’t seen her look so happy in years.”

The third daughter coughed. “S-Sisters! Worry about me instead!”

“You were asking for it, so shut it!” her sisters retorted in unison.

The prince nodded, and I definitely agreed as well.

The queen eventually asked about Colona, and I introduced her as my trusted partner.

“Your...partner?”

“We work together,” Colona clarified.

“I see. I shall take your word for it, then. Although I have my doubts...”

“What are you insinuating, Queen Gardenia?” Colona shot back.

“What do you think?”

Urgh. Are they gonna fight? It’d be my fault, wouldn’t it?

Colona and I were invited to share a meal with Gardenia and her family. The queen really hadn’t summoned me here to make me apologize. Instead, she hoped to make up for the trouble her knights had caused me. We were treated like important guests and enjoyed the finest food and alcohol. The only thing was...

“Shou, you should try these eggs... They’re divine.”

“My lord, you’ll love this type of meat, have some.”

Gardenia, Colona, can the two of you stop trying to feed me at the same time? I only have one mouth!

I was so tense the entire time that I didn’t get to focus on the food at all. Eventually, Gardenia suggested that we spend some time in her palace. I took her up on her offer. Colona and I usually stayed at inns, but living in such a luxurious palace for once sounded appealing. I didn’t intend to stay for long, though.

And so, Colona and I were given rooms in the palace. We took it easy for a few days, visiting the city and enjoying the palace's hospitality. I figured we'd have a relaxing time until it was time to leave, but...things turned out differently.

If I remembered well, it happened after about a week had gone by. I'd been going at it with Colona until the early hours of the day, so I was sleeping soundly when a loud noise woke me up. I immediately sensed that the atmosphere was heavy. *Something must have happened.*

I woke Colona up and started getting ready when someone stormed into my room without knocking.

"Lord Shou! Are you awake—KYAAH!" Gardenia's third daughter, Melfia—the one I got along with best after Gardenia herself—squealed.

The princess had ended up seeing me almost naked.

Melfia took after her mother and had beautiful almond-shaped eyes as well as fiery red hair. She was quite the outspoken personality. So much that she'd been strangled for it when I first met her.

Don't you know how to knock? I was in the middle of putting on a shirt when she came in, and, besides that one piece of clothing, I was stark naked.

Wait. Is she peeking from behind her hands?

I might have chastised her for her her impure behavior as a princess, but then again, considering I'd hit on her a few times, I probably wasn't one to talk.

"Melfia, can you tell me what's happening?"

"Oh! Right! We're under attack! The neighboring country launched a raid!"

"The neighboring country? That would be..."

"Gargantia," Colona said. "The nation of the trolls. Their skin is as hard as rocks, and they're said to be able to crush boulders with their bare hands. Rungard and Gargantia have been at war several times in the past, but Gargantia's current king, King Gad Zala formed an alliance with Queen Gardenia so they could withstand the attacks of the empire. Both Rungard and Gargantia lost a lot of soldiers in the war—ten thousand and twenty thousand

respectively—but managed to drive back the empire's elite force."

"Y-You sure know your stuff," Melfia commented.

"Thank you for the compliment."

Unlike humans, Colona never forgot anything she read or heard. Only machines could have such a perfect memory.

"So these trolls attacked you... That explains the commotion," I said. "Weren't you guys supposed to be allies, though?"

"We were, but...they broke the truce and decided to attack us anyway!"

Such things weren't unusual. Countries would form alliances, and, as soon as their new partners let their guard down, decide to bare their fangs again. Others also tried to surprise their opponent by attacking right after the alliance was formed.

While this kind of military operation came with its fair share of drawbacks—such as losing the trust of the rest of the neighboring nations, it was very effective. Rungard would have a hard time responding.

"The stronghold at the border has already fallen... That's the last report we got before the telepathic messages stopped coming in. There are at least ten thousand trolls marching into Rungard, and we can barely gather three thousand soldiers at the moment... The villages and cities closest to the border must have fallen already, and...in a day or two they'll be at our doors. In the meantime, you must—"

"Escape? Is that it?" I cut in.

Melfia paused. "Yes... That is Mother's request. She doesn't wish to lose someone precious to her ever again..."

"What will Gardenia do?"

"She said the queen cannot leave her people behind, no matter what."

"I see."

Do as I say, not as I do, huh?

She intended to stay even though she was asking us to flee. Most

commendable behavior, but...

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Mother led her knights to the front line at dawn. She said she’d be able to buy some time if she used her draconic powers... I wanted to accompany her, but...she begged me to come to you instead...” Melfia’s voice started breaking. “She wanted...to thank you...” she sobbed.

This must have been a difficult order for Melfia to follow, I thought.

Gardenia obviously intended to die, and I refused to let that happen. I wasn’t about to let her throw her life away!

“She’s a goddamn idiot...” I grumbled. “Colona!”

“Yes, my lord. According to my estimations, the front line is located in the south-south-west, around the fortified town of Asogaon. Preparations complete. Ready to depart at any time.”

“Perfect! Hey, Melfia, don’t you wanna leave these troll bastards speechless? I’m off to deal with them, wanna come?”

“What?” Melfia looked at me, astonished. She quickly regained her composure, “I... I do!”

“Good! You do take after your mother, after all! Let’s go show them how strong you are!” I said, going out on the balcony and throwing one of my trump cards in the air. “Rush through the sky and answer the call of your master! Open your iron wings and lend your godly speed to my cause! Lead me into the battlefield! Beast Invocation! Jet Falcon!”

The card shone before breaking apart into thousands of tiny light particles. They quickly took on the form of a mighty falcon with sharp claws. Jet engines appeared and attached themselves to each of its wings before the beast landed in front of me.

Melfia screamed. “Wh-Wh-What is that thing?!”

Colona jumped onto the falcon’s back, and I followed her.

“Don’t worry, I summoned it with my ability, Iron Beast Invocation,” I told Melfia. “Come on, give me your hand.”

She looked scared, but she took my hand anyway and managed to hop onto the large bird.

I could transport up to six adults at a time using Jet Falcon, and it even came with seats for optimal comfort. *Melfia's gonna fall if she just sits down like that, though.*

"Melfia, this thing here is called a seatbelt. Fasten it properly or you'll fall," I warned.

"W-Wait... I could fall?"

"As long as you stay put and don't undo your seatbelt, you'll be fine."

Melfia looked even more scared, and she buckled up in a hurry. She didn't seem to trust the seatbelt much, though, and she also entwined her long tail around the seat. *You don't need to do all that*, I thought.

"My lord, I'm done inputting the coordinates into the Jet Falcon. We can depart as soon as you say the word."

"Gotcha."

Colona was in the pilot seat. I could have taken charge as well, but Colona could synchronize with the Jet Falcon and have it fly on auto-pilot until it reached the coordinates she'd inputted. *Easy, huh?*

I fastened my seatbelt as well and gestured at Colona to get going. The Jet Falcon let out a loud screech and started flapping its large iron wings. After reaching a certain altitude, the jet engines attached to its wings activated.

"Melfia, you should close your mouth unless you want to bite your tongue."

"What?"

Colona pulled the lever before I could explain. Flames came flying out of the engines, and the Jet Falcon was propelled forward at high speed, cutting through the wind.

The moving landscape was beautiful, but Melfia was frozen in place, not daring to look around as she clenched her jaw. *Yeah, that was always gonna happen. It's her first time going this fast. These kind of vehicles don't exist here.*

I wished I could have used the Jet Falcon more during my own travels, but it wasn't an option most of the time. It could only cover relatively short distances—going across the sea was out of the question, for instance. I'd tried once, and Colona and I had ended up in the sea. *Now,* that *was an ordeal. You shouldn't underestimate fuel exhaustion.*

If I had the Quetzalcoatl, I could totally travel long distances, though. Too bad it's as rare a card as Colona is.

There was no point dwelling on cards I didn't even have. The Jet Falcon was more than enough to get us to where we needed to be today, and that was good enough.

We were flying at high speed, but the wind wasn't impacting us at all. We didn't have an aircraft canopy above our heads to shield us, but the Jet Falcon itself came with a bonus ability called Atmospheric Armor. It nullified the impact of the wind—which would have normally been difficult to handle at this speed.

The only thing was...you wouldn't be protected by that ability if you fell from the falcon. In which case, you'd feel the wind slam into you as you fell to the ground. *And this is why seatbelts are important, kids!*

After around ten minutes, Asogaon came into sight. Sturdy walls surrounded the fortified town on all sides—it'd been built to serve as a fortress in times of war.

A fire was blazig in the south of the city, so we immediately headed toward the southern gate, leaving a trail of vapor in our wake. The gate seemed to be on the verge of collapse, and right outside of it, a dragon was singlehandedly taking on dozens of trolls.

Behind the larger dragon, five smaller dragons were laying on the ground, wounded—Melfia's sisters.

Gardenia was pretty much fighting alone. There were still a few echidna knights here and there, but they couldn't do much against the five thousand trolls that were still standing.

I had to give them props for getting rid of half of the trolls with such a small

army. However, most of their warriors had been incapacitated in the process. Gardenia was also badly hurt. Her scales had been pierced and her flesh cut open in many places. She was bleeding profusely.

The commander of the trolls raised his blade and roared. *An artifact? It's giving off a pretty unsettling energy... There's no way that sword is a regular artifact.*

"FORWARD!" he screamed. "VICTORY IS BEFORE US! SEIZE QUEEN GARDENIA AND BRING HER TO MEEEEE!!!"

His men responded with earsplitting battle cries.

Wow! These guys are in a good mood! They're so sure they've won that they're not even bothering with formations anymore, huh?

Let's spice things up a little.

"Colona, I'll jump down. Join me whenever you're done landing."

"Understood, my lord. Please be careful. Your opponents have found a way to pierce through dragon scales. They can't be underestimated."

"I know that!"

I took out a card and designated my casting area.

Time to show them what a Machine Beasts Tamer can do!

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I could feel my strength leaving me. I knew I would not emerge victorious, and I knew the most I could do was buy some time for my people, but I did not even succeed in doing that...

As soon as I received word of the troll invasion, I called on my troops and led them into battle against one of our oldest enemies.

Trolls were a severe threat to us. They were blessed with tough skin, great physical strength, and, above all, overwhelming regenerative abilities.

My children and I could oppose them with our draconic powers, but I knew my people could not. In the past, several other countries had borders with Gargantia. However, they'd all been invaded and integrated into the trolls'

territory. Rungard alone had escaped this fate—until now.

The repeated offensives of the empire had forced Gargantia and Rungard to unite against a common enemy. We'd buried the hatchet, and together, we'd driven the imperial troops away. We were finally at peace.

And yet, the moment we relaxed, the trolls launched a surprise attack. They'd made use of the war against the empire to hide soldiers in dungeons, and then they all came out at once to march upon Rungard...

We were no fools. We knew that Gargantia might again turn against us, and we had soldiers keep watch at the border at all times. However, they were easily outnumbered when those hidden troll soldiers came crawling out of the dungeons. The border stronghold fell in the blink of an eye.

I immediately understood how dire the situation was, and I brought all the knights and soldiers I could find, as well as my daughters, to Asogaon. We decided to make use of the fortification. Our goal was to focus on defense and slow down the trolls' offensive. I was ready to give up my life if needed—especially if it meant I could take down the hateful Gad Zala with me. I hoped that my daughters could then drive the remnants away. A terrible miscalculation.

Gad Zala had gotten his hands on a powerful artifact.

His strange saw was much sharper than it looked. It could easily cut through my scales, and it somehow sapped away my magic every time it so much as grazed me. I was starting to have a difficult time maintaining my dragon form.

My daughters collapsed one after the other. I was the only one left.

Even with my draconic powers, my chances of winning were growing thinner and thinner. Even if I managed to take Gad Zala's head, there was no one left to stop the trolls from marching on the capital.

I wish I could have seen Shou's face one more time before my death...

The best I could do was send Melfia to warn him. My sweet daughter had yet to master her powers and couldn't turn into a dragon at will. I couldn't bring her to the battlefield.

Besides...I knew that Melfia too had feelings for Shou.

“Urgh...”

I could feel my body turning back into my echidna form. *Are my powers leaving me already?*

“I’m still the queen! I won’t let you hurt my people!” I exclaimed, forcing myself to stand up in spite of my injuries. I pushed my sword into the ground, using it as a clutch to remain upright. “I’ll take as many of you as I can with me! Gad Zala! You shall keep me company in death!”

I mustered all of my mana and let it run rampant.

Argh...

I still had one move I could use: Annihilation Breath. It was a dangerous technique that involved letting all the mana inside me flow out, unbridled. It would destroy everything in its wake—even the strongest of dragons.

As queen, I wouldn’t let these odious trolls take another step! My pride as a woman forbade me from falling into their vile hands, and I was ready to give up my life to unleash this final attack.

However, right before I could activate Annihilation Breathe, flames flashed before my eyes.

“What in the world?!”

I was certain the raging inferno had been created by my enemies, but...

“ARRRRRGH!!!”

“IT BURNS! IT BURNS!”

“NOOOOO!!!”

The cries of the trolls filled the battlefield.

Finally, I noticed something crucial. I was so close to the flames...and yet, I did not feel hot. I didn’t hear any of my knights and soldiers scream either.

Who could have done this?!

“Hot, huh? I’ll make sure only your bones are left when I’m done with you!”

I suddenly heard a familiar voice from within the inferno. *No way... He shouldn't be here...*

The wall of flames disappeared, and *he* was standing in the midst of the sparks. It was him, beyond the shadow of a doubt.

"Shou..."

"Hi, Gardenia. What kind of expression is that?"

The man who'd stolen my heart with his carefree smile, Shou Sakakiyama, was right here.

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Phew! That felt good!

The magic card I'd just used was called Change Burst. I had to select one or several targets—the trolls in this case—and a blazing tempest would consume them. The winds created by this tempest would also bring the launching unit—me—next to the targets on the field.

You had to pay attention to the timing when using this kind of card. Since your summon would end up in the middle of the enemies, it had the potential to backfire horribly. That was why I was currently surrounded by tons of trolls.

The troll holding the artifact was furious. "Human! How dare you! I'll destroy you! BRING ME HIS HEAD!" he screamed, sending his men after me.

"Shou! Why are you here?! Run away!" Gardenia implored.

"Sorry, but no can do. I'm not the kind of man who'd leave a lady behind to save myself. Stay put, Gardenia. I'll show you there's no need for you to worry."

First, I had to take care of their vanguard.

"Come forth! Gears General, Machine Mercenaries Corps, Mohawk Biker Corps, Templar Chain Guards!" I said, launching four cards into the air.

Pompous soldiers, ferocious half-machine mercenaries, decadent bikers with mohawks holding iron pipes and iron bats, and mechanical soldiers holding large shields appeared on the battlefield.

"Annihilate them! Trample them down! Chaaaaaarge!!!" the general of the

Gears Army roared.

His men reacted immediately, pulling the triggers of their machine guns and unleashing a rain of bullets upon my enemies.

The trolls fell one after the other. Their skin was said to be as tough as rock, but it couldn't protect them from steel bullets. *My turn isn't over yet!*

"Don't let these damn soldiers outdo us!" one of the mohawk bikers exclaimed. "Here we go!"

Cheers erupted.

"Get rid of the filth!"

The mercenaries and the general worked hard to maintain their upper hand, making use of their rifles—some even had rocket launchers—to blow the trolls to smithereens. In the meantime, the mohawk bikers rode into battle, circling around them. Their heavy bats and pipes were powerful enough to kill someone with a single blow to the head.

"We shall ensure your safety!"

"A-All right..."Gardenia replied.

The Templar Chain Guards formed a line in front of the gate, protecting Gardenia and the others. They had terrible attack stats but amazing defense. Their special ability, Protection, made them resistant even to unforeseen attacks. They were also able to use healing magic—albeit only once. All in all, they were perfect for setting up a line of defense.

The greatest advantage of these cards was that they allowed me to summon an entire platoon with a single card—super cost-effective!

The mohawk bikers were especially cheap to summon. And while the Templar Guards were a little more expensive, they were still easy enough to summon.

I needed to chant to summon more cost-heavy iron beasts such as Buster Megalo Chimera or Jet Falcon, but cheap cards like the ones I'd just used barely required any concentration at all—a bit of mana, and here they were. They really shone in these kinds of situations.

That being said, a platoon was composed of approximately thirty units. I'd just

summoned three platoons, which meant I had around ninety iron beasts on the battlefield. They were up against several thousand trolls, and naturally, that meant they couldn't handle them all.

Some eventually got past my beasts and came charging at me, spears in hand. I unsheathed my blade, the Cursed Sword Gram, and swung it with all my strength. It cut through the trolls and their spears alike.

While the trolls were known for their regenerative abilities, there was no regenerating when your body lay on the ground, separated into two distinct parts.

More trolls continued to rush toward me, diving into the same breach.

I can't be bothered to deal with them one by one... Isn't it about time?

A flash of silver befell the trolls running in front. They collapsed, their heads—and helmets—neatly cut in two.

"Sorry for the wait, my lord."

"No worries, I didn't wait long."

As always, my reliable partner had perfect timing.

"Here's your Plasma Twinblade, Colona. I'll focus on getting rid of a bunch of them at once, so you take care of the small fries running around."

"Understood, my lord. Plasma Twinblade, recognized," she said after catching her favorite weapon.

She stepped in front of me and cut through the trolls that were approaching as if their bodies were as soft as mere blocks of tofu. *What beautiful technique*, I thought, looking at her. *The way her skirt flutters and exposes her upper thighs is divine.*

All right, I have stuff to do too, I forced myself to focus.

I picked out three of my favorite cards—Buster Megalo Chimera, Gear Leech, and Silver Wolf, Arthur—and summoned them. As soon as Buster Megalo Chimera appeared on the field, it charged at the soldiers that continued to flock toward Colona with its imposing steel body, sending them flying back violently. Gear Leech created dozens of small magic circles, using them to materialize

lasers that burned through the trolls. As for Arthur, he jumped into the crowd of enemies without hesitation, cutting down every troll his blade could reach.

Now that we had enough soldiers on our side to buy me time, I took out another one of my trump cards. I channeled my mana and made sure to follow the steps as accurately as possible.

“Come forth, my sword. Devour my mana and lend me your help in return. Lay waste and desolation upon my enemies! Beast Invocation! Sylvan Dragon!”

As I finished chanting, the card I was holding shone as brightly as the sun, illuminating the entire battlefield. A torrent of energy started swirling around me as the blinding light split into thousand of small particles. It soon took another shape—that of a gigantic dragon.

“GAAAAAAAAAAOOOOOOO!!!” it roared.

The mighty dragon was covered in silver scales, and its sharp orichalcum claws were strong enough to grind mountains into dust.

“Destroy them!” I ordered.

The Sylvan Dragon roared once more, acknowledging my command, before it started inhaling.

“All units! Bring the dragon down!” the enemy general screamed, sensing the danger.

While he’d been on the front line when I first arrived on the battlefield, he’d since retreated behind several rows of soldiers. *Running away won’t help you.*

The trolls hurled their spears at the Sylvan Dragon...in vain. *Sorry to disappoint, but regular weapons won’t leave a scratch.*

The most courageous soldiers actually approached the dragon and tried to hurt it with their battleaxes, but it didn’t work as they’d hoped. Their axes shattered against the hard scales.

My boy’s on par with ancient dragons, you know!

There were several categories of dragons, ranging from wyverns to ancient beasts. All dragons were powerful, but some could be killed if you were strong enough and had an appropriate weapon—a mithril sword, for instance. Ancient

dragons were something else entirely. They were the stuff of legends—gods, even, at times.

The Sylvan Dragon was one such mythical beast. To be precise, it was a Phantasmagoric Machine Dragon. I couldn't be bothered detailing everything the flavor text said, but the point was that spears and axes wouldn't cut it. *If you wanna take it down, you need to bring missiles and tanks, guys.*

The Sylvan Dragon finished inhaling and opened its gigantic jaw wide. Once more, light flooded the battlefield, and with it came destruction.

The fierce light energy created a chain explosion that blew away the trolls one after the other. This powerful technique—the Sylvan Dragon's best move—was called Judgement Breath.

The torrent of destruction swallowed the trolls and spit out ashes.

While plenty of mohawk bikers were in the midst of the enemies, they were not affected by the attack in the slightest. They weren't the only exception: the grass and the trees weren't scorched either. In fact, no one—and nothing—but the trolls were hurt by the dragon's breath.

Judgment from the heavens did not befall everyone—it only came for those who'd sinned. *Yup, it works exactly as in the flavor text.*

When the breath finally faded, only a few hundred trolls were left.

"Impossible! How could this have happened?!"

Looks like their commander's still alive. Too bad.

He had most likely rolled into a ditch and had been lucky enough to escape the dragon's judgment.

Sometimes, those who deserve it the least are the luckiest.

"My lord, this is their king, Gad Zala," Colona informed me.

Oh my, their king came in person? I'd heard trolls were warriors at heart, so it made sense. Plus, I definitely respected kings like him more than the ones that sent soldiers out to die from the safety of their castle walls.

If I took him down, this war would be over. The troll's offensive had started at

dawn and it was around noon now. *What kind of war lasts for half a day?*

"You!" He pointed at me. "It's your fault! If I kill you, summoner, your damned dragon will disappear too! Follow meeeee!" he screamed at his men.

Someone's sharp. He was right—without me, my summons would disappear. While they were fairly rare, summoners existed in this world. I didn't know whether they were the descendants of an otherworlder or if that power existed even before the first otherworlder ended up here.

The trolls that had survived all rushed me at once.

Guys... Did you forget I wasn't alone?

"Everyone! Charge ahead!" Melfia yelled.

She was riding alongside one of the mohawk bikers and was leading the remaining echidna warriors toward the group of trolls.

I'd given her command over some of my iron beasts. I wasn't sure how she'd found herself on one of the bikes, but that didn't matter—Melfia was a splendid fighter. While she couldn't transform into a dragon, she was even braver than her sisters.

I'd noticed that after accompanying her during one of her outings. I was bored, so I'd decided to tag along while she took care of a bunch of bandits.

In Rungard, every princess had a chivalric order under her direct control—although each order was only composed of two squads for a total of around twenty knights. In most cases, these knights ended up as personal guards—or worse, overdressed sidekicks to make the princesses stand out. Melfia however, used them to maintain order. She often fought alongside them to punish criminals as she had those bandits.

I didn't think much of it at first and wondered what a princess's personal force could achieve, but I'd been pleasantly surprised. Melfia and her knights were wonderful fighters and had easily subdued the bandits even though they were greatly outnumbered.

Melfia, in particular, had spent a long time gathering intel and putting together a strategy. She'd made sure there would be no way out when she

attacked their hideout, and her carefully devised plan had proved effective—her knights had barely suffered any casualties, and the bandits had all been captured.

I hadn't helped her much either—besides a bit of scouting, Melfia and her knights had done all the work themselves. Melfia wasn't only a princess; she was a skilled commander fit to lead troops into battle.

While many of the echidna knights and soldiers had been wounded earlier, thanks to Gardenia and her other daughters' efforts, very few had died. The healing spell cast by the Templar Chain Guards had allowed them to return to the battlefield under Melfia's command.

The princess and her troops hit the trolls' flank, breaking their formation. As for my iron beasts, they attacked from the other side, surrounding the trolls in a pincer movement.

Faced with our relentless onslaught, the trolls gradually lost the will to fight. The fear of death overcame them, and they threw their weapons to the ground before routing.

Even so, Gad didn't relent. He set his sights on Melfia and raised his strange sword, carving a path for himself by cutting down one of the mercenaries. He followed up by kicking a mohawk biker away and beheading one of the echidnas that stood in his path.

He's head and shoulders above the rest. I can see why he's *the king.*

"Strength! Charged!" I exclaimed, activating two buffs before I closed the distance separating me from the troll king in a single motion.

He noticed me...but it was already too late.

"Now!"

I slashed at his torso, cutting through his rock-hard skin. Blue blood started pooling on the ground beneath him. He'd been sent flying back from the impact of my blow and he now groaned in pain. He pressed on his open wound and slowly got up...only to immediately fall to his knees, vomiting blood.

I'd felt firsthand how deeply my sword had cut into his flesh. He was still

hanging on, but this was a fatal wound. He wouldn't be able to walk anymore, let alone swing his sword at us.

"King Gad Zala! Say your prayers!" Melfia cried, raising her blade towards the heavens and bringing it down on her enemy.

I suddenly felt a chill run down my spine. *Where is that wicked energy coming from— The sword!*

Gad's sword let out an ominous aura that seeped into its master's body. The king—who should have been unable to take another step—suddenly jumped forward. His eyes were wide open, and his entire face distorted into a crazed expression as he swung his evil blade at Melfia.

"Colona!" I screamed.

"I'm here!"

Colona and I both leaped, and I immediately activated a card.

My vision blurred, but I managed to get in front of Melfia in a split second. I used Gram to block Gad's sword, and a loud clanking noise resounded.

The card I'd just used was called Close Call. It allowed me to intercept an attack targeting another unit while bolstering my own defense. It was pretty similar to Protection, the Templar Guards' skill.

When Gad's blade collided with mine, I realized that something was wrong. His artifact was trying to devour my own cursed sword. It felt...alive.

While we were locked at a standstill, Colona arrived. She targeted his arm and cut it clean off, sending it flying along with the strange blade.

Gad had no way to come back from this. We could have left him to die, but this battle had to be settled. Needless to say, there was no point in me dealing the finishing blow. His victims had to put an end to him themselves.

"You finish him, Melfia."

"I will!" The princess didn't hesitate and brought her sword down, taking his head in one fell swoop.

The troll's head rolled on the ground as more blood started gushing out.

“The king... The king is dead?!”

“Run! Run for your life!”

With Gad dead, the last remaining trolls threw their weapons and helmets to the ground and fled as fast as their legs could carry them.

Good grief.

I got a cold sweat at the end, but we’d somehow managed to bring an end to this mess. I couldn’t help but wonder what was up with that sword, though. It had been sent flying along with Gad’s arm, and so I started searching for it, but I couldn’t find it no matter how hard I looked.

“My lord, what’s wrong?” Colona asked.

“I was just wondering where his sword had gone,” I answered.

“Now that you mention it, I cannot sense it anymore. Did it not get damaged when it collided with the cursed sword, Gram?”

“Maybe...”

Something bothered me, but the echidnas were already celebrating their victory, cheering as they watched the trolls flee.

“Whatever, I’ll worry about that later. Colona,” I called.

“Yes, my lord.”

I took her hands into mine and quietly celebrated the fact that we were still both alive and well.

We’d been able to avoid needless sacrifices—a job well done, if I dared say so myself.

Gardenia and the others were waving at me, so I forced my exhausted body to move and joined them.

I let Gardenia and her daughters handle everything after the battle. I was an outsider, and I had no business butting into political matters. Especially since I had no intention of settling here long-term.

That being said...I’d ended up standing out much more than I would have

liked. *I didn't really have a choice, though.*

I wish I could have done a little more sightseeing.

"Colona, are we good to go?"

"Yes, my lord. I double-checked, we haven't forgotten anything."

The palace was bursting with excitement, and Colona and I masterfully slipped past the busy maids as we headed toward the hidden passage meant to be used only by the Rungard royals.

We couldn't stay in this country any longer. Even if I knew Gardenia herself wouldn't pressure me, her ministers and the rest of the court would soon desperately try to recruit me. I didn't want to deal with something like that, so it was time for me to make my exit.

"Shou."

We exited the passage to find...Gardenia and Melfia.

Aren't you two supposed to be super busy? What about work?

"You're leaving for good, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I stood out a little too much during the battle," I answered. "But I'll come say hello whenever I'm in the area again."

They'd both noticed I was about to leave. *Women's intuition is quite something.*

Gardenia looked disappointed. "I see..." she said, casting her eyes down.

Melfia, on the other hand, didn't look away from me. "Shou! Take me with you!" she requested, her voice full of determination.

Her mother was taken aback. "Melfia?! Do you even understand what you're asking?!"

"Of course, I do, Mother! I—"

"Melfia, stop. Please don't say anymore," I cut in.

I knew Melfia's feelings for me were real. She'd clearly thought things through and had made up her mind to follow me, but...

“Melfia, you belong here,” I told her. “You can’t leave your country behind to follow a guy like me.”

“But—”

“I like this country, you know? Your food and alcohol are top notch, and the scenery’s beautiful. So I’d be very grateful if you protected it for me,” I said.

“Protect it? Me?! I can’t even turn into a dragon...”

“You don’t need draconic powers. You’re amazing with a sword in hand, and you have a gift for leading people. Others aren’t so talented, you know? Melfia, please protect this place so I can come again someday.”

“Promise me you’ll come back,” she said after a pause.

“I will. Gardenia, I’m counting on you too.”

“Sure... Shou, let’s meet again...someday...”

“Yeah.”

I rearranged my mantle and set off with Colona in tow. Gardenia and Melfia watched me walk away until I disappeared into the darkness of the night.

“My lord, are you sure you’re all right with this?” Colona asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I know you truly enjoyed your time here. You could become the king of Rungard and remain here if you wanted to. Why didn’t you?”

“I would have had to deal with all kinds of troubles. Besides...do you know what I enjoy most?”

“What?”

“Traveling with you, Colona. I like watching the sun rise with you in places I’ve never seen before. I wouldn’t exchange that for any throne.”

“Oh... I see.”

I hadn’t gotten to see Colona blush in quite some time. *I’ll commit this to memory.*

“So yeah, you have to keep taking good care of me, partner,” I said.

“I couldn’t leave you alone, my lord. I’d feel bad if you left even more victims in your wake, so I have no choice but to stick by your side.”

Victims?! That’s mean!

Our travels would continue for a long time.

I guess our next destination will be...the land of the demon tribes. I need to talk to Asta about that weird artifact.

Colona had told me it’d probably been destroyed, but I’d definitely felt it clash with Gram. There was no way I’d shattered it on the spot.

I’ll need to look into this.

◆◇◆

“Shou?”

Gardenia’s voice roused me from my thoughts. What did she say again? Oh, right, she was asking about the song.

“It’s a song from my old world,” I said. “It’s a folk song that was popular where I’m from. I like it a lot. What do you think? It’s goodg, right?”

“The other world, huh? I don’t really understand the lyrics, but I like cheerful songs like that.”

I’d been singing a famous Okinawan folk song. It had won its fair share of awards and had even been performed at Kohaku Uta Gassen, the New Year’s Eve music show. I’d been in this world for a while now, but I didn’t think I’d ever forget those words.

From now on, I would surely go on to make more new memories in this world with Colona by my side. We still had some time to think about it, but I eventually wanted to settle down with her—have children with her even. According to Colona, she could give birth. I still remembered how red her face had been when she’d reluctantly whispered it into my ear. She was so cute I couldn’t help but embrace her.

Colona had become so important to me that I couldn’t bear to imagine a future without her. She was just that important—worthy of an entire lifetime of devotion. Not that I had ever told Colona that—I was much too embarrassed. I

didn’t have a problem flirting with her, though.

“My lord, look. A white dolphin.”

“Oh! That’s rare.”

Colona looked excited as she took out her camera to immortalize the scene. I draped my arm over her shoulder and pulled her close. *I’m already enjoying this trip*, I thought.