AKATSUKI

ILLUSTRATOR
YUUI

04



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Chapter 1

So warm and fuzzy—I wanna stay here and sleep forever...

“Um... Masa...san...” a voice called.

I have to wake up, but the pillows are so soft... What are they made of? I have a feeling I’ve touched something just as soft in the past, but...when was it again? I don’t even remember buying such amazing pillows. They’re so warm... Wait. Warm? Why are the pillows warm?

“Um... Masaki-san?”

All at once, I came to my senses. I struggled to open my eyes and, when I finally did, I was greeted by two large, soft mounds. When I looked up and saw Akiha’s bright red face, I realized I’d mistaken Akiha’s voluptuous breasts for the pillows I thought I’d been rubbing my face against.

“Ahhh! S-Sorry!” I blurted, jerking away from Akiha so fast that I fell on my rear end.

“Masaki-san?! Are you okay?!”

“Y-Yeah... I’m so sorry, Akiha. I did something terrible while I was asleep...”

“I-It’s fine... It was an accident,” she said, pausing. “You were just sleeping so soundly that...”

“I hugged you, and then dared touch your—”

“Please stop talking about it!” Akiha averted her eyes, flushing red once more. “Even thinking about it... It’s so embarrassing.”

Remembering how warm and soft she’d felt against me, I felt my own cheeks start to warm.

Then Levia’s face suddenly appeared between the two of us. “Hey!” she said. “I come back from scouting the area and what do I see? The two of you flirting!”

Akiha and I both cried out in surprise.

“Don’t you think you two are a little too relaxed considering we just fell into

this weird...place?" Levia asked.

Oh, Right. Suddenly, everything came back to me: we'd tried to go through a Fairy Path, but a magic storm broke out and threw Akiha, Levia, and me into a bottomless chasm.

That must be how I'd ended up passed out on top of Akiha. *I must have been heavy. Not to mention I...* I shook my head, trying to chase the thoughts away, and took another look at Akiha. Thankfully, she didn't seem hurt.

I wasn't worried about Levia; I'd seen firsthand how sturdy she was.

"I suppose we have no way of knowing where we are," Akiha said.

"The smell of this forest is rich. I can tell we're in Arth, but that's about it," Levia explained. "We could be anywhere on the continent."

"I'll use Wing and fly around a little. I should be able to spot a road, or a village at the very least. That'll help us figure things out," I said.

Levia shook her head. "That won't work. You won't be able to maintain spells because of the magic storm."

I tried activating Wing and, just as Levia had predicted, I was only able to float for a few seconds before my mana dispersed and I fell. I hadn't flown high enough for my fall to hurt, but this didn't bode well.

I opened my map and checked our surroundings. *Trees, trees, trees, and more trees*. The forest went on for kilometers all around us. *Did we end up in the jungle?* I hadn't realized how large Arth truly was up until now. While I could see plenty of monsters and animals, there wasn't a single village or town in the area.

After studying the map for a while longer, I spotted a road in a corner of the map. "Looking at the map, I've got some bad news," I said, sighing. "I only found one road. Levia, you can't fly either, can you?"

"Nope, the magic I rely on to fly isn't working either. I do have a way to bypass that, though..."

"You do?"

"If I turn back into my original form, then—"

“I’d rather you didn’t,” I said.

“Please don’t!” Akiha agreed.

If Levia were to suddenly unleash her enormous draconic form here, the situation was bound to escalate. What if the beastmen assumed she was here to attack them? We could start a war. The trees and animals around us wouldn’t last long either.

“Let’s just head toward the road for now,” I suggested. “If we follow it, we’ll eventually reach a town or a village.”

“You’re right,” Akiha said. “We won’t achieve anything dilly-dallying around. The sun will set soon, then it’ll be more difficult to navigate.”

“Not to mention that the monsters will become more active after nightfall,” Levia pointed out. “Masaki, crouch for a moment.”

“What?”

“Don’t ask questions. Just do it.”

As soon as I did, she jumped onto my back.

“All set! Let’s go!” she exclaimed.

“What do you mean by ‘all set’?! Don’t mess with me!”

I jumped to try bucking Levia off my back, but she clung to me so tightly that she didn’t budge at all. I quickly gave up and began walking through the forest, using Lost Dominion to clear a path through the thick bushes and tall grass. I’d tried using Seven Arthur at first to cut down more plants at once—and make space for Akiha—but it destroyed everything around us. Navigating past fallen trees only made the forest more difficult to traverse, so I had to begrudgingly put my favorite blade away. *Sometimes, being too powerful can be its own issue.*

After four long hours, we finally reached the road. Following the map, we’d tried to walk in a straight line but a few obstacles delayed our progress: we were attacked by ferocious monsters, then forced to take a detour around a large river and a swamp that had been in our way.

Thanks to my skills, I was all right—but Akiha could barely keep up. She had

plenty of own skills at her disposal, but RPG and FPS games aren't the same: hers weren't meant to last for hours.

Watching her pant, I could see how much trouble she'd have if we kept going. "Akiha," I said. "Let's take a break. We finally found the road. Plus, it's open so we'll be able to deal with any attacks easily here."

"No...need," she said, but her voice betrayed her exhaustion. "Let's just keep moving."

"No, we're taking a break," I said. I had to get her to rest even if she didn't want to. "You don't mind, Levia, do you?"

"Why would I mind? It's time for lunch!"

Levia wasn't wrong. Given it was a little past noon, it was about time we had something to eat. When I tried to create a door to my Room, however, only a tiny window, not nearly big enough to climb through, appeared. *Hm, looks like the aftermath of the magic storm is still disturbing my magic.* I'd noticed it while we were fighting in the forest, too. Attack spells dispersed after a couple of seconds and healing spells refused to work unless I was touching the wounds directly. For some reason, strengthening spells weren't affected to the same degree. They were less potent than usual, but I could still maintain them.

Being unable to wield magic was more annoying than I would have expected. Telepathy, in particular, would have been a huge help at the moment. I could still use Whisper to chat with Akiha—although static messed up the call if we were too far away from one another—but Telepathy didn't work at all. I'd tried contacting Adel to no avail. Since distance wasn't usually an issue, I assumed this was yet another consequence of the magic storm.

My last hope, System Message, hadn't been much help either. People needed to appear on my map for me to reach them.

Activating my Room didn't even require the use of mana, but it had still been affected by the magic storm. *There's no way we'll be able to enter through that window...*

I kept the 'door' open anyway and soon saw Fen within, sweeping the room. As soon as she noticed me, she ran to the window, her maid dress fluttering

with every step.

“Hmm... Big Brother Masaki? Why aren’t you...using the door?” she asked.

“Well... The thing is...”

Figuring Fen should know what happened, I quickly caught her up to speed. She looked worried when she heard we’d been separated from Nemea and the others, so I reached through the window to pat her head. She smiled at me brightly.

“I’m sorry, Fen,” I said, “but it looks like I won’t be able to fully open the door until the magic storm goes away for good.”

“I understand. Still, it’s...strange. Magic storms are rare. Be careful... You never know what else could happen.”

“Got it. We’ll be careful,” I said, reassuring her. . “We were thinking of having lunch. Would you like to eat with us, Fen?”

“Y-Yes...” Though Fen looked as shy as usual, she smiled at me. I gently stroked her hair once more and she lit up, more at ease.

When I looked back, I saw that Akiha was watching us intently. *Do you want me to stroke your hair too, Akiha?*

Not being able to enter my Room was a bit of a letdown, but I had cooking utensils and condiments in my inventory, so we could still cook and eat the bird monsters that had attacked us earlier without much trouble. The storm must have made them lose their minds, because they flew recklessly right at Levia. Needless to say, she’d easily twisted their necks.

I seasoned the meat with spices and herbs before covering it in potato starch. I then arranged the pieces on a makeshift stove I’d built with stones. I used Flame Javelin, but instead of the large fire spear I usually made, only a tiny spark leaped forward. It was good enough to start a fire, but it was kind of depressing.

I put a few slices of bread on the makeshift stove, too. We’d found some eggs and I wanted to make French toast for dessert. I didn’t have any sugar in my inventory, so I asked Fen to get some from inside my Room.

After I finished cooking the meat, I handed Levia, Akiha, and Fen their portions and we enjoyed the light meal together. I hadn't cooked outside in a while, but it was pretty fun.

The French toast should be almost done, I thought, shifting to check on the stove when—

"Hot, hot, hot! Ouch! It's too hot!"

The tiny fairy hovering near the stove quickly let go of the piece of French toast she was trying to steal. She picked it back up only to drop it the very next second.

"What do you think you're doing?" I asked, glaring at the little thief.

I picked up the knife I'd been using as a spatula and transferred the French toast onto a wooden plate.

"How am I supposed to resist such a sweet smell?! Wait! You're a human! I have to conceal myself!" she exclaimed.

Right as the fairy began turning invisible, Levia swiftly snatched her. "Too late," she said.

The fairy struggled in her grasp, trying to escape, but Levia had her by the wings and there was no way the fairy was breaking free.

"Let go, you rude human! Take this!" she yelled, thrusting her hand at Levia's face. The air crackled, then a powerful wave of electricity struck Levia in the face. Smoke started rising in the air. *How could she use magic with the storm going on?! Not that it's going to help her. In fact, knowing Levia, I'm a bit worried for her.*

"Heh heh! How'd you like that?!" the fairy said, smug.

"Shut it, you thief!" Levia shot back, unharmed. Though her hair had been singed, that was the extent of the damage.

"What?! My magic didn't work?" the fairy said, shocked. Even my magic hadn't worked on Levia, so there was no way a little electric wave would. The only way to get through her sturdy skin was by using a scalding hot fire spell before striking.

As always, Levia's magic resistance is no joke.

"You not only try stealing my precious dessert, but you dare burn my hair too?" Levia roared. "You deserve a long, painful death! Since you ruined my meal, I'll have to eat you instead!"As Levia brought the small fairy closer and closer to her open mouth, I couldn't help but think: *You're not going to eat her for real, are you?*

"I'M SORRY!" the fairy screamed, crying. "I'M SORRY! FORGIVE ME!"

Then Levia gobbled her down.

ARE YOU SERIOUS?!


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“Spit her out!” I exclaimed, hitting the back of Levia’s head.

She spat her back out with a gross gurgling sound.

Who the hell does that?!

“Masaki! Why’d you do that?! Fairies are delicacies!” Levia complained.

“I don’t care! If you’re still hungry, eat this instead!” I shoved a piece of French toast into Levia’s mouth.

As soon as she started munching on it, her face relaxed into sheer bliss.

The fairy flew straight toward me, covered in Levi’s drool. *Gross!* “I-I’m alive!” she said, panting. “You’re my savior!”

Noticing my discomfort, Akiha wiped the fairy’s body and hair with a small towel. The fairy let Akiha clean her up without a word.

Once everyone cooled down, we sat down and I offered the fairy some French toast.

Levia asked for more, but I’d only made one piece for each of us, so I refused. Fen couldn’t bear to see Levia so dejected, so she asked Levia if she’d like half of hers.

Levia lit up.

Do you have no pride, Levia? Why is an ancient dragon taking food from a child?

“This is amazing! I love it!” the fairy said between bites of a tiny piece of French toast.

“I’m happy to hear you’re enjoying it,” I said. “So, what’s your name?”

“My name? Humans can’t pronounce fairy names... I know! You can just give me another one!”

Why the hell should I *be the one naming you?! I guess I can just make something stupid up...but it’d be rude, wouldn’t it?*

With her blond hair, blue eyes, and pale blue-white dress, the fairy resembled those fairies that always appear in fairy tales. *Should I call her...Alice? Rapunzel*

could work too, but her hair's not long enough...

"Hmm... Masaki-san," Akiha started. "How about we call her Alice?"

"Oh! I was just thinking the same thing. She really does look like her, doesn't she?"

"Alice?" the fairy asked. "Is that my new name? All right! I'm Alice now!"

"I'm Masaki. This is Akiha," I said, gesturing to my companion. "As for the girl who tried to eat you...she's called Levia. Do you live around here, Alice?"

"I live in the Fairy Village, obviously. Why are you even asking? I'm only here because there's a Fairy Path close by," she said.

I asked her to tell me more about the Fairy Village and learned it was a place you could only reach if a fairy guided you through a Fairy Path. According to Alice, fairies weren't bothered by magic storms and could easily come and go at any time.

"Do you want to visit my village? You all look nice, so I don't mind showing you around. Well, not all of you. I refuse to bring *her*," Alice said, glaring at Levia.

"You're so rude! Care to remind me which one of us is a wicked thief?" Levia shot back.

They looked like they were going to fight again, so I stepped between them and patted each of their heads to calm them down. Although I wasn't particularly proud of it, I'd become a master at patting people.

"We don't have time for this. Save for it later," I said.

"Too bad," Alice said. "I wanted everyone else to get a taste of this delicious treat... Besides honey, I've never tasted anything so sweet before."

"Well, Alice, it was a pleasure meeting you, but we've got to reach a village or town before nightfall. We'll be on our way," I said.

"We'd like to avoid having to camp in the forest at night, you see," Akiha added. "Goodbye, Alice! I hope we meet again someday."

"W-Wait! Hang on!" the fairy said. "You're looking for a beastmen settlement,

right? I'll show you the way. I haven't got much to do and I have a feeling I'll get plenty of good meals if I hang around you."

So, she wants to be our guide, huh? I still hadn't seen anyone on my map, so relying on someone who knew the area was probably for the best.

"All right," I replied. "Just make sure to lead us to a town or a village, okay?"

"Masaki-san... Are you sure this is a good idea?" Akiha asked.

"She'd follow us even if we said no. Am I right?" I said, looking at the fairy.

"Of course I would! The elders are always telling me not to wander around. There's 'something wrong with the forest,' they say. But sitting around is so boring!" the fairy exclaimed. "I'll have a lot more fun with you!"

"I don't want you around, though," Levia grumbled.

"Why not?!" Alice asked.

Since it was starting to seem like Alice had snuck out of her village against the elders' orders, it was looking like we'd somehow met a runaway fairy."Well, given the circumstances, I suppose you can be our guide until we reach the Beastmen Kingdom," I offered.

"Oh my! We have a long journey ahead of us, then! But don't worry, you can count on me!" she exclaimed, puffing up her nonexistent chest as she flew out ahead to show us the way forward.

While I knew we were very lucky to have stumbled across someone to guide us through the forest, I couldn't help but wonder if we'd really picked the right person for the job...

Chapter 2

“We passed that tree a few minutes ago,” I said, already regretting my decision to ask Alice to lead the way.

Alice smiled at me, laughing.

I sighed. “Do you think I’m going to let this slide just because you smile at me?”

She laughed once more. “Things weren’t supposed to happen like this...”

“Look, you said you’d help us find a village or a town, right? So, explain why we are going round in circles in the middle of the forest? We haven’t seen a single soul!” I yelled, my voice echoing deep within the forest. Even with my map zoomed all the way out, I could only see trees and more trees!

I looked up at the sky. The sun was starting to set and it was looking like we’d have no choice but to sleep out in the open tonight.

Let’s go back just a few hours earlier.....

After following the road for a while, we arrived at the ruins of a suspension bridge, its collapse most likely the result of some battle ages ago. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t have cared about the state of the bridge since I could just use Wing to fly to the other side, but the magic storm had rendered that option impossible.

“Usually magic storms don’t last very long,” Alice said, “but the elders said that this one could endure for as long as a month or two.”

That made sense, at least. Given what Alice and Levia had said, it was obvious that this magic storm wasn’t like the others. Something strange was at play. Not being able to use magic for at least an entire month was going to be depressing...

Since following the road was no longer an option with the bridge out, we started walking along the riverbank. Alice told us that there was a village on the

other side of the river, so we just had to cross it. The current, however, proved much stronger than I expected.

“This is nothing,” Levia snorted right before she swam across the river with ease.

Figures. Levia was the sea god, so it was no surprise swimming was one of her strong suits. She emerged on the other side, her blue dress somehow perfectly dry.

What in the world is that dress made of?

I added Swimming Master to my skill list, but before I could enter the water, Akiha had already jumped in. Now that I thought about it, I remembered her and Haruka telling me they used to swim a lot. Akiha wasn’t using any specific skill, but she still managed to swim across the river without getting swept away by the current. She was so fit! Watching her swim was such a pleasure it made me wish she’d been wearing a swimsuit. Her military uniform sort of ruined the picture.

Nonetheless, I was so mesmerized by her figure that, before I knew it, I was the only one left on the riverbank. *I gotta catch up!*

Thanks to Swimming Master and Underwater Breathing, I easily joined my friends on the other side of the river. Though there were plenty of water monsters around, including large sharks, crocodiles, and anacondas, the strength of the current prevented them from reaching me while I crossed the river.

Hah, I thought you guys were supposed to be good swimmers?!

I was drying myself with a towel when I suddenly noticed Akiha had removed her jacket. The tank top she wore below highlighted her beautiful curves. Though she looked nothing like Adel, she was just as beautiful, and her wet hair only added to her charm.

“Masaki-san,” she said, noticing my stare. Her cheeks reddened. “This is...a little embarrassing.”

“Oh. Hmm... Sorry,” I mumbled, looking away. I couldn’t help but remember how soft her chest was... *Damn, I must be pent-up. I need to stop thinking about*

that.

“He’s interested... Thank god...”

I heard Akiha whisper something but her voice was so quiet that I didn’t catch it. *I hope she doesn’t hate me now.*

I already had Adel and Youko. I shouldn’t be laying my hands—or my eyes, for that matter—on Akiha. Not to mention she probably wasn’t interested in me. I was almost thirty after all.

I needed to keep my cool.

Akiha and I changed our clothes quietly, then followed Alice.

Which brings us to the present...

I was starting to think we should have stuck to following the river rather than strike out into the forest. Even if we retraced our steps and went back to the river, we wouldn’t reach it before dark.

I was glaring at Alice, trying to convey my frustration to her, when a person suddenly appeared on the edge of my map.

“There’s someone to the northwest,” I stated.

“Yes, of course! O-Obviously!” Alice immediately exclaimed. “See!? I was right all along!”

“That’s rich coming from someone who had us walking in circles!” I shot back.

Levia leaped, trying to snatch Alice as the little fairy flew higher into the sky. If she came any lower, Levia would get to her.

The sea god groaned. “Come down this instant!”

“Heh heh! Why would I listen to you?!”

Now that I’ve seen someone on my map, is there really any need for me to wait on my childish companions?

“Akiha, let’s go,” I said.

“Eh? Are you sure?”

“If we can get to the person I saw on my map, they’ll be able to tell us where to find a town or a village. We should get going before we lose them.”

“Oh, okay.”

I ignored the two idiots playing around behind us, took Akiha’s hand, and began walking northwest.

As soon as Levia and Alice noticed that we were leaving them behind, they hurried to catch up. I rolled my eyes. *If you stopped playing around and focused for once, that wouldn’t happen*, I thought.

I kept moving forward, cutting down the branches and bushes that were in my way, until eventually, I spotted four people in the distance.

According to my map, there was a road nearby. The only issue was that the four people were surrounded by a pack of monsters—six of them, to be accurate. They seemed to be in a tough spot.

“Damn!” I yelled. “These people are under attack! Hurry up!”

“Yes!” Akiha agreed.

“Coming!” Levia exclaimed.

“W-Wait!” Alice said, trailing behind us.

After nearly getting lost in the forest, I wasn’t about to let the first people we’d finally come across get killed. I was done following Alice in circles, though the more that I thought about it the more I realized we’d only found these guys thanks to her guidance. *I should cut her some slack.*

Dashing through the trees, I heard metallic clanking noises as well as the bellows of the beasts they were fighting up ahead. It sounded like metal weapons were hitting something very hard.

As we got closer, the tumult of the battle ahead intensified. I could start making out the words being shouted:

“Fuck! Come on, use your magic!”

“I keep telling you I can’t! Here, potion. Catch!”

“Thanks. I needed it!”

“Damn, it’s so hard! Take this!”

Magicians were pretty rare. However, considering the circumstances, magic wouldn’t help them. Apparently, the magician had already given up on using spells and was throwing potions at her teammates instead.

The monsters they were fighting were pretty far away, but I could finally see them. Akiha had clearly noticed them too, because she took out her magnum.

It looked like they’d been attacked by black lizards. Sturdy scales covered their monstrous bodies and made them gleam under the setting sun.

“Those are crazed beasts,” Levia explained. “They’re pretty small, but those weaklings don’t stand a chance without our help.”

It was my first time seeing crazed beasts. Their iron scales and large claws were threatening enough, but on top of that they had huge teeth that looked like they could tear through a human in a split second. Overall, they looked more like Komodo dragons than regular lizards.

CLANG! CLANG!

Metallic noises echoed in the forest as a huge lizard used its claws to strike one of the beastmen’s swords. They were so powerful that the sword snapped.

“Damn!”

“Gaddle?!”

The lizard started focusing their attacks on the chabit who’d just lost his weapon—Gaddle, as his friends had called him. *Damn!* He managed to stave off their attacks with his shield, but I knew he wouldn’t be able to hold out for long.

One of his comrades continuously shot arrows at the lizards to distract them, but each arrow merely ricocheted off their scales.

Then one of the lizards roared, bringing its fierce claws down on Gaddle.

In that split second, I tried to use Flame Javelin out of force of habit, but my mana dispersed before the spear had even formed. *I forgot I couldn’t use magic!*

My poor sword wasn't made for this, but I had no choice. I activated Homing Shooter and Oversword and hurled Lost Dominion at the lizard. It cut right through the vegetation and struck the lizard, sending it flying backward. The other lizards paused, disoriented, failing to understand how their little friend had been not only stopped in its tracks but sent hurtling backward. Akiha seized this opportunity by shooting one of them three times. Her bullets, empowered by her skills and equipment, struck the lizard's eyes, arm, and throat, punching through its scale to embed themselves deep inside the reptile's body. It fell down with a thud, twitching violently.

I assumed the bullet that had gone through its eye ended up in the brain, triggering these twitches after it died.

"W-What was that?!" one of the beastmen shouted.

"Where did this sword come from?" said another.

"We'll talk after!" I yelled. "For now, just use the sword! We'll support you!"

Even though they still looked dumbfounded, they nodded, understanding that taking care of the lizard threat was more urgent than figuring out who we were. The beastman whose sword had been destroyed earlier picked up Lost Dominion in a hurry and slashed at the lizard that had come jumping at him. With Lost Dominion in hand, he sliced right through the lizard's scales, lopping an arm off in a single blow.

"In-Incredible!" the beastman said. "What's up with this sword?! It cut through the scales so easily!"

It's not as rare as Seven Arthur, but it's still a boss item, you know!

Lost Dominion was a one-handed sword but it still increased the user's attack by eighty and STR and DEX by fifteen. Since it didn't come with any additional effect, the stat bonuses it gave were incredibly high.

After more sprinting, Akiha and I finally reached the road where the beastmen were fighting. After we arrived, the tide of the battle began turning.

I unsheathed Seven Arthur and chopped up one of the lizards in a couple of seconds while Akiha finished off the monster Gaddle had weakened.

As for Levia, she jumped in front of the other three beastmen and drop kicked the last two monsters they'd been struggling to keep at bay. That one kick was enough to send them crashing into a tree.

Levia hadn't been able to put all her strength into the blow, so the lizards staggered back onto their feet to try to run away. Alice was ready, however, and unleashed a barrage of lightning that filled the forest with both a crackling sound and the familiar smell of barbecue. *Their meat must be tasty*, I thought.

Alice's command of magic was pretty impressive; moreover, she still didn't seem at all bothered by the magic storm. When I asked her about it after the battle, she explained that fairy magic was fundamentally different from the kind of magic we could use.

With all the lizards slain, I was finally able to take a good look at the beastmen. They'd suffered quite a few wounds before we arrived to help.

I could have cured them with healing magic, but it would require an incredibly large quantity of MP because of the magic storm. On top of that, I'd look suspicious if I was seen using spells when no one else could use magic.

Overall, potions were a much better option at the moment—plus, I had plenty of them in my inventory anyway.

"You're wounded," I remarked, pulling out some of the potions. "Here, use these."

"Wow, so many... Wait! Are those all High Potions?! C-Can we really take them? You won't ask us for money later on, will you? I have to warn you: we're broke!"

"I wouldn't extort wounded people," I replied. "They're free of charge, so just use them. That has to hurt, right? Ah, I do need my sword back, though."

The man seemed disappointed to let go of such a good weapon, but he handed it back to me. I only had one Lost Dominion and I wouldn't have hesitated to take it back by force if I had to.

Anyway, the four beastmen made a full recovery thanks to the High Potions I'd given them. They were composed of the swordsman, who was a chabit and had the head of a cat. The magician was from the lunar rabbit tribe while the

spearman was a beaart—a bear. As for the archer, she had mouse ears—a mousian, I assumed.

The lunar rabbit and the mousian were both girls, so their group was made up of two half-beastwomen and two beastmen. *I'm so glad she's a bunny* girl *and not a bunny boy.*

The swordsman stood up and walked up to me. He seemed to be the leader.

"You really saved us here," he said. "I thought I was a goner when my sword broke! You guys are way too strong! I can't believe you even have a fairy in your party."

"He's right!" one of his friends chimed in. "You're amazing! How did you meet her? And why are you guys here?"

I can't tell them we'd met her after we caught her trying to steal our French toast, can I? I wonder if all fairies are like her... Nah, she's probably the only one.

"We lost our way in the forest when we heard people fighting in the distance. We came to take a look and you seemed to be in danger, so we decided to help out," I explained. "I can't tell you much about our fairy friend, though."

The girl who'd just questioned me pouted.

"Don't bother them," the beaart cut in. "They rescued us and we are lucky enough just to lay eyes on a fairy. Just be thankful."

"Right."

In spite of his imposing appearance, the bear man was very polite. He was only wearing light armor, but it seemed to be of better quality than what the others were wearing. *He must come from a good family.*

Akiha tugged on my sleeve, distracting me from my thoughts.

"Masaki-san... It's getting dark..."

I'd forgotten about our predicament during the fight, but Akiha was right. We'd managed to wrap things up pretty fast, but we still hadn't found a place to sleep and the sun was still setting.

"Hmm, you..." I began.

“My bad!” the chabit said. “We’ve yet to introduce ourselves. I’m Gaddle. Our magician’s called Eris, the one with the spear is Gunha, and the archer’s Sibra. As you probably guessed, we’re adventurers.”

“I’m Masaki. My friend here is called Akiha, and the girl playing around and walking all over the lizards is called Levia. Oh, and that’s Alice,” I said, pointing at the fairy. “Would you happen to know if there’s a village or a town in the area?”

If there were none, we’d have to make do and camp, but I would much rather spend the night in a proper house.

“Sure. There’s a village right ahead,” he answered. “We need to buy new weapons, so we’re heading there. We can show you the way. We still have to thank you properly as well.”

“That’s great! Right, Masaki-san?” Akiha asked.

“Yeah. I really don’t want to wander around this forest anymore.”

“I’m hungry. If you want to thank us, treat me to food,” Levia said.

“Me too!” Alice exclaimed.

“Please manage your expectations... We’re far from rich,” Gaddle said.

The gluttons were at it again. For some reason, Levia and Alice suddenly got along *very* well the second anyone mentioned food.

Laughing at Gaddle’s response, we followed the group of adventurers to the closest beastmen village.

Chapter 3

On our way to the village, I told Gaddle and his friends about our situation. Obviously, I left out the part about me being a noble or the fact we were looking for a literal god. I didn't want to invite trouble. These people looked nice enough, but I couldn't be sure they weren't involved with the garuda tribe in one way or another.

"So," Gaddle said, "you fell from the Fairy Path and ended up here, huh? That's rough, man. Still, you were lucky to end up in the south. The north is under the rule of the battle leos and let me tell you: they're hard on troublemakers. The west isn't any better," Gaddle added, "so steer clear from that region too."

He wasn't wrong. For as much trouble as we'd encountered so far, we were lucky we didn't end up somewhere much worse.

I hope Adel and the others made it to the central area of the Beastmen Kingdom.

"Right. I can't imagine how things would've gone out west with a 'guide' like her," I answered.

"Hey!" Alice said sullenly. Sitting on my head, she started stomping her feet angrily against my forehead. "I led you to other people, didn't I?! That's what you wanted, right?"

Levia had hopped onto my shoulders earlier and refused to budge.

"Can't the two of you walk by yourselves?!" I finally said. "I'm not a horse!"

Gunha laughed. "I've never seen a fairy act so friendly toward a human. They usually conceal themselves and refuse to appear in front of humans...or beastmen, for that matter. It's my first time seeing one," he said.

"Me too!" Sibra chimed in.

So, these two were also meeting a fairy for the first time, huh? To be fair, Alice just seemed to be overly friendly by nature.

We traveled, chatting along the way, until eventually a village called Dran appeared in the corner of my map—it was close enough that we'd even make it there before it got too dark.

"Masaki-san, do you need me to use Light?" Akiha asked, referring to the exclusive skill that allowed her to materialize a headlamp when she needed it. It was quite practical since it didn't require her to walk around with a headlamp at all times.

"No need, thank you. A village just popped up on my map and we should get there in thirty minutes or so."

"Your map seems awfully detailed..." Akiha said.

That's a GM map for you. Its field of view covered huge areas when I was out in the open, but also showed me every little detail whenever I entered a city or a castle.

"What are you guys talking about? I haven't seen you check out a map," Gaddle asked.

Right. The people here couldn't use that function.

"We're talking about one of the abilities we otherworlders have. We can visualize a map without the physical object. I know some natives of this world can do it too, but their maps are usually not as precise as ours," I explained.

"I see... So you two are otherworlders, huh?" Gaddle said. "I've heard about your kind, but I'd never met one before. They say you're blessed with incredible abilities! I'm kind of jealous, honestly."

"Now that you mention otherworlders," one of the girls accompanying Gaddle said. "I remember hearing that there's one among the soldiers of Saunshade. I don't know much about them, but I heard they could wield guns. That's what they're called, right? Like the ones she has?" she asked, pointing at Akiha. "Apparently, they take down crazed beasts like it's nothing!"

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Yes," Gunha confirmed. "People gossip about them all the time in taverns. I'm afraid I never caught their name, but rumor says they live in the largest city

of the south, Saunshade.”

I was always glad to hear about other otherworlders. We’d probably get mixed up in a political mess if we sought them out, though. Otherworlders were treasured by powerful and influential figures. Since this one was a soldier, they surely already had links with the big shots of the south.

That said, being well-connected also meant they probably knew a lot and we needed information if we hoped to help Jörmungandr.

Our initial plan had been to go to Jörmungandr’s sanctuary and ask around, but since we’d all been separated, any piece of information we could get our hands on was precious. Obviously, there was always a risk we’d be fed false intel, so we had to be careful.

“Oh, by the way,” Gaddle started. “That sword you lent me was incredible. Did you get it in your world?”

“Yeah. You could say it’s one of a kind—unless I run into someone who comes from the same place as me.”

“You should be careful then,” he warned me. “There’s a huge weapon shortage around here because the crazed beasts’ skin is so hard that weapons break constantly. The lord of the west has started confiscating weapons from adventurers and mercenaries as a result.”

Confiscating their weapons? Did he want them to die after they were left unable to fend for themselves? First Fen and now this... *For crying out loud, that guy does whatever he wants without a second thought about anyone else.*

Apparently, the ruler of the south was a reasonable person and did not approve of the western lord’s methods, but the recent incidents caused by the crazed beasts had forced them to compromise and work together. Still, the soldiers of the west were known to be violent troublemakers who liked causing problems in other regions.

Thankfully, I was the only one in our party who needed to worry about their weapons. They probably wouldn’t target Akiha’s firearms since they’d have no way to use them.

“I should probably switch to another weapon for the time being, then. It’s not

like I *have* to use this one," I said.

"Let's hope you can find one," Gaddle answered with a sigh. "I'm not sure the stuff they sell at the village will be all that good... I'm hoping I can pick up a decent longsword at the very least, though."

The sword Gaddle had broken fighting the crazed beast had also been a longsword. He must have been going through them quick if they all broke so easily against the crazed beasts' skin. Even if he bought another one, it wouldn't last long.

Should I help him out?

Most of the materials I'd gathered over the years were in my Room, so I'd have to make do with what I had in my inventory. I had old mithril coins, adaman ore, some Volvory wood I'd picked up earlier so I could start a fire to cook, and some damask lizard skin and scales from the crazed beasts we'd fought earlier.

Gaddle and his friends had insisted that we take everything since they hadn't been the ones to kill the beasts, but I'd refused: we'd helped them, sure, but they'd also done their fair share. Adventurers needed money to keep going and considering their reaction, the skin and scales of these lizards seemed quite valuable. In the end, I'd only accepted two scales and some skin.

Using Appraisal to evaluate the scales, I realized I could turn them into damask ingots, a good base material to craft a fine weapon. Volvory wood seemed more suited for shields, so I put it away for now.

I should probably use Upgrade to improve the quality of the ingots before I start crafting. I'm kind of curious too... I wonder what kind of metal I'll end up with.

While I was considering how to craft the best possible weapon with the materials I had, I felt someone tug on my sleeve.

"Ma-Masaki-san... Don't go craft something weird again, okay?" Akiha said.

"Did my face give it away?"

"Yes. I can tell you're thinking of crafting weapons again."

Am I that easy to read? I love crafting weapons so much that I must have been smiling just thinking about the possibilities.

Now that I thought about it, Akiha had also stopped me the last time I'd wanted to craft things. I still thought that making bracelets that could enhance the workers' stats was a great idea... The materials were dirt cheap and it was a simple process. That said, Akiha's point had made sense, too. If bandits learned that the workers had bracelets, they would try to steal them, so I'd reluctantly given up.

While I had still given the guards magic items to enhance their stats, I'd made sure to engrave my family crest as well as a trackable serial number. If they were stolen, lost, or sold on the black market, my contacts in the Dark Guild would notify me.

"Don't worry," I reassured Akiha. "I'm making it for someone else, so nothing weird or dangerous—I promise."

"That's good to hear..."

I'd need a smithy if I wanted to craft a weapon, though. If I couldn't find a decent one in the village, I'd just give Gaddle a mithril sword and craft accessories with the damask ingots. Since I owned a portable metal engraving kit, I could make those anywhere. Plus, I was curious to see the stat boosts a damask accessory would give.

"I can see the village!" Gaddle exclaimed. "Your estimation was right on the mark, Masaki. And I'm so glad we didn't run into any more monsters on the way."

"We were lucky," one of the girls said. "You don't even have a weapon anymore, so we would have had to rely on Masaki and the others again."

Now that I thought about it, it was kind of strange that the monsters seemed to be avoiding us. While I'd seen plenty of monsters on my map, they refused to approach us. *Wait, maybe...* I looked up, trying to catch a glimpse of Levia's face. When our eyes met, she giggled smugly, puffing out her nonexistent chest. *Yep, she definitely has something to do with this, but I'm just glad to have our very own insect repellent around.*

“Hey, Masaki. I know that look. You were thinking something rude, weren’t you?” Levia said.

“No way. You’re just imagining things. Anyway, what do you think about asking the cook at the inn to fix something up with all that damask lizard meat we’ve got? They were quite plump, so I’m pretty sure their meat will be nice and juicy.”

“That sounds amazing!”

Levia, like always, was immediately distracted by the prospect of food. *Bring up food and she’ll forget about anything else.*

The sun had almost set by the time we reached Dran. The fact that a village this small still had a gatekeeper went to show how serious the issue with the crazed beasts had become. We greeted the man minding the gate, but he wouldn’t stop ogling the girls. He thought he was being inconspicuous, but we moved on, not wanting to subject the girls to that any longer than needed. Apparently, they noticed, because the second we got out of earshot they all collectively sighed.

“He was so gross...” Sibra said

“I know...” Eris agreed. “Why did they pick someone like him for the job?”

“Who knows?” Sibra answered, sighing. Her stomach growled. “Let’s focus on more important things! What should we eat? I’m starving.”

Two more growls sounded above my head—*Levia and Alice too, huh?*

“I’m so hungry I’m dying,” Levia whined, munching on my hair and drooling all over me.

“Foooood!!!” Alice added, kicking her feet.

Can you two stop kicking and biting me?!

Gaddle laughed. “Let’s hurry to the inn,” he said.

“Lead the way, please,” I said. “I don’t want to lose any more hair...”

I hope they have a bathing area at the inn...

We followed Gaddle and his group to a large inn I would never have expected

to find in such a small village. They probably wouldn't have any issues housing all of us.

Gaddle headed to the reception to book rooms for us. The innkeeper was a beaard—a half-beastman with bear characteristics—but I almost mistook him for a beaart—a bear beastman—at first because of his bristly beard.

"Hi," I said, "we'd like to get two rooms. One for three and one for four."

"You're in luck," the beaard replied. "We have exactly two rooms left. They're quite far from one another, though. That all right?"

"No, that's fine."

Considering the size of the building, I estimated the inn probably had around ten rooms in total. They must have been doing pretty well if they only had two rooms left.

"Masakiiiiiii, what about dinner?" Levia complained.

"Yeah! Dinner!" Alice repeated.

I really wished the two of them would stop throwing fits while sitting on me.

"Excuse me, but could we have dinner before you show us to our rooms?" I asked.

"Of course, sir. If I may, I'd like to recommend our specialty: roasted juwa bird."

That sounded pretty good. It reminded me of the time my senpai roasted a whole turkey for the Christmas dinner we held. The soup we had that day was also stellar.

I'll be working tonight, so I should take it easy on the alcohol, I thought as we walked into the dining hall.

The staff put two tables together so that all seven of us—plus one fairy—could fit. I hadn't shared a meal with so many people at once since my days with the pirates.

We ordered drinks for everyone. Before long, a waiter with horse ears and a tail brought our drinks. He must have been serving for a long time, because he

carried all seven drinks at once with no problem.

We all made a toast to our meeting.

I hadn't given it much thought until now, but the people here toasted just like we did in Japan. An otherworlder probably introduced the custom a long time ago.

Alice couldn't drink alcohol, so we'd asked for a glass of milk with some honey. The staff had been quite taken aback when they'd noticed her. Fairies truly seemed like a rare sight.

Levia, on the other hand, ordered alcohol. While she looked like a kid in her current form, she was much older than any of us. Plenty of beastmen looked much younger than they were, so no one seemed to mind*. Dwarves live on this continent, so I suppose they're accustomed to not judging others by their appearance.* This being said, it was possible there simply wasn't any legal drinking age at all.

I took a big gulp of ale. *It's lukewarm... I really wish I could use some ice magic...*

The effects of the magic storm had yet to subside, and they even suppressed my magic while I was indoors. I started wondering if my magic would work underwater. From what I'd heard, magic storms affected the air itself, so it was possible my magic would work if I was submerged underwater. I didn't want to risk opening a door to my Room underwater, though. What if Fen drowned?

While we waited for our food, Gaddle and the others recounted their adventures for us. They'd been traveling together for quite some time now, clearing dungeons together and even taking part in the war between the empire and the Beastmen Kingdom.

"Right, right! You guys said you were adventurers too, right? What rank are you?" Gaddle asked. "We're all Rank C, by the way."

"I'm Rank D and Akiha's Rank...C, right?" I said.

"Yes," Akiha replied. "I explored a few dungeons to look for crafting materials, which was enough to be upgraded to Rank C."

“I’m Rank A,” Levia said. “Oh, and I own a dungeon.”

“You own a dungeon?!” Gaddle asked, shocked. “What does that even mean?!” He looked at me then in equal disbelief. “And Masaki, I can’t believe you’re only Rank D when you’re that strong! You have to be Rank A as well...or Rank B at the very least!”

I shrugged. “Well, the thing is...—oh, the food’s here! I’ll explain while we eat,” I said.

The staff brought out everything we’d ordered: roasted juwa bird, damask lizard stew, a dote cabbage, and onimilion salad. The damask lizard stew wasn’t on the menu, but the cook made an exception since we’d provided the meat.

The moment I cut into the juwa bird’s meat, its juices flowed out. It looked divine. The first bite I took washed every one of my taste buds in its rich, succulent flavor. *Amazing.*

The lightness of the damask lizard stew, on the other hand, was a pleasant change of pace from the oily poultry dish. The cook had made a good call using the lizard meat to make a stew. Grilling it would have made the meat way too tough.

I sampled the salad next, then started explaining why I was a Rank D adventurer. I told them I’d never tried dungeon diving before and that my one and only achievement as an adventurer was killing a bunch of sea serpents.

Levia couldn’t exactly say she was Leviathan, so she didn’t go into many details about her rank. She simply said she’d done a lot of adventuring years ago and left it at that.

Since she was of a much higher rank, Gaddle and the others couldn’t question her story too much, so they directed all of their disbelief at me instead.

“No way!” Gaddle exclaimed. “You’re kidding us, right? There’s *no way* you took on several sea serpents all by yourself, Masaki! How did you even find yourself in that situation?!”

“Well...” I began. “There were a lot of factors. The empire and the Sentdrag Kingdom, where I was at the time, were at war and, you know, I just did what I had to do. Anyway, that’s why I’ve never entered a dungeon. I just didn’t have

the time," I explained.

Levia was being mind-controlled back then and I still remembered how much I'd struggled to fend off both her and her sea serpents. It was hard to believe the very same sea god was currently sitting in front of me, gobbling down juwa bird that Eris cut into morsels for her. Eris was having the time of her life feeding Levia, her black rabbit ears twitching as she watched her new friend stuff her cheeks. I wanted to touch her ears but I had a feeling she'd get mad at me.

"You're not affiliated with any clan, then?" Gaddle asked me.

"No, I'm not. I only registered at the Adventurer Guild quite recently and I really haven't done much."

Clans were more or less large parties—the equivalent of guilds in most online games.

"What a shame," Gunha said. "You're all so strong that I'm sure even the most famous clans would love to recruit you. Actually, what do you think about the idea of joining ours?"

"Wait, Gunha. You can't invite them without the leader's permission!" Gaddle interjected. "That said...I'm pretty sure the leader would love to have them, so it's probably fine..."

"Thanks for the invite, but we can't join." I paused, remembering that adventurers who were known to scam, blackmail, or assault others were blacklisted, and added: "It's not because we've been blacklisted or anything! We just have our reasons..."

Whenever a clan recruited someone, they'd go through the Adventurer Guild to check their status and would thus learn of any past misbehavior. On top of that, whenever an adventurer did something illegal—such as stealing an item they'd been asked to deliver, for instance—a red mark would be added to their adventurer card. After three such marks, they'd be banned for life and barred from using the Adventurer Guild's services. *Just like a red card.*

"It's fine! We won't pry. Here, Levia. Say aah," Eris said with a smile, using her fork to spear another morsel for Levia to devour.

Levia opened her mouth wide. “It’s so tastyyyyy.”

Eris and Levia looked like a pair of loving sisters, even if one was hundreds of years older than the other.

“Masaki-san, you’ve got sauce on your shirt,” Akiha said, pointing at my collar.

I had no idea food could dirty costumes.

“I was so engrossed in our conversation that I didn’t even notice.”

“Don’t move. If we get it off quickly it shouldn’t stain,” she said, wetting a handkerchief before carefully wiping away the sauce.

Thanks to Akiha’s quick reaction, the sauce disappeared without leaving a stain. *I’m so lucky she noticed.*

Gaddle and the others grinned at us, but didn’t comment.

We’d just finished eating—thankfully, no one had bothered us during our meal—when I noticed a saucy, appealing meat dish at another table. The smell alone made my mouth water, so I couldn’t resist ordering it. When the waiter brought it out, the first thing I noticed was that the sauce tasted very similar to Worcestershire sauce. I finally understood why so many beastmen had jumped on my yakisoba back in Atami. It tasted a lot like the one I made.

Now that our bellies were full, we decided to head to our rooms. We’d initially decided to have the men in one room and the girls in the other, but I was scared Levia and Alice’s constant fighting would prevent the others from sleeping, so I decided to bring Levia to the men’s room. I was the only one who could keep her in check, so I didn’t really have a choice.

Now that they’d eaten their fill, Levia and Alice were so drowsy that I had to carry Levia while Akiha took care of Alice. *These two are just like little kids*.

I put Levia to bed and got ready to craft a few pieces of equipment.

First of all, I used a Smithing Skill called Ingot Refinement to turn the damask scales into a damask ingot. I could have made several ingots if I had a smithy, but I’d have to make do with what I had.

Gunha was so shocked when the ingot suddenly appeared in front of me that he dropped the spear he was polishing. It dropped onto the floor with a noisy

rattle.

“Huh?! H-How?” he asked.

“Oh, I just used a Production Skill,” I answered.

“What?! You’re an incredible fighter *and* you can use Production Skills?!” he said, dumbfounded.

Gunha said that some of the best adventurers could use Production Skills, but he’d never seen anyone transform damask scales into ingots.

“What are you making?” he asked, watching me work.

“Bracelets that can enhance physical abilities.”

“You want to enhance your abilities even more?! But you’re already so strong!”

“It’s not for me. I was thinking of giving them to you guys,” I explained.

I initially wanted to craft a sword called Black Circus since it required mithril and damask ingots, but I decided against telling him.

“Y-You’re making them for us? But why?”

“I’ll tell you when Gaddle comes back.”

“O-Okay...”

I continued working on the first bracelet throughout our conversation. Thanks to my metal engraving kit, I could craft bracelets anywhere. I first used the Engraving Skill called Processing to make the general shape of the bracelet before switching to Craftmanship to engrave the details. The last step was to use Fusion to add the small mithril spheres I’d made out of old mithril coins.

The specs of the finished product were as follows:

Damask Bracelet: Defense +5 STR +5 VIT +5 Shock Resistance Fire Resistance Magic Resistance (Low)

They would have been even stronger if I had jewels, but this was the very best I could manage with the materials I had on hand.

Once I finished the first, the process of creating the others went much quicker. I flowed between the various skills, letting them guide my fingers. Right as I was finishing up the last one, I heard the door open.

Gaddle—who'd left earlier to visit the armory—walked in with a dissatisfied frown. *I guess he didn't find what he was looking for.*

"Ugh, I'm back. Not only were their swords terrible, but they were charging a ridiculous price for them."

I understood that merchants wanted to make as much money as they could from their customers, but considering the crazed beasts were going wild these days, I couldn't help but feel like it wasn't the time for this. Besides, while the weapon shortage wouldn't last forever, customers would remember who tried to take advantage of them.

"Did you buy one anyway?" I asked.

"No way. It was three times the normal price!"

Price gouging at its finest.

I pulled a mithril sword out of my inventory. "Use this, then," I said, tossing the weapon to him. "I don't have any use for it."

"Careful... Wait!" he said, catching the weapon out of the air. "Is this a mithril sword?! Don't get me wrong—I'd love to use it, but are you really sure you want to give it to me?"

"It's not a gift," I said. "I have a request, so I need you in a better mood."

"A request?"

"I would like you and your party to guide us through the Beastmen Kingdom. In return, I'll give you these bracelets," I explained.

We were in dire need of a guide. Gaddle and his friends were strong enough, knew the Beastmen Kingdom, and we'd already fought beside them. I felt more comfortable asking them rather than hiring someone I didn't know at all and risk getting scammed.

If we were traveling together, I didn't want Gaddle to be without a weapon. I could have given him the sword without asking for anything in return but, as far

as I was concerned, there was no such thing as a free lunch. I didn't want him to feel burdened—or, worse, assume I was a shady character—because I was giving him a valuable sword for no reason.

"That's a very generous reward you're offering, Masaki...but do you mind if I discuss it with the others before I give you an answer? Thanks for the sword, though. It's very much appreciated."

"Sure. And it's no problem. You were having a tough time without a weapon, right?"

"I sure was. Thank you so much."

"Don't worry about it. We would still be going round in circles in that forest if it wasn't for you."

Without Gaddle and his friends, we'd still be relying on Alice's dubious sense of direction.

I was getting everything ready for tomorrow before finally heading to bed when someone knocked on the door to our room. I went to open it, wondering who it could be. When I opened the door, I discovered a young girl I'd seen working in the tavern earlier. *Did we forget something?*

"Good evening, sir," she said. "We offer drinks to our customers free of charge. Would you like one?"

Room service, too? I could see why this place was so popular now. I requested four glasses, handed Gaddle and Gunha their shares, and closed the door. I took a sip of mine and sighed. It was sweet without being too sweet and—

——Paralysis (Extreme).——

——Resistance to status alterations activated.——

Immune Status just kicked in?!

There must have been some sort of poison in the drink. Considering the system message, a pretty strong one at that. Without Immune Status protecting me, I would have been rendered unable to move. I immediately turned to look at Gaddle and Gunha and saw them scattered across the ground.

They struggled to speak:

“Can’t...move...body...”

“Para...lysis...?”

Damn... I didn’t know exactly what was going on, but someone was clearly out to get us. My first priority was to help Gaddle and Gunha. *Thankfully, I have some Panacea.*

I knew there were methods of suppressing magic in this world, so I made sure to stock some potions for this exact scenario. I didn’t expect I’d have to use them so early on, though.

Panacea could comprehensively treat every status alteration at once, so it was much more practical than regular potions. There were probably even better options in other games, but the Panacea of Britalia Online worked well enough.

“Drink this,” I said, bringing a bottle of Panacea to Gaddle’s lips. “It’ll help with the paralysis.”

As soon as he swallowed, a faint golden light suffused his body. It seemed to soak into his skin until, eventually, it was as though his body had drank all of the light.

Gaddle’s hand twitched and he jumped to his feet. “Phew! Thank you, Masaki!”

“Are you okay? Does anything feel off?”

“No, I’m good. The effect was almost immediate, though. That potion must have been expensive. I’m so sorry you had to use it on us.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t bring them just for the sake of it. I’m glad I could help.”

The Panacea didn’t even demand especially expensive ingredients; I’d only used honey and a mixture of different herbs.

Now that I’d confirmed Gaddle was fine, I moved on to Gunha. Just like his friend, the beaart recovered quickly.

“Thank you so much. What in the worldwas—”

We heard a scream coming from the next room. It seemed like the mysterious girl intended to visit every room in the inn.

Akiha's in danger! Damn! I should have realized that earlier!

"We'll worry about that later! Akiha and the others are in danger too!" I exclaimed, drawing my sword.

Then the door flew open and several of the inn's workers and townspeople stormed into the room. Some of them were armed with swords and spears while others clutched spools of thick rope they were probably intending to use to tie us down.

"What happened?" one of them said. "The poison didn't work?"

"I don't know. Sometimes it takes a little longer to take effect, but we even drugged their food... Whatever, we've waited long enough. There are only three of them. Let's take care of them, then we can take the girl sleeping over there. She'll fetch a nice price."

Would you look at that? An entire village working together to commit crime.

They pretended to be harmless, but kidnapped adventurers and travelers as soon as the opportunity presented itself. *What low-lives.*

"Guys, we've got to take the trash out fast," I said. "I'm worried about the others."

"You got it, Masaki. I was itching to try out my new sword," Gaddle answered.

"Spears are a little unwieldy indoors, but I'll just think of this as a training exercise," Gunha said.

Our calm composure enraged the villagers. *Now that it's come to this, there's no need to let them have the initiative.*

Since I still couldn't use magic, I quickly switched out MP Recovery (High) for Swift Wind and used my enhanced attack speed to charge the first villager. In just a split second, I used a Non-Lethal Attack to send my target flying into the villagers behind him. All three crashed into the wall of the corridor outside. I'd tried to send him crashing right through the wall, but the other bodies softened the blow. Still, the sheer power of the blow was enough to knock all three of

them out, so I didn't mind.

"You bastard! What do you think you're doing?!" one of the other villagers screamed.

"Hey, that's my line!" I retorted.

Gaddle sprang into place beside me, dropping his center of gravity to slip into a proper combat stance. His new sword was still in its scabbard.

"Quick Draw!" he shouted.

A blurry arc of silver flashed before my eyes and the guy who'd been holding a spear crashed to the floor.

What a beautiful draw.

I'd heard from others in the Adventurer Guild that this skill was popular among adventurers who favored one-handed swords, but only skilled fighters could use it properly. *Good thing I gave him the sword in its scabbard.*

Seeing him in action, I could tell that the sword fit Gaddle. I needed to remember to use Iron Coating later. If I made the mithril look like cheap iron, the western soldiers wouldn't try to take it from him.

"S-Someone help!" the final villager screamed before he turned and tried to run away.

"Not so fast!" Gunha exclaimed. "Lightning Spear!"

The electric shock struck him in the back, paralyzing him. He fell face-first on the ground.

Watching them use all of these skills I couldn't use was making me a little jealous. That said, I supposed the reverse was also true. The people of this world couldn't use my skills—and I had *a lot* of them.

Gaddle used the ropes that the men had brought to tie them up. He was clearly accustomed to using rope like that, but I chose to assume it was simply because he was used to binding the thieves he captured. *I just hope he's not into that BDSM stuff.*

"I made sure not to kill any of them, but what do we do with them now?"

Gaddle asked.

"Just leave them here for now," I replied. "You know what..."

They'd made that poison themselves, so they ought to have a taste, right?

"It'll be a pain if they get free, so let's give them some of that poison they used on us. I'll go find Akiha and the others. You go help the guests in the other rooms when you're done here!" I said, handing ten bottles of Panacea to each of them.

"Got it. Take care of Eris and Sibra for us," Gaddle said.

"I will."

"Ah, what about Levia? She's still sleeping..."

I couldn't believe the noise hadn't woken her up! They said they had drugged our food, too, but there was no way it had affected her.

"Just leave her be. She's stronger than me and I don't want her to throw a tantrum because we woke her up."

"A-All right. She did say she was a Rank A adventurer and she even owns a dungeon... What's the saying? Let the sleeping god lie?"

I think it's "Let the sleeping dog *lie", but Levia* is *actually a god, so I guess it still makes sense.*

Nearby villagers who'd heard the commotion came pouring out of the other rooms into the corridor. I intended on searching for them, so I appreciated how much they'd gone out of their way to save me the effort of hunting them down.

One of them clicked his tongue. "These bastards didn't drink our special cocktail, huh? Let's get them, guys! There are only three of them! Today's the day we get our hands on a fairy! We can't mess up now!"

So, it sounded like capturing Alice was their main goal. They must have really wanted her to attack while the inn was packed with adventurers. *So, the others got hurt because of us... No! I shouldn't think like that—they're the bad guys, not us!*

I grabbed the leg of one of the men Gaddle had tied up and I hurled him at

the villagers that clogged the corridor. They hadn't expected me to be able to throw a beastman like a boomerang, so they froze, wide-eyed, before trying to dodge. Unfortunately for them, the corridor was too narrow—there was nowhere to hide. They fell like dominos, groaning in pain.

Looks like I missed the ones at the back.

Giving them no time to recover, I immediately lunged at the first villager in my path. I activated Non-Lethal Attack and tried to kick him in the face, but he managed to lift his sword to block my foot. My foot, however, broke the sword the second it made contact, and the force of the blow sent him reeling backward. It must have been a very cheap sword for it to break so easily... *Oh, right, Gaddle did say that the stuff they sold at the armory was awful.*

The follow-through of my kick had me landing in the middle of several villagers, all of whom immediately took the chance to try to slash me with their knives.

You're all so slow.

I dodged every attack, then casually drew Lost Dominion in a single, sweeping cut. Even though I was still using Non-Lethal Attack, bones crunched and shattered each time Lost Dominion struck one of the villagers. Without my skill, they'd have died on the spot. *It must hurt like hell, but they deserve it.*

I suddenly felt two whips coil around my dominant arm. The last two men had been waiting for their chance to strike and I had to admit they'd done a decent job of restraining my arm. It wouldn't save them, though.

I grabbed the whips with both hands and pulled with all my strength.

"How can he be so strong?!"

"He's just a puny human. I can't believe it!"

One strong pull sent them stumbling and their whips flying out of their hands. Before they could land, I used Oversword and Non-Lethal Attack to perform a roundhouse kick so powerful my leg gleamed as it arced through the air.

BAM! The strength of my kick sent them crashing through the wall. I heard them slam into the ground somewhere outside.

It was my first time using Oversword on my own leg. *So, that's what it does, huh?*

With the assailants out of the way, I dashed through the hallways. Behind me, I heard the adventurers Gaddle and Gunha had woken up screaming at the half-conscious villagers as they continued to beat them.

When I finally reached Akiha's room, I tried to push the door open but it wouldn't budge—they'd locked it. *Guess I'll have to force my way in.*

I kicked it open with a single, powerful kick and leaped inside.

One of the men was holding Akiha down, her chest exposed. It looked like he had no intention of stopping there, either.

"M-Masaki-san... Help me!" she cried out as soon as she noticed me.

My heart sank, then I felt nothing but rage.

I shouldn't have kept them alive... They deserve to die. All of them!

I closed the distance in a split second, seized the man's arm, and threw him off of Akiha.

"It hurts! What the heck, man? Can't you wait for your turn—"

"You don't get to say another word," I said, wrenching his arm. Deciding immediately that this wasn't enough, I lopped his entire arm off with Lost Dominion.

"ARGH!!! MY ARM!"

"You bastard!" roared the man who'd been looming over Eris. He charged me, knife in hand, but I cut his head clean off his shoulders with one swing of Lost Dominion.

"He's a monster! Someone help!" another man screamed as he tried to run away.

I had no intention of letting any of them escape. I grabbed his arm and used Silent Blow to make his head explode. In just moments, the entire room was painted red with the blood of the monsters who'd dared touch Akiha. I had absolutely no regrets.

I took a look at Eris and Sibra. Their clothes were disheveled, but it didn't look like they'd been assaulted yet. Thank god.

Akiha, on the other hand, was almost naked. Her bra had been torn off and her pants and panties pulled far enough down her legs to expose everything.

I hadn't made it in time to protect her... I gritted my teeth in frustration as I covered her with a bed sheet.

"I'll do anything! Just let me live!" the man who'd tried to assault Akiha pleaded. When I turned to look at him, I recognized him as the innkeeper.

He must have given them this room because he wanted to have his way with Akiha all along...

Anger welled up inside me at the thought, and I felt myself lose control. I grabbed his collar to hold him in place, then used Non-Lethal Attack to punch his face again and again. I then struck his throat, his arms, his torso... I wanted to break every single bone in his body. I beat him until his face looked more like a bloody lump of meat than a face, each blow sending more of his teeth bouncing across the floor. I couldn't stop—I just kept punching and punching and punching.

I'd been using my bare fists this entire time, but Invincibility made sure my knuckles were unharmed. Moreover, I hadn't killed him yet. Non-Lethal Attack ensured that the target would always have at least one HP left—no matter how many times I hit him. I could crush his bones and his organs, but the man still couldn't die. He began losing consciousness due to the pain, but I woke him up with my fists, over and over again.

"Argh," the innkeeper groaned, his mouth missing so many teeth he could hardly talk. "Shtop... K-Kill...me..."

No. That bastard had hurt Akiha. He deserved to suffer for much longer than this.

I continued pulverizing the man's face until I felt someone tug at my sleeve softly from behind. I looked over my shoulder and saw Akiha grimacing up at me.



Even though she'd drunk the poison, she still managed to say, "D-Don't..."

I'm such an idiot. She's still drugged. I should have taken care of her first!

"I'm sorry, Akiha. I'll make you all better, I promise..." I said, throwing the bloodied innkeeper through the window.

I gathered Akiha into my arms and fed her the medicine, but she'd overworked herself just by speaking a few words and her body refused to swallow. I splashed some Panacea over her body instead, but that didn't work.

I have to help her...

I drank a mouthful of Panacea, then crushed my lips against hers. I used my tongue to push the liquid down her throat and help her swallow. It was a slow process, but it helped cool my temper. I never would have thought I could lose control of myself like that. I knew I could have done horrible things in that state. Lost in these terrible thoughts, I continued feeding Akiha the potion with my tongue. Eventually, her body twitched beneath me as the paralysis's grip on her loosened. She opened her eyes and looked at me with a strange intensity.

"Um..." Akiha hummed, then she suddenly pushed me down and kissed me, her tongue chasing mine. I yelped. I was glad to see the Panacea had worked, but I had no idea what was happening!

After a moment, our mouths parted. Akiha's face was bright red. She stared at me through glazed eyes for a moment, then hugged me tightly.

Even though Eris and Sibra were right next to us, Akiha pressed into me and started kissing me again.

What's going on?! My brain can't keep up, Akiha! I saw Eris and Sibra staring at us, blushing, from the corner of my eye. *Stop looking!*

"Aah... Masaki-san..." Akiha all but moaned.

A string of saliva still connected our mouths when she pulled away. The sheet I'd covered her with was threatening to slip away when suddenly—

"Tsk!" Levia said, suddenly behind Akiha.

Akiha let out an adorable yelp of surprise, then passed out on top of me.

Levia, who'd just struck Akiha at the nape of her neck, stood in front of me. *She's not dead, is she?* I thought, worrying Akiha might be hurt. After a closer look, I saw her face had relaxed into a satisfied expression.

Phew...

I couldn't decide if I was glad or upset that Levia had stopped Akiha...

"What are you doing, Masaki? Busy cheating while we're in the middle of a crisis?" Levia asked.

"No, I—wait! I don't wanna hear anything from the person who just slept through an entire battle!"

Levia cleared her throat. "Anyway," she said, dipping her finger into Akiha's glass. She licked her finger. "It looks like they spiked her drink with an aphrodisiac on top of the poison."

An aphrodisiac, huh? That explained why Akiha had acted like...that.

Had the Panacea not worked because the aphrodisiac didn't count as a status alteration? Maybe another type of medicine was needed for these kinds of afflictions. It wasn't like Panacea actually worked on *everything*—it hadn't fixed Philia's coma, for instance. *I'll need to look into it.*

Levia tapped Eris and Sibra's foreheads with the tip of her finger. Light gleamed over their bodies, seemingly nullifying the poison. *That wasn't magic...and it felt different from fairy magic too... How did she do it?*

"That should do the trick," she said.

"Thank you so much, Levia!" Eris said. "And Masaki... Thanks for the show."

"A nice show, indeed," Sibra added. "It was my first time witnessing something so...*passionate*."

I wish they would just leave it alone! I really don't want to think about it anymore.

I was already trying my best not to get a hard-on and I didn't need them adding more fuel to the fire! I sighed, figuring I should just be grateful Eris and Sibra weren't afraid of me after seeing me lose control like I had. I couldn't tell if seeing me and Akiha kiss overshadowed my killing spree or if the spiked

drinks had rendered them unable to grasp what was going on at first. Either way, I wasn't complaining.

"Oh no!" Eris shouted as she suddenly remembered something. "Alice! They took Alice away, Masaki!"

"How?! Why didn't she use her fairy magic?"

"They had a Silver Spider. It suppressed her magic. We would have helped, but we couldn't move, and..."

It sounded like the girls had exhausted themselves trying to fight through their paralysis to help Alice. I had never heard of Silver Spiders, but hearing that our enemies could control monsters was even more surprising. Was it a native of this world or an otherworlder? If it was the former, we'd be fine—but contending with another otherworlder would be difficult...

"Masaki! Are Eris and Sibra all right?!" Gaddle shouted as he barged into the room.

The adventurers, merchants, and travelers who'd been sleeping in the other rooms were following him. It looked like he and Gunha had managed to save everyone.

"You're late, idiot!" Eris exclaimed, throwing a pillow at Gaddle the moment he came into the room.

The chabit let out a confused noise when the pillow hit him.

Come on, he's doing his best, I thought, Gaddle's panting telling me that he'd run as fast as he could.

Eris fixed her clothes, then picked up her mace, which had been leaning against the wall, and walked balefully toward Gaddle. *I probably shouldn't involve myself in this.*

"Umm..." Akiha whined, stirring in my arms. *She's finally waking up*.

"What was I... Masaki-san..." she said, looking down. "AHHHH!!!" Akiha flushed more red than I'd ever seen her as she clutched the bed sheet tightly around her.

Oh, right. She was still practically naked.

Some of the men by the door hummed, smiling in appreciation. *Did you just look at her?!*

“All right, all right! All of the men, out! We have to change! Go beat up the people who attacked us or something!” Eris exclaimed. “Gaddle! Stop lying on the floor. Out, I said!” Eris used her mace to prod Gaddle, who was now crumpled on the floor, toward the door.

I noticed a stain on the tip of her mace and found myself hoping it wasn’t Gaddle’s blood...

I followed the rest of the men out of the room and overheard some of them discussing what they’d just seen.

“You guys saw that too, right?”

“Yeah... Her skin looked so smooth...”

“Did you see her boobs?”

“I wish. I—”

“How about you guys shut up?” I snapped, my aura flaring wildly against them.

The idiots who’d been running their mouths like school boys stopped talking at once, quivering in fear. We hadn’t resolved any of this, yet all they could think about was Akiha. Moreover, some of the women, having overheard them, were looking at them with disgust.

I had a feeling there’d be some tension between the adventurers and the women in their parties over the next few days. *You reap what you sow.*

“Ugh,” Gaddle groaned, rubbing his head as he got up. “Let’s focus, everyone. We need to make these guys pay for what they did to us.”

Watching everyone follow him out of the room, I couldn’t help but think Gaddle’s unhesitating resolve to take the initiative made him an excellent leader. Outside, we came upon the men Gaddle and Gunha had restrained and those we’d beaten up so badly that they were still unconscious. Quite a few villagers had attacked us, but they were hardly much of a threat to adventurers —as long as they weren’t incapacitated by some sort of poison, at least.

When we stepped outside the inn, we found ourselves facing a crowd of what seemed like a hundred villagers. *Where in the world were all these people hiding?*

I spotted the gatekeeper in the crowd. *Why am I not surprised to see this creep was in on the whole thing too?*

“You’re going to wish you’d stayed put!” a bird beastman screamed, a rooster-like comb cresting his head like a mohawk. “Guys! Get them! Cut off their legs if you have to! As long as they’re alive, we can still sell them!”

Although something about what he just said bothered me, I’d have to think about it later. Knocking these idiots down a peg came first. The group of adventurers had split into two, so I joined the less numerous one.

Opening my map, I zoomed all the way out so I could keep track of the enemies’ movements at all times. The villagers all appeared red, proof they were all hostile. I didn’t know whether these were bandits who were posing as villagers or if these townspeople were just rotten to the core. Regardless, they’d made a huge mistake when they decided to attack us. Not a single one of them was going to be leaving unscathed.

Oh, and I also needed to find Alice. *That fairy sure is a handful...*

Then the adventurers and villagers charged into one another under the moonlight, and the battle began.

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After Eris kicked the men out, she, Sibra, Levia, and Akiha—who was still hiding under the sheet Masaki had given her—were the only ones left in the room. The women staying in other rooms offered their help too, but they were complete strangers as far as Akiha was concerned. Their presence would have likely only stressed her out, so Eris turned them away.

“We’ll take care of her. You go beat up the accomplices of the men who did this,” she told the other women before turning to Akiha. “Akiha, are you okay?”

“How could I be okay?! Ugh, I can’t believe I did *that* to Masaki... I didn’t mean to—I couldn’t control myself because of the drug, but still...”

“Do you dislike him, Akiha?” Eris asked.

“What? No! I like him... I...like him a lot, actually.” Akiha groaned, shaking her head. “He must be so disappointed in me... What if he hates me now?”

Akiha seemed less distressed by the fact that she’d almost been raped than the fact that she’d pushed Masaki down and kissed him. The way he’d helped her drink the potion mouth-to-mouth also weighed on her mind somewhat, but she’d been barely conscious at this point and didn’t remember much of it. What she did remember, though, was how anxious she’d felt when he’d pulled away after feeding her the medicine, how she’d chased his lips to reclaim that connection with him, and how warm the aphrodisiac had made her body feel.

“Masaki isn’t so petty that he’d start hating you over something like this,” Levia said. “Besides...if you keep hesitating, I might go ahead and make him mine before you do. He’s strong enough to be worthy of standing by my side, after all.”

“What?! No! You can’t!” Akiha exclaimed, peeking out from under the sheet.

Masaki already had two beautiful fiancées. If Levia started pursuing him too, Akiha would never manage to catch his eye. She already had far fewer opportunities to get close to him than Adel or Youko and she was starting to worry she’d never get a chance to express her feelings.

“Then stop acting like a scaredy-cat and confess to him! You’ll have plenty of opportunities on this trip. Don’t waste them.” Levia said.

“Okay... Hmm... Thank you, Levia.”

“Good! A girl in love should seize every opportunity! Quickly, too. I meant what I said earlier,” Levia added.

“Eh?!”

“Sorry to interrupt, but...could you get dressed, Akiha?” Sibra asked. “Your huge melons are gonna make us jealous.”

Akiha, finally remembering her state of undress, hurriedly grabbed the clothes Eris was handing her.

The lunar rabbit smiled as she watched Akiha put on her military uniform as fast as possible. She whispered, “Stop acting like a scaredy-cat and confess...huh? I wish that idiot would take notes...”

“Eris, did you say something?” Akiha asked.

“Nope! S-Shouldn’t we find Gaddle and the others?!”

“I’ll take the lead, then,” Levia said, opening the window.

“L-Levia?! This is the second floor!” Sibra screamed.

With one foot already on the windowsill, Levia leaped through the window before the adventurer could stop her. Eris and Sibra were astonished, but Akiha didn’t bat an eye—she knew that Levia was one of the Three Dragons, after all. She finished getting dressed and gathered her equipment. After she put on the necklace Masaki had given her, she caressed the pendant softly.

A few seconds later, a large noise rumbled beneath the windows and a villager was sent flying toward the sky. Levia had descended upon him like a mighty dragon and the man was now on his way back to the heavens. Eris and Sibra stared, dumbfounded, as the man disappeared into the night sky.

Behind them, Akiha finished getting ready. No longer a young, confused girl, Akiha now looked like a warrior. “Sorry for the wait. I won’t be outdone by Levia. Let’s destroy these criminals!” she said.

Eris and Sibra were surprised by her sudden change, but they didn’t waste time questioning it: there were still tons of enemies to deal with.

Eris picked up her mace and jumped out of the window. As for Sibra, she took an arrow out of her quiver and she drew her bow, taking aim from her spot at the window.

The lovestruck girls had joined the battle...

“I’m so tired of being single! I hate you all!” Sibra screamed, shooting her first arrow.

Rather, three lovestruck girls—and one who was still waiting to find the one—joined the battle.

For some reason, on this day, Sibra’s arrows were far more accurate than ever before.

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“Power Slash! Sonic Axe!”

“Flame Bite! Twin Thrust!”

“Grand Shake!”

Adventurers plied skills left and right, cutting down the villagers with ease. In a way, it reminded me of the large-scale battles we waged on Britalia Online. During the war, I’d mostly fought alone, so I hadn’t witnessed anything like this—but I imagined the soldiers must have relied on skills, just like these people.

While the adventurers were stronger, the villagers seemed endless. No matter how hard the adventurers fought, there was always more villagers to fight.

Needless to say, I had my own share of villagers to contend with as well.

“Die!!!” one of them—a gigantic beastman—screamed as he lunged at me, swinging his huge battle axe.

His movements were so slow... I stopped his axe with my bare hands, grabbed his underarm, and tossed him out of my way—a giant swing, as the wrestlers called it—with so much force he flew through the air like a human shuriken—no, a beastman shuriken.

The beastman was so big that he ended up knocking all the people behind

him down.

Strike!

"Woah! You're crazy strong for a human, buddy!" one of the adventurers—a monkey beastman—praised me.

"Some of us are stronger than you'd think," I said. "Let's finish this quickly."

"You got it! We can't let the human beat us, guys! Let's go!" he shouted, using a long pole to take out a few more villagers.

He moved so quickly that his enemies couldn't follow his movements. They crumpled to the ground before they even understood where the blow had come from. Everything from his appearance to the way he fought reminded me of Sun Wukong, the famous Monkey King.

The monkey beastman laughed. "Bring it on!"

He was showing off, swinging his pole around, when I noticed an enemy on the second floor of a building aiming a bow at him. A quick look at my map revealed three others waiting in hiding for their opportunity to strike.

I should take care of them.

I snatched a few stones off the ground and used Homing Shooter. Each stone's trajectory followed a perfect arc to race right through the open window. The first one hit the two archers that'd been standing by the window right in the head. The last archer tried to retreat further inside the building, but sadly for him, the stones I'd thrown were pretty much heat-seeking missiles at this point. I looked at my map and saw the man stop moving suddenly.

The adventurers were surprised to see two stunned beastmen fall from a window above us, but they quickly understood what had happened and tied them up. They were starting to run out of rope, but they made more by tearing strips of fabric from the villagers' clothes to use as makeshift rope.

"I'll take care of the sneaky ones, but don't let your guard down!" I told the monkey beastman.

"T-Thanks, buddy. You saved me there."

I used my map to hunt down each of the hiding villagers. At the end of the

day, these criminals were only relying on their numbers. If they couldn't catch the adventurers off guard, they were no match for them. Every time I spotted one that looked a little stronger than the others, I took them out quickly just to be safe. I was starting to wish I had better projectiles than the pebbles I kept picking up. *Guess I'll just whip something up with Iron Coating later.*

Looking at the other end of the battle, I suddenly noticed a huge gap in the enemies' flank. I was wondering what happened when I saw Levia wading through the fray sending people flying with her bare hands. Just a single punch was enough to crush her opponent's shield to dust, destroy their armor, and fling them into the night sky.

"I'm happy to play with you, heh heh! Just don't die too easily, okay?" she said, laughing.

A blue aura appeared around her fists. Every time she swung them, even enemies well beyond her reach were blown away. The villagers faltered, cowering in fear. The adventurers weren't about to let this opportunity pass them by. Gaddle led them into the breach Levia had opened and they charged at the enemies.

Watching Levia advance all by herself, I doubted she needed much help.

I took a look at my map. A little while ago, red marks covered the entire town, but that number had gone down drastically.

They have everything under control, so it's probably okay if I leave, right?

"I'll leave the rest to you guys!" I told the people around me. "I'll go after the ones who kidnapped my friend."

"We'll take care of things here, don't worry!" the monkey beastman said.

After finding Alice's mark on my map, I climbed onto a building and began jumping from roof to roof, dodging the blows and arrows of the remaining assailants. Because the village was surrounded by the forest, the houses were built close to one another, making rooftop travel much faster than trying to make my way through the enemies on the ground. A few beastmen with bird characteristics tried to block my way, but I increased my speed with Swift Wind and charged into them, knocking them out of the way. I didn't suffer any

damage thanks to my trusty Invincibility.

That'll teach you to get in my way!

I continued to jump from roof to roof until I reached the exit of the village. *There they are.*

The beastman who'd captured Alice was holding a basket and the large spider he'd supposedly used to bind her was crawling behind him. I put more mana into Swift Wind to increase my speed even further as I dashed toward the kidnapper. I didn't want him to notice me and use Alice to threaten me, so I decided to be a little creative. I activated Stealth to make sure neither the beastman nor the spider would notice my presence as I approached at full speed.

When I got close enough, I charged at the spider and sent it flying into the air. While the man in front was stumbling, I grabbed the basket. Stealth disabled itself, but I didn't mind; I had managed to get Alice back.

"Hmm!!! Hmm!!!"

I could hear the poor fairy struggling to speak from within the confines of the basket. She was still entangled in the silver threads and couldn't move at all.

People like him are the very reason why fairies have to live hidden, I thought.

I cut the threads binding her very carefully so that I wouldn't hurt Alice in the process. When I cut enough of the web, she flew out of the basket, crying. "I was so scared!"

"Everything's gonna be all right now. I'm here," I reassured her.

She clung to me, sobbing.

"Hey! Careful! Don't get snot all over my clothes!" I complained.

Silver Spiders apparently ate fairies. Alice must have really thought she'd be eaten—or worse.

I was patting her head to calm her downwhen I heard a thud behind me. The spider I'd sent flying a few moments ago finally hit the ground. It twitched, its legs curling into its belly.

I had never been all that scared of insects, but I had to admit a spider this huge was gross.

The kidnapper jumped to his feet, but started trembling as soon as he noticed the spider's state.

"You bastard! What did you do to my dear Jennifer?!"

Who gives a disgusting spider a girl's name?! Even if the spider was female, he didn't have to give it a person's name!

I'd worried that an otherworlder could have been behind this but, in the end, the kidnapper was a beastman. He took out a flute and...I immediately snatched it away. I wasn't about to stand there and watch him use it to call forth an army of bugs.

"Hey! That's my flute! Give it back!" he shouted.

It's kind of your fault for trying to play it right in front of my nose.

This item was most likely what allowed him to control monsters. *This is going straight to my inventory.*

"Where's my flute?!" the man panicked when it disappeared.

"He's powerless now. Alice, get him!"

"I'll make you pay! Magic Missiles!" she exclaimed, her voice full of rage.

Countless magic bullets came flying out of her hands. The kidnapper had no time to dodge. He ended up paralyzed, poisoned, confused, blinded, and burnt. *Woah! That's quite the array of status alterations!*

After taking out her frustration on him, Alice seemed to be in a much better mood. *A smile suits her better than tears*, I thought.

The monster tamer collapsed just as his spider was getting up. *This thing's tenacious!*

"Giiiiii!!!" it screeched. "Giiigiiii! Giigiiigiii!!!"

Boy, I have no idea what it's trying to say.

It didn't try to approach us, though. It didn't even seem hostile anymore. *I guess it's just a bug at the end of the day. It probably doesn't wanna fight us.*

“Is that so? You must have had a hard time too,” Alice said.

“Giigii! Gii!”

“You can understand what it says?” I asked.

“Most of it, yes. He’s mad that he was given a girl’s name when he’s a boy. He’s starving and annoyed that the beastman was hugging him so hard every night. He says thank you for freeing him.”

I would have been pissed if people treated me like a girl too. I never would have thought I’d meet a pervert with a liking for *bugs*, of all things. I was starting to feel bad for the spider.

“Gigii! Giiii!” the spider cried. Then it pressed its spinneret to a nearby tree branch and created a beautiful, silver web

“Really? That’s a present for us, apparently,” Alice explained.

“You’re surprisingly polite,” I told the spider. “Thank you.”

The spider gathered the web into a little spool and brought it to us before disappearing into the forest. *Be careful not to be caught by another pervert!*

“Now that this is done,” Alice said, settling on my shoulder, “let’s go beat these guys up, Masaki! Let’s go!”

She still intended to treat me like a horse, didn’t she? *If that’s what she wants...*

“Sure thing. Just make sure you hold on tight.”

“What do you mean?”

I used as much mana as I could and activated Swift Wind. I kicked the ground to jump-start my momentum, then bolted toward the village at full speed.

“Too fast!” Alice yelled. “Masaki! Slow down! AHHHH!!!”

“Keep your mouth shut if you don’t want to bite your tongue,” I warned her.

I had no intention of slowing down on her account. Most of the villagers had been taken care of, but some adventurers had probably been hurt in the battle.

Alice had passed out on my shoulder and I could only hope she’d finally learn

her lesson.

Once I reached the center of the village, I checked my map and saw that the remaining villagers were all at the exact same spot.

Looking over, I saw Levia sitting proudly on top of a mountain of unconscious villagers. The adventurers surrounded her, staring with a mixture of awe and apprehension.

So that's why my map looked like that...

"There you are, Masaki," Levia said "You took your sweet time, didn't you? I'm almost done here. Nice to see Alice's okay."

"Did you do *all that* by yourself?" I asked.

"The other adventurers gave me a hand," she answered with a grin.

"Hey, Masaki," Gaddle greeted me. "Good to see you got Alice back. I gotta say...this girl's incredible," he said, looking at Levia. "I heard the sovereign of a country has to give their approval for a Rank A adventurer to become Rank S, but I have a feeling she could pull it off. She definitely has the skills!"

King Laurent would most likely endorse her in a heartbeat if she asked.

I looked around. As expected, quite a few adventurers had been wounded. The villagers were numerous and a few strong foes had been hiding in their midst so it made sense.

I could have healed their wounds fairly easily with my magic—although I'd have to touch them directly because of the magic storm—but I didn't want to draw too much attention to myself. I wasn't sure I had enough High Potions on me to help everyone, but I still had more in stock in my Room. I'd just need to ask Fen to hand them to me through the window.

I gave regular potions to those with light wounds and handed out the powerful High Potions I'd carefully brewed myself to the people who'd lost limbs. I'd learned during the war that my homemade High Potions were potent enough to regrow limbs.

"I'm sorry for making you waste such a valuable potion," one of the people I helped told me.

“It’s fine. I make them myself, so it’s no issue,” I answered.

“Even so, I’m in your debt.”

I’d heard that beastmen respected strong people and it seemed like that respect extended to skilled healers.

“So,” I said once I finished handing out the potions. “Where’s the ringleader?”

“Right here,” Levia said, grabbing the bird beastman with a mohawk she was sitting on.

She’d beaten him black and blue and he convulsed as she manhandled him once more. *Looks like he’s still alive.*

She threw him at my feet. I could have caught him before he crashed into the ground face-first but I didn’t feel like being nice to a criminal like him. Now that he was closer to me, I could see bullet holes in his arms and legs. *Akiha’s work, huh?*

Behind me, a familiar voice said, “Masaki-san, is Alice all right?”

I turned around to find Akiha standing there. I studied her, but she looked fine; there were no signs of distress. *Levia and the others must have taken good care of her afterward. I’ll need to thank them with a little something later on.*

“As you can see—well, I guess she doesn’t *look* okay, but don’t worry. She just passed out while sitting on my shoulder. She’s okay.”

Akiha paused before answering. “Just how fast were you running?”

I wasn’t sure what speed I reached, but Alice must have felt like she was riding a roller coaster. *If I just had done a few loops, I’d have been a human roller coaster for real.*

The beastman that was laying at my feet groaned as he raised his face to look at me. *Did he just regain consciousness?*

“Heh heh... You won’t get away with this...” he said.

“You’re in no position to threaten us,” I shot back. “Your men are all down. It’s over.”

He laughed once more. “Don’t you see? You attacked poor, defenseless

villagers. Who do you think the authorities are going to believe are the actual criminals here?”

What? There was no way in hell the authorities would believe such a farfetched lie. I’d heard the ruler of the south was a decent person.

“Everyone around here believes that the people of Dran are good-natured folks,” he continued. “Why would anyone believe you over us? The army will be here soon and when they arrive, you can kiss your head goodbye,” he continued.

He seemed way too confident. *Do they have ties with the army?*

Even if the lord truly was a good person, there was no guarantee that every officer was as well. Someone could very well tamper with the reports before they reached the lord and pretend a bunch of bandits had attacked harmless villagers.

“Masaki-san, what do you make of this?” Akiha asked me.

“I’m not sure... He doesn’t seem to be bluffing. It’s still the middle of the night, but maybe we should leave...”

Gaddle and the others also seemed conflicted. We were the victims, but these people were trying to frame us.

“S-Shouldn’t we get out of here, Masaki?” Gaddle said. “You’re planning to travel through the Beastmen Kingdom, right? You don’t wanna end up on the wanted list, do you?”

Gaddle was right. If we became wanted criminals, Adel and the others would be in danger too. *What if everyone gets caught...*

I wanted to believe we wouldn’t be sentenced to death, but I wasn’t as confident when it came to Nemea. He used to be an important priest in a heretical sect. They could definitely execute him.

I also had to think of Akiha and Alice. Levia could reveal her true identity and prove her innocence if push came to shove, but that would mean letting Pavaria know that she was in Arth. I had no way to predict how they would react.

While it was incredibly frustrating, getting out of here was probably the best

course of action...

Right as I was about to make up my mind, a loud laugh echoed across the village. I immediately looked for the source of the noise and spotted someone standing on the roof of the tallest building. Moonlight illuminated the man standing there and I froze.

A green mask hid his entire face—except for his mouth—over which he wore a pair of sunglasses. A tight bodysuit clung to his muscular body, two huge red letters emblazoned over the chest: JK. Red shoulder pads and a red cape—that somehow fluttered even though there was no wind—completed his outfit. The worst part about this all was that he wasn't wearing anything over his very *very* tight bodysuit, meaning his crotch was...exposed, to say the least.

We all stared at him for a second, then exclaimed in unison: "A pervert!"

"What?!" he shouted back. "I'm no pervert! I'm a hero!"

Chapter 4

“I’m a hero! A H-E-R-O! Not a pervert! Do you get it, you scoundrel?!” the man shouted at the top of his lungs.

“I’m sorry to break it to you, but you really do look like a pervert,” I answered.

Most of the men around me nodded. As for the ladies, they’d already started backing off, screaming in fear. Admittedly, a few people simply stared, almost...interested.

Akiha, her cheeks bright red, hid behind me, while Levia scowled like she was looking at something nasty.

Alice lay unconscious on the barrel on which I’d deposited her earlier.

“Didn’t your mother teach you that lying is wrong? Can’t you hear the girls welcoming me with cries of happiness?” he said grandiloquently.

“You got it completely wrong, you dumbass!” I retorted. “They’re scared because you’re dressed like a damn pervert! At least cover your crotch!”

“Why?! My outfit is perfectly appropriate!”

I give up. There’s no getting through to this guy.

I didn’t really want to give him the benefit of the doubt but his costume did look straight out of an American comic. *As much as I don’t want to claim him, this guy has to be an otherworlder, right? He has Latin alphabet letters on his chest and he’s been calling himself a hero, so there’s no other explanation...right?*

I’d never met a weirdo like him when I was in Japan, though. I wasn’t all that knowledgeable when it came to foreign games, but I’d heard about a popular VRMMO in which you played as a hero. *Is he from that game?*

“I can see through your tricks! You’re trying to confuse me! Scoundrel! I won’t be swayed by your evil tactics! Free the villagers!”

“*They* attacked us, not the other way around. They almost raped one of my friends, so I have no intention of going easy on them!”

“What?!” he seemed shaken by what I’d just said and turned to face one of the villagers we’d tied up. “Hey, you! Did you lie when you asked for my help?”

“N-No! We were living peacefully, as always, when these evil people attacked us out of nowhere! We’re the victims here, please trust me!” he pleaded, crying.

Look at him lying through his teeth. Bastard... Should I just kill him and get it over with? I guess no one would be stupid enough to believe him...

“Of course I trust you! I know real tears when I see them!” the self-proclaimed hero exclaimed. “You scoundrels! I won’t fall for your lies!” he screamed at us.

Maybe not...

“He’s lying to you, you know? Look, he started smirking the second you took the bait,” I pointed out.

“I won’t listen to you anymore! May the fist of justice triumph over evil! Justice Kick!” he exclaimed, leaping off the roof. He plummeted toward me at the speed of light, trying to dropkick me.

Why are you calling it the “fist of justice” if you’re going to use your leg?!

I drew my sword and blocked the hit. A shockwave exploded around us the second my sword connected with his foot.

“Ahh!” Akiha yelped.

“Akiha! Move back! He’s surprisingly strong,” I warned her.

“Not giving me your undivided attention, eh? Take this, then! Justice Wave!”

The self-proclaimed hero struck the ground with both hands and a gigantic shock wave writhed and quaked toward us. It seemed almost alive. I used Oversword to cut through it and lunged at the man. He disappeared in a split second and I hurriedly looked at my map. *He’s behind me!*

I couldn’t stop my momentum, but I twisted mid-step to change the direction of my atttack.

“What?!” the hero gasped, surprised to find me suddenly swinging behind

me. He was crouching, but he still managed to block my sword with his bare hands.

He'd only unleashed that shock wave to distract me so he could get behind me, huh? *He calls himself a hero, but he doesn't hesitate to use underhanded moves.*

Even though looked like a total pervert, this guy was pretty damn strong. He'd managed to block my sudden counter without any issue. Moreover, he'd stopped the blow with his bare hands, and now it felt like my sword was stuck in an invisible wall.

He still looks like a creep, though.

I tried jerking my sword out of his hands, but I couldn't pull it out no matter how hard I tried. I saw that I'd still managed to deal some damage, though: his bodysuit was torn.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "You hurt me even though I blocked the blow! You're pretty damn strong! This is going to be fun!"

Yeah, no. Not only have I had to fight all night long, but now I'm brawling with some perverted hero cosplayer on top of everything else!

After exchanging a few moves with him, I was starting to learn his attack patterns. He used his quickness to attack often and continuously; they weren't strong attacks, but he made up for that with his sheer speed.

I couldn't dodge or block a handful of hits and, while I didn't take any damage thanks to Invincibility, it was starting to annoy me. Every time he unleashed one of his killer moves, he paused just before. While I struggled the first time, I knew now just what to look for.

"Justice Charging Spark!" he thundered.

Electricity crackled across his entire body as he lunged at me. He charged at me in a straight line, so I evaded to the side, but that was a mistake. He made a ninety-degree turn mid-air and charged at me from the back. I hadn't expected that and couldn't react in time—the blow sent me flying into the air.

He didn't stop there, though. Before I could land, he followed up with a series

of punches and kicks that juggled me in the air. I couldn't regain my balance mid-air, so I could only grit my teeth and take it. He eventually spun around, getting behind me, and used a downward kick to blast me through the roof of a house. I went right through it and destroyed several pieces of furniture on my way down.

Everyone—especially the damn self-proclaimed hero—was surprised to see me walk out the front door as if nothing had happened a few seconds later. He looked shocked that his best combo didn't have any effect on me.

"I-Impossible... Ah! I know! I must be lacking power!"

He's not going to let his surprise stop him, is he...

That combo attack must have taken a toll on him, because his movements began slowing down. He was still pretty fast compared to your average fighter, but I began seeing windows of opportunity to counterattack between each of his movements. I used Oversword and Homing Shooter, but I quickly discovered that I was dealing way less damage than expected.

Is his weird bodysuit protecting him?

I suddenly noticed that some of the villagers were trying to escape while everyone was distracted. The adventurers were busy watching us fight and weren't paying them much attention anymore.

It'll be a pain if they escape. I wanted to go after them but...

The idiot in front of me started laughing, "HA HA HA HA!!! This is exciting!"

...this weirdo was in my way!

I could kill him if I put my mind to it, but I didn't think he deserved it. While he was in the wrong, he was, ultimately, just trying to stand up for who he thought were weak and defenseless villagers. He was also careful not to involve anyone else in our fight. *What should I do?*

"Hey! How about you cut it out? Can't you see the criminals are trying to flee?!" I shouted.

"I told you I won't fall for your tricks! Justice Beam!"

He refused to listen to a word I said and instead launched a laser beam from

the center of the JK insignia on his suit.

If you won't listen, you leave me with no choice. Sorry, but this is going to hurt.

I dodged the laser beam at the last moment and threw both Seven Arthur and Lost Dominion at him using Homing Shooter. Thanks to the effect of the skill, my two swords flew at the man, leaving a trail of light in their wake. Since I knew he'd dodge if I didn't time my attack right, I wanted to make use of the little moment he'd pause right after shooting his laser.

"Hah, you won't hit me with those!" he boasted as he narrowly dodged the swords...before yelping in surprise.

I hadn't been aiming at his body—I was after his cape.

Just as I'd hoped, the swords punctured his cape and their momentum jerked him back toward a nearby house, where they pinned him right against the wall.

"Shit! Damn it!"

Now that I'd pinned him, he was done for. While he was trying to free himself, I closed the distance between us in a split second.

"Take this!" I exclaimed, grabbing both swords and activating Oversword and Non-Lethal Attack.

"N-No! How could I—"

I cut through the wall in an X shape and the self-proclaimed hero collapsed before he could finish his sentence. The wall came crashing down.

His fancy cape had ended up becoming his downfall. Capes and mantles were great to boost stats, but if your opponent used them to catch you, you were done for.

This reminded me of that comic in which one of the heroes died because his cape got caught in a revolving door.

Akiha ran up to me as I was putting my swords back in my inventory.

"Masaki-san, did you...kill him?"

"No. I used Non-Lethal Attack. He's alive. He's a bit of an oddball, but he's an otherworlder and he didn't seem like a bad guy. I'm hoping we can talk to him

later. Besides...we have more guests to deal with."

"What do you mean?"

I could see a bunch of marks getting closer to us on my map. They'd get here soon. I assumed they were here to support the villagers, but as I studied the map I couldn't be sure. It seemed like one mark was dragging most of the others along.

"Enough! Hands up everyone!" a man screamed.

A few gunshots cracked and everyone stopped moving.

The man who'd just spoken appeared. He took a look at the self-proclaimed hero lying on the floor and his face paled. He was muscular, with broad shoulders, and was wearing a mechanical exoskeleton. His hair was fairly short and he was wearing a helmet with a built-in microphone. The man was single-handedly clutching an enormous pile bunker.

I'd seen suits like the one he was wearing before—in the foreign game *Saturn War*. The main weapons used in this game were pile bunkers, rocket hammers, and modified chainsaws. If memory served me right, the game had an online mode, which meant the man who'd just shown up was most likely an otherworlder.

"Masaki-san, what should we do?" Akiha asked.

"We stay put for the time being. Get behind me. I'll protect you, no matter what."

"O-Okay..." she answered, blushing as she stuck close to me.

I finished putting my weapons away and Akiha copied me.

"We'll play nice. That work for you?" I said, louder.

"Much appreciated," he said, before addressing someone else. "How are things on your end, James?"

"I didn't let any of them slip away," a man with long hair answered, throwing the villagers who'd tried to flee earlier at his comrade's feet.

He'd tied them all up using the tortoise shell bondage technique. *Why...?*

James, as the man in the mechanical exoskeleton had called him, had long blond hair and blue eyes. He wore light armor and carried a quiver and a bow on his back.

I've seen that bow before... That's...

"Hey, that's an Elven Lord Bow, right?" I asked.

"Oh! If you know about my bow you must be a *Britalia Online* player, too."

"Yeah. I didn't think I'd meet a fellow player here."

"Same here. Sorry for the bother, but do you mind if we detain you a little longer? We don't want to hurt you, but we have our own positions to consider..." he explained.

It seemed like he was telling the truth. Levia had lowered her guard as well, so I assumed she didn't sense any bloodlust or misadventure in these newcomers. After all, they'd even arrested the escaping villagers.

They kept stealing glances at the self-proclaimed hero. *Do they know him?*

"It would seem like one of our own caused you some trouble," the man in the exoskeleton said. "Did you...kill him?"

"I used a non-lethal move. He's still alive. I didn't go easy on him, though."

"He's a bit...eccentric, but he's still our comrade, so I'm glad to hear that. There's much I'd like to discuss with you, but for the time being... Dan!" he exclaimed.

The self-proclaimed hero—Dan—jumped to his feet. *He can move already?! Impressive.*

"What is it, Sieg? By the way, I'd appreciate it if you stopped calling me Dan. I'm Justice Keeper!" he exclaimed, puffing out his chest and tapping the red letters on his bodysuit—JK.

Sieg let out a deep sigh. He hurried over to the hero's side and wrapped him so smoothly in a sudden headlock that I had to assume he was accustomed to doing it.

"How many times have I told you not to go off on your own?! And why aren't

you wearing your groin guard?! I had the guild make one just for you, but you never wear it!”

“It huuuurts! I’m sorry, okay?! I’ll wear it next time, Sieg! It’s not my fault! There were people in need! I had to act fast!”

“I keep telling you to study the situation before jumping in! James, you tell him!”

“Me? All right, all right,” said a confused, begrudging James. “Dan, these villagers were kidnapping people and selling them as slaves. We discovered evidence and confirmed with the women we found here. They’re all slaves. In other words, these people are criminals.”

So, bandits *had* taken over the village, huh? A village full of men would have been suspicious, so they forced the slaves to pose as their wives and daughters.

Dan’s face fell. “No way,” he kept repeating. He was an impetuous idiot, but he seemed to have a good heart, at least.

“I’m truly sorry. This idiot always charges headfirst without thinking. Did he hurt anyone?” Sieg asked.

“It’s all good. I’m pretty sturdy,” I said.

“Sieg! This guy’s amazing!” Dan suddenly chimed in. “I used my trump card, but he’s completely fine!” he said with pride, like he’d done something impressive.

“You idiot! Apologize right now!” Sieg exploded. “How could you go all out on him?! It’s not the first time you’ve pulled something like this! You need to think before you act!”

“I”m sorryyyy! Sieg, stop! It hurts!!” he whined as Sieg tightened his headlock.

“Sounds like you have a lot on your plate,” I said.

“I sure do...” Sieg sighed.

Sieg seemed to be a few years older than me, but he already had plenty of wrinkles. *Being around that fool has got to make you age faster.*

It was still the middle of the night, so we decided to have a talk in the

morning. We were told to return to the inn and were happy to oblige. Sieg and his comrades would take care of the rest.

As it turned out, a few of the inn's employees were slaves. The cook, for instance, came to thank us in person. I couldn't help but notice his slave collar, so I removed it for him using the Pick of the Bandit King. He started crying and thanking me, but I was so sleepy that I asked him to save his gratitude for the morning and headed to my room.

I never would have expected I'd suddenly run into three otherworlders out of the blue. Moreover, one of them used to play the same game I did. I had to find him and have a long chat with him in the morning.

This hectic day finally came to an end, and I slept like a log.

When I woke up the next morning, I quietly left the room without waking up Gaddle and the others and headed to the outskirts of the village. I took out Lost Dominion and got into a fighting stance.

Up until a few days ago, I used to train with Adel and Tatsuma, but I'd have to do it alone for the time being. I focused and tried to picture Dan—the opponent I'd faced the previous day—in front of me. Even though he looked like a creep, he was strong—in fact, with the way he timed his attacks and blocks, I knew he was more skilled than I was. He probably had more experience fighting others. I made up for my own lack of experience with Invincibility, but that wasn't optimal. I'd continue relying on it, but I was always afraid this reliance would be discovered and exploited.

As I swung my sword at the imaginary Dan, I realized I hadn't met anyone in a long time who made such a great punching bag. *This pervert's earned it.*

I was starting to work up a sweat when someone approached. I stopped and turned to see who was there.

"You're full of motivation this morning," Levia said.

"Hi, Levia. You're up early today."

She usually never woke up before it was time for breakfast. She always jumped out of bed the second she smelled food, though, so I never had to go

through the trouble of waking her up.

“I guess I am,” she answered before asking. “You have something on your mind, don’t you?”

“Yeah... I just feel like the way I’ve been fighting is no good,” I said.

“Since I’m here already, wanna spar? I’m feeling generous today.”

“You know how to use a sword?”

“I do. You end up picking up a lot of skills when you live for as long as I have. The swordsmanship you puny humans practice is a piece of cake for me. Speaking of cake...what are we having for breakfast?”

She just has *to bring up food, doesn’t she?*

Levia truly was a glutton. I still couldn’t fathom where all the food she devoured went when her body was so small.

“I’d like to take you up on that offer. I was starting to feel stuck, training by myself.”

“I’m happy to help. The food you cook is always great, so you deserve it. Well, then...here I come!” Levia said, pulling a crystal sword out of nowhere.

Her blade swayed softly and before I knew it, she’d closed the distance between us, getting ready to strike. I tried to dodge, but I didn’t evade in time and her sword connected.

Even with Invincibility, the impact shook me to my core.

“You saw it coming, but your body couldn’t move quick enough, right?” she said. “Still, your defense is truly out of this world. I tried to knock you out for real, you know?”

Had she just tried to end our spar with the very first attack?! *She’s terrifying!*

“But training without pain won’t teach you much,” she added. “You may not feel comfortable doing so, but you definitely should take down your defensive skills when you train.”

“I know. I always do when I train with Tatsuma,” I answered, disabling Invincibility. “All done... You can keep going!”

Levia’s body swayed and she vanished the next second. I focused. I was ready to put my all into this training.

◆◇◆

“Ouch...” I groaned.

As soon as she saw me, Akiha gasped. “M-Masaki-san! You’re hurt! Are you okay?! What happened to you?!”

“Don’t worry, these are just bruises,” I reassured her.

My training session with Levia consisted of me getting repeatedly and unilaterally beaten. I never would have expected her to be so good with a sword. While my skills and various stat buffs allowed me to follow her movements despite her speed, I was much too slow to do anything to stop her attacks.

Sparring with Levia had made me realize once again how reliant on my skills I was. Still, I managed to get one clean hit in right before it was time for breakfast.

“You have a long way to go, Masaki,” Levia said. “That last attack was pretty good, though.”

“You weren’t even paying attention anymore when I got that hit in, were you?” I asked her.

“I may or may not have been distracted by the delicious aroma of bacon at that moment...” she admitted.

We wrapped things up and I dragged my tired body to the inn. Just as she’d predicted, bread, scrambled eggs, and bacon were on the table. Apparently, Sieg and his comrades had brought bacon they’d made using the meat from a donphango—a species of wild boars.

I’d been proud of myself for scoring a clean hit, but after learning that Levia had merely been distracted, I felt defeated.

I ordered breakfast for four. I intended to make something different for Alice, but I’d bought a share for Fen. I’d checked on her briefly after the uproar of the previous day and found her having dinner by herself, looking lonely. I hadn’t told her about the attack and simply kept her company until she finished eating. Being alone all day long in my Room must have been getting to her.

I entered an empty room and created a door to my Room. Again, only a small window appeared.

“Are you awake, Fen?” I called through the window.

“I’m...awake... Good morning,” she greeted me politely, parting the blinds.

She was wearing her usual maid outfit. *We’re not at the mansion, but she still chooses to wear the maid outfit*, I thought.

I’d given Fen quite a few costumes for her to wear. Needless to say, I hadn’t chosen them alone. Women usually had a much better fashion sense, so I’d asked Adel and Youko to help me. They’d picked out a wide array of outfits ranging from simple colorful clothes to frilly lolita dresses.

While she enjoyed dressing up when she went out with us or her friends, she seemed so comfortable in her maid dress that she wore it even while she wasn’t working. The uniform fit her like a glove and I was so used to seeing her with it on that it was what felt most natural for me too.

The window was barely big enough for Fen to pass through, but she managed and joined our side to have breakfast with us. We all sat down around a table and enjoyed our meal.

I’d made a sweet omelet topped with fruits for Alice. I’d asked the cook to make it for her at first, but he’d never made one before so I just borrowed his kitchen for a few minutes to do it myself.

I watched Fen take small bites of her bread—she was absolutely adorable. My eyes went to Akiha next and I noticed she had some milk on the corner of her mouth. When I wiped her mouth for her, she turned bright red. Levia tried to take advantage of the moment to steal my bacon, but I blocked her fork with mine. Afterwards, we exchanged a few fork blows.

“You’re much quicker than you were this morning,” she commented.

“You trained me well,” I answered. “But I’m still not giving you *my* bacon,” I said, stabbing my knife into a thick slice of bacon. I immediately brought it to my mouth, stuffing my cheeks with the large piece of juicy meat. It didn’t taste like the bacon I was used to eating in my previous world, but it was still pretty good.

Levia lowered her head. She looked so miserable that Fen gave her half of her share.

“Here, Big Sister Levia... I’m not hungry enough to eat it all...” she said.

“Oh! Thank you so much, Fen! You’re such a good girl!” Levia exclaimed, hugging Fen and patting her hair energetically.

“I-It’s nothing... Y-You’re welcome...” Fen answered.

They looked like a pair of sisters, which was funny enough considering one of the two was a God Eater and the other a god. *And yet, the God Eater is the one giving up her food.*

Fen seemed much happier now, but after we finished eating I had her return to my Room. I felt bad for making her stay inside all alone, but it was much safer for now. I’d let her come out after things calmed down. Fen had been born and raised in this land, after all—she probably wanted to explore with us instead of staying cooped up inside.

Now that our bellies were full, it was time to have a serious chat with Sieg and the others.

He and his comrades were staying in the mayor’s house, the second largest building in town after the inn. The actual mayor of this village had long since been killed by the bandits that were posing as villagers and his poor daughter had been turned into a slave—a sex slave at that.

I can’t bear to think of what would have happened to Akiha if I’d come even a minute later... I’m so glad I made it in time...

Two guards were posted in front of the mayor’s house. I was a bit surprised to see them bow respectfully as I walked past them.

Right as I knocked on the door, I overheard someone screaming inside, “I can’t believe you, James!”

“Why are you so angry, Sieg? You’re scaring this little cutie.”

“Of course I’m angry!”

What in the world was going on? I didn’t want to casually barge in in the middle of their argument, so I knocked once more and asked, “Sieg, can we

come in?”

“They’re here, Sieg! Akiha, Levia, and Alice, right? Oh, and...Masaki.”

We’d quickly introduced ourselves before going our separate ways, but James sounded like he’d only remembered my name as an afterthought.

I heard Sieg click his tongue. “We’ll have a serious chat later, James,” he said sternly. Then, more softly, he said, “Come in, Masaki.”

“Okay,” I said, pushing the door open.

Dan was...immobilized in a bamboo mat that had been wrapped around him. James was holding a young woman close, an arm thrown over her shoulder, and Sieg was scowling at them both.

I had no idea what was going on.

“I have a lot of questions, but I’ll go with the most pressing one: What’s going on with Dan?” I asked.

“Masakiiiii! Hewwwwp!” Dan pleaded, flapping on the floor like a fish out of the water.

Gross. While Akiha and Levia seemed just as put off as I was, Alice looked amused.

“That’s his punishment for his actions yesterday,” Sieg answered. “Dan, don’t you have something you’d like to say to them?”

“Yep! I’m happy to give you my autograph if you untie me!” he exclaimed.

I don’t want it.

Sieg punched him.

That must have hurt.

“Apologize to them, you idiot!”

“Oh, shit! I totally forgot! That’s what I had to say! Sorry, Masaki,” he said, wriggling around like a caterpillar to press his face to the ground.

Is he trying to... prostrate himself? This is so awkward...

“I’ve never seen anyone apologize like...that,” Levia said.

Neither have I. It's so bizarre—I wish he'd just stop.

"It was all a big misunderstanding. Let's just let bygones be bygones," I said, trying to get him to stop apologizing. "Get your face off the ground, please."

"Wow! You're such a good guy, Masaki! Thankies! I'll give you my autograph later!"

"No need," I refused bluntly.

Dan finally stopped prostrating himself, but things were still pretty awkward with him cocooned in the bamboo mat. It didn't look like Sieg or James intended to free him any time soon.

Sieg asked me to tell him more about what had happened. I explained that we had business in the Beastmen Kingdom and that we'd found our way into this village only to be attacked when we were preparing to sleep at the inn. Once I started talking about Akiha's assault, I couldn't help but use more...emphatic language. Sieg and the others refrained from commenting, but I could feel their indignation.

"Thank you for recounting everything," Sieg finally said after I was done speaking. "We were asked to investigate a recent string of adventurers who went missing near this village. We interrogated the gatekeeper, but he claimed to know nothing about it. After more investigation, we found that the gatekeeper had expensive tastes: frequent visits to the brothel in the nearest city, expensive alcohol, the works. He's even been seeing some pretty famous courtesans that no normal soldier could ever afford. That's how we knew that something about him was fishy. We've been watching him ever since."

"So, that's how you discovered what was going on," I said. "What about the soldiers you came with? I'm impressed—they even seemed like they were obeying your orders"

"Well... Our boss, Lydea, happens to be the ruler of the south," Sieg said. "She's helped us a lot ever since we arrived in this world. The soldiers listen to me so well because I've trained them. Military service taught me a great deal and I shared that knowledge with them. People here don't seem to care much about pride or honor, but they do listen if you teach them well," Sieg said.

“I taught them too!” Dan exclaimed.

“Military service sure brings back memories,” James sighed. “It was tough, but I learned so much back then.”

I hadn’t considered that, but some countries still had compulsory military service. I learned a little later that Sieg was German, James was French, and Dan was American. Their party was quite international to say the least.

Now I understood why the soldiers had been so well-organized. Sieg had obviously put a lot of effort into training them. While Dan and James had probably taught alongside him, it was obvious whose training had been more effective. Dan was the epitome of unreliability and James didn’t seem decisive enough.

Truth be told, I really wanted someone as well-versed in military affairs as Sieg in my territory. Tatsuma was doing a good job leading the soldiers and guards, but he was self-taught. If my troops learned modern training methods and strategies, they’d be more effective.

I’ll invite them to my territory once we’re done here. Not Dan, though.

“While we were investigating the gatekeeper, we discovered that there’d been dozens of bandit attacks in the vicinity of this village. We were still puzzling everything together when a falcon carrying a request for help suddenly flew in. We’d been suspicious of the townspeople here ever since we learned about the gatekeeper’s proclivities, so we were hesitant to take the request at face value—all of us except for this idiot, that is. Before we could stop him, he was running off to help... Well, you know the rest.”

“I’m sorry...” Dan apologized again.

“Don’t overthink it, Sieg,” James started. “We managed to find enough proof to take them down and we even saved this little cutie,” he said, pulling the girl he’d been holding closer to his chest. “All’s well that ends well.”

Who’s that girl?

Noticing my look, James said, “Ah, I forgot to mention it, but this is the daughter of the former mayor. I can’t forgive these despicable bandits for hurting a young woman. Women are treasures that should be protected,” he

sighed. “Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ll keep you safe... Safe and satisfied.”

“Y-Yes, please” the girl all but moaned.

Satisfied? Oh boy, where in the world is this conversation going?

Sief sighed, an annoyed look on his face. *Were they fighting about this, earlier?*

The young woman didn’t seem to dislike James’s advances, so I didn’t think it was my place to butt in. People were free to love whoever they liked.

“I’d still like to get rid of this hateful thing, though,” James said, looking at the girl’s slave collar. “Sieg, have you found the key yet?”

“No. The slavers the bandits had ties with must have the key. We’ll need to go back to Saunshade to remove her collar,” he answered.

“I could remove everyone’s collars for you if you’d like,” I offered.

“What?!” Sieg and James both shouted at the same time.

I guess that must have sounded pretty unbelievable.

All the women here had slave collars on, so bringing them all the way to Saunshade would be a huge hassle. Getting rid of them here would be much easier. I was so used to dealing with such collars that a few seconds were enough for me to take out the Pick of the Bandit King and remove the one the young woman was wearing.

Sieg and the others watched, flabbergasted. I pretended that the Pick of the Bandit King was an artifact I’d found while traveling in this world and left it at that. It wasn’t a complete lie—the item *was* an artifact. As far as I knew, it could pick any lock. In fact, I’d be curious to see a lock it couldn’t pick.

I still didn’t get how they’d arrived so quickly if they were in Saunshade. I asked Sieg about it and he told me they’d been waiting in a nearby village located upstream. The messenger falcon had brought the emergency message to the guards of this village who’d then shown it to Sieg and his men. They’d used canoes to go down the river in a hurry and, while they waited for the rest of their men to arrive, Dan had charged in alone, mistook us for the bad guys, and fought with me. *What an idiot*.

A new mayor would soon be dispatched to this village. In the meantime, the soldiers would remain here to keep the peace. Since this village was the closest to the forest, adventurers would be in a pickle if it disappeared. Making sure the security was good enough until a new mayor and new guards arrived was also crucial. There was no point in saving the enslaved women only to let them be killed by monsters.

“The village should be all right now,” Sieg concluded after explaining everything to me. “Now that’s out of the way, there’s something I’d like to ask you, Masaki.”

“What is it? I’ll answer you if I can.”

“You said you had business in the Beastmen Kingdom, but could you elaborate a little? You must know that the crazed beasts are out of control these days. Since you’re bringing women to such a dangerous place, I’m assuming you must have a very good reason.”

“Well...”

That’s a tough one... How should I answer?

“We’re on our way to the Great Earth Sanctuary,” Levia answered before I could make up my mind. “We need information on Jörmungandr.”

“What?! Jörmungandr as in one of the Three Dragons?!”

“Levia, are you sure you should tell them that?” I asked.

I felt like such an important piece of information ought to be shared only with people we trusted. Sieg and his comrades did seem to be good people, but I wasn’t sure involving them in this mess was a good idea. It was a bit too late to worry about that now, though.

“It’s fine,” Levia said. “We’re desperate for information, so we don’t really have a choice anyway.”

“It’s your call, Levia,” I told her.

Levia stepped closer to me and whispered in my ear, “You still have that skill you used last time, right? The one that lets you read people’s memories. If they’re involved in Jörmungandr’s disappearance, you’ll be able to get to the

bottom of things.”

Log Analysis, huh? Levia was right. If I wanted to, I could uncover any piece of information—including someone’s embarrassing secrets. I didn’t like using that skill indiscriminately, but it was effective when it came to obtaining information.

“So, you’re looking for information on Jörmungandr,” Sieg said. “ I’m sorry, but we can’t tell you anything without Lady Lydea’s approval.”

They can’t tell me anything? That means they must know something*. Sounds like they’re willing to tell me, too, as long as their lord allows it. If worse comes to worst, I’ll have to force it out of them, but I hope we can resolve the situation peacefully.*

“Can you connect us to Lydea, then?” Levia asked.

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about Lady Lydea so casually, young lady,” Sieg said. “I’ll do what I can, but she’s a busy person. You may have to wait.”

“Show her this,” Levia said, producing a glowing blue dragon scale that she carelessly tossed at Sieg. “She should see us pretty quickly.”

Can’t you take better care of your own scales?!

I knew a certain prince who’d do anything to get his hands on such a valuable item.

“That’s...” Sieg trailed off, looking at the scale he’d just caught. “Got it. I’ll do what I can.”

“Thanks,” Levia said.

Levia seemed to know Lydea, so I assumed we could trust her. I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of person she’d be, though. The ruler of the south was supposed to be a member of the lunar rabbit tribe, but that was pretty much all I knew about her.

Sieg suggested that we travel with them by carriage if we were also headed to the capital of the south. I thanked him and accepted his offer. The preparations would take around four days, but it’d be much easier than traveling by foot.

I informed Gaddle and the others afterward and they told me that I’d made

the right call. They also needed to go back to the capital of the south to stock up on supplies and repair their weapons and equipment.

Speaking of Gaddle and his party, they'd happily accepted my earlier request to travel with us. I gave them the damask bracelets as an advance payment and I could still remember how astonished they were when they saw the bracelets' stats.

While I might have overdone it with the rewards, I don't regret it.

Now that I was free, I wanted to go train with Levia some more, but I had a few things to do beforehand.

First of all, I used Iron Coating to make the mithril sword I'd given Gaddle look like some cheap iron sword.

When he saw what I'd done, he gasped."What did you do?! Why did you turn mithril into iron?!"

"Don't worry. It only changes the sword's appearance."

The beautiful light green blade was now dull gray, so I understood why Gaddle had freaked out. *I probably should have explained things to him* before *I used my skill.*

I took out my own weapons and used Iron Coating on them as well.

Attack +3? Oh right. I'd totally forgotten Iron Coating had that effect.

It was such a useless skill in Britalia Online that I'd forgotten its actual effect. Iron Coating gave an attack +3 buff for three minutes. Most people never used it because it made weapons look boring. Besides, much better skills such as Mithril Coating, Damask Coating, Platinum Coating, or Orichalcum Coating existed, so there wasn't much of a point in making your weapon look like inferior iron.

You needed ingots to use these skills and considering how rare orichalcum was—I only had a handful of it in my inventory—I didn't intend to use Orichalcum Coating any time soon.

After that, I devoted the rest of my time to training—or, rather, getting beaten up by Levia. Akiha worried constantly, while Alice bursted into laughter

every time she saw me wearing new bruises.

Two days went by just like that. During that time, most of the adventurers and travelers who'd fought alongside us left the village. Some of them were also headed to the capital of the south while others continued on to other villages. One of them—a burly merchant—decided to stay here and open a business. The village would be slowly rebuilt and repopulated over the next few months. Besides, soldiers would soon be dispatched here and nearby farmers often visited the village. *It does sound like a promising place to open a shop.*

Apparently, getting beaten up repeatedly was starting to bear fruit. I was self-taught and it showed, but with Levia pointing out all of the unnecessary movements I made, I was starting to get the idea of how to be more economical with my body when fighting—even if my entire body now hurt when I did move.

I had a lot of stamina thanks to my skills and buffs. While this was usually a blessing, it meant that I couldn't pass out from exhaustion, dooming me to suffer during our long spars.

I truly made a lot more progress than I'd expected in these two short days. According to Levia, I had the makings of a great swordsman. *I used to score full marks whenever we did kendo in PE, after all.* Kendo and occidental swordsmanship were completely different martial arts, but they still had a lot in common. Back in high school, the kendo club had tried to recruit me but I'd refused. I had games to play and I enjoyed being home more than doing sports.

Eventually, Sieg and his comrades finished getting the carriages ready. Unlike regular horse-drawn carriages, these carriages were pulled by rhinoceroses with golden fur and black horns. The carriages themselves, made out of iron, were also rather peculiar. They almost looked like armored vehicles.

Sieg and his comrades decided, based on their military knowledge, to use these carriages rather than the traditional wooden ones. *Makes sense—wooden carriages were probably too flimsy to protect us against crazed beasts*.

"Those are genos rhinos," Sieg explained. "They're easy to tame and fairly fast. They're also sturdy enough to hold their own against crazed beasts."

"They *do* look strong enough to put up a fight," I said.

The genos rhinos growled as if to confirm they'd protect us. Gaddle started at the noise and hesitated, but Eris kicked him and he reluctantly entered the carriage. *Looks like Eris will wear the pants in their relationship.*

Sibra and Gunha laughed and followed them inside.

We followed suit and boarded our own carriage. Several cotton, legless chairs and pelts decorated the floor of the surprisingly spacious interior. I'd expected solid benches—just like the ones in most carriages—but it looked like Sieg and the others hadn't only remodeled the carriages' exteriors.

I silently thanked all the otherworlders that had preceded me in this world for the comfort they'd brought.

"It's my first time riding a carriage like this. How soft," Levia said, throwing herself onto one of the chairs.

"You cheater! I wanted to sit first!" Alice shouted, flying after her at full speed.

They both seemed to appreciate the soft cushions. *They'll definitely fall asleep soon.*

I touched one of the legless chairs and noticed they were somewhat bouncy. I also discovered you could also push the back onto the ground to turn the chairs into mattresses.

Levia and Alice had settled on one side, so I sat down next to Akiha. A faint scent of citrus wafted through the air.

The inn didn't have baths, but I'd asked Fen to retrieve shampoo inside my Room for Akiha. A girl's hair was her life—and I especially liked Akiha's beautiful locks.

Speaking of Akiha, I still need to apologize to her for what I did last time...

It had been the only way I could have cured her, but I still ended up stealing a kiss. I hadn't known how to apologize, so I put it off until now.

"Something on your mind, Masaki-san?" Akiha asked.

I shook my head. "No, don't worry," I answered. "We should leave soon."

I'll apologize once we get to the capital of the south, but I can't wait much longer. If I wait too long, it'll be even more awkward.

The coachman pulled on the reins and the genos rhinos started walking, their large hooves thumping on the ground noisily. The two idiots who were slouching on their chairs lost their balance and knocked their heads on the floor.

A thud echoed through the carriage. *Hah, that was satisfying.*

"OUCH!!!" the two of them whined.

Akiha and I laughed at their clumsiness.

The carriage swayed gently as we headed toward the forest.

Chapter 5

Fortunately, the next couple of days proved uneventful. The genos rhinos simply pulled the armored carriages along bumpy, unpaved roads.

I was sleeping when the carriage jostled hard enough to wake me. *When did I fall asleep?* I yawned and looked out the window, discovering that it was the middle of the afternoon.

While the roads we were traveling on weren't paved, the carriage's suspension kept it from shaking too violently. In fact, it was so relaxing that I often dozed off without realizing it.

It had already been a few days since we'd left the village. I'd seen plenty of crazed beasts and monsters from the windows, but they hadn't dared approach the genos rhinos. They scurried away as soon as they spotted them.

Genos rhinos were impressive animals. They were over two meters tall, but were still as fast as horses. Moreover, the rhinos were powerful creatures. The few monsters that hadn't been fast enough to get out of their way had been trampled, leaving minced meat smeared across the road behind us. *What a gruesome sight.*

I tried to get up, but I felt something heavy on my thighs. When I looked down, I saw Akiha sleeping with her head resting on my lap.

Levia and Alice were also sleeping soundly. The little fairy was nestled against Levia's cheek. *Aren't you afraid she'll eat you the second she wakes up?*

That aside, I had a problem—a huge problem.

Having just woken up, my body, like most men's, was currently experiencing a certain...physiological phenomenon.

The issue was that Akiha was sleeping soundly, her face inches away from my crotch... *What am I supposed to do?*

She looked sound asleep, so I didn't want to wake her, but...I couldn't exactly stay like *that*.

I already had two fiancées, but Akiha was also a sweet girl. While there was a bit of an age gap, being intimate with Adel and Youko had made me see Akiha in a new light as well. I found myself noticing her charms more nowadays.

“Masaki-san...”

Uh oh... Did she wake up? I sure hope she didn’t... My thing *is right in front of her face.*

Her breathing hadn’t changed and it still sounded like she was asleep.

Phew. Looks like she was just talking in her sleep. All right, I’ll just look at the scenery until I calm down.

I looked out the window, but there wasn’t much for me to admire except trees and—more trees. Most animals ran away at the sight of the genos rhinos, so I could only catch sporadic glimpses of them as they fled. While this effect was keeping us safe, it was also making the forest look desolate.

After a few minutes of intense focus, my manhood obeyed. Almost immediately after, Akiha stirred and opened her eyes.

“M-Masaki-san?”

“Sleep well?”

Akiha, suddenly noticing she was sprawled over my thighs, quickly straightened herself.

Akiha was completely different from the dignified Adel and the vivacious Youko, whose personality could light up a room. Akiha was usually so serious and composed that it was nice to see her relax a little from time to time. I was happy she’d chosen to lean on me.

I noticed that she was wearing the pendant I’d given her. *I’m glad she likes it.*

“Y-Yeah... I’m sorry... I must have been heavy.”

“Not at all. I haven’t had many people use my lap as a pillow before, but it felt kind of nice. I could feel your warmth.”

“Stop lying to me, Masaki-san! I must have been a bother.”

“No, I meant it. How should I phrase this... Human contact just feels nice... It’s

very soothing, in a way. I wouldn't mind you resting your head on me for a while longer if you wanted to," I explained.

"I might just take you up on that, you know," Akiha said, resting her head on my shoulder and closing her eyes.

I felt like Akiha relied on me a lot more these days. She used to maintain a certain distance, but now that Adel and Youko weren't around, we'd grown closer.

It did make me happy but, as a man, I couldn't stop myself from noticing her more.

Akiha was currently nuzzling her cheek against my shoulder affectionately. I enjoyed it as well, so I wasn't going to complain.

She'd gone through a traumatic experience at the village and I wanted to spoil her however I could to make her feel better. If letting her rest her head on my shoulder was the only thing I could do at that moment, I was happy to do it.

I started stroking her hair gently as we sat quietly in the carriage, waiting for the genos rhinos to take us to our destination.

◆◇◆

Arth is so damn big!

One week had already passed since we left the village, but we'd yet to reach the capital of the south.

"The villages and cities weren't so far apart in Rand, were they?" Akiha said with a sigh.

"The roads being properly maintained certainly helped." I looked at the food we were cooking over the campfire. "Ah, it looks like it's almost done, Akiha."

"You're right," she agreed. "Damask lizard meat is surprisingly juicy."

"It was great in the stew last time, but I wasn't sure how it'd taste if we just boiled it. It looks like I worried over nothing, though," I said.

Every night, we stopped the carriages and made camp. It was dangerous to travel by night and the genos rhinos needed their rest, otherwise they'd lose stamina and get hurt, setting us back even further.

Tonight, we were boiling what was left of the damask lizard meat to make a soup. We'd used the bones to make the broth.

We were simmering the soup when a rustling noise came from the bushes. Akiha tensed, glanced into the bushes, and then refocused on the pot. *Looking away when you're cooking is dangerous!*

I checked my map and saw three marks in the bushes—James, Alice, and Levia.

"We're back from our hunt!" James exclaimed as he emerged from the bushes, dragging a couple of large lizards behind him.

James used to play as a hunter. He could make use of his skills—Owl Eye, which allowed him to see in the dark, and Hawk Eye, which allowed him to see distant targets—to hunt even at night.

Alice and Levia followed closely. The former was holding a basket full to the brim with mushrooms and wild plants while the latter carried a lizard and a couple of boas over her shoulders. They'd both decided to tag along when James had announced he was going hunting. They probably wanted to blow off some steam after sitting in the carriage for so long. *I'm happy they found*

another outlet for their pent-up frustration. I'll offer up a prayer to the poor crazed beasts that crossed their path.

Alice had told us she could tell which plants were edible and which were toxic, so I'd put her in charge of gathering plants. We couldn't only eat meat—we'd lack vital nutrients.

"That was one good hunt," James said, humming.

"It was easier than ever thanks to you, James," Levia said.

"It's all thanks to *you*, Levia and Alice," he answered with a flirtatious smile.

James was a self-proclaimed playboy, but he was still a man of honor. For instance, he'd hit on the mayor's daughter because he didn't want her to come to distrust all men in the future. He'd promised to take good care of her and seemed like the type of guy who took responsibility for his actions.

He hadn't hit on Akiha much, and Levia and Alice didn't seem to mind him—they simply brushed him off—so I didn't see any harm in his behavior.

"We caught silver raptors and big hedge boas today. Did you know silver raptor steaks are known as a delicacy? The big hedge boa meat smells a little strong, though, so we should process it a bit," James explained.

I was starting to notice that most crazed beasts—if not all—were reptiles with sturdy metallic scales. According to our new friends, the stronger they were the sturdier their scales: the weakest crazed beasts had bronze scales, while the stronger ones, in order, had scales made of iron, silver, damask, mithril, gold, platinum, adaman, and then finally orichalcum.

Rumor had it that some crazed beasts had scales of even stronger metals, but no one really knew much about this. As far as I knew, any ancient documents pertaining to the crazed beasts had long been lost.

I was a bit taken aback when they told me that some of the stronger crazed beasts had scales of gold. It was a precious metal, but I was under the impression that gold was pretty soft. Apparently, that wasn't the case when it came to the crazed beasts. The scales of these particular ones—called golden dragons—were incredibly tough. These monsters could also unleash a fearsome golden breath which made them difficult to fight. Thankfully, they never left

their caverns, so we weren't likely to run into any of them.

Apparently, quite a few adventurers had met their deaths trying to hunt these golden dragons for their scales. *A fitting end for money-grubbers*.

As far as I was concerned, I had no intention of hunting crazed beasts if I could help it—although I was kind of curious about how the meat of these other variations would taste.

The silver raptors James and the others had brought back were riddled with arrows. James had done a wonderful job of targeting the unarmored spots of their bodies, thus avoiding damaging any of the scales. I could tell how good of an archer he was and, to be honest, I wasn't sure I could outdo him in an archery match. Skills and equipment weren't everything. A truly skilled hunter was an experienced one.

"Hey, James. Since you're back, come over here!" Sieg called for his friend. "We don't have enough pepper. Get some from your Room."

"Yeah, yeah. You're always working me to the bone," James sighed before approaching, one silver raptor hanging off his shoulder.

James was a *Britalia Online* player, just like me. This meant he also had a Room. Because of the magic storm, he was also unable to create a real door, though, and had to make do with a small window.

Being able to store food and condiments inside our Rooms was a real plus. Every group that had to stay on the road for a long time—be it an adventurer party or an army—had to worry about food. Hunting monsters as you went was always an option, but hunting meant danger or even the possibility of returning empty-handed.

To make up for this, the people of this world used item boxes. These magic items were great, but they had limits and large ones that could fit as many items as a regular house—the ones the army used, for instance—were incredibly expensive.

With our Rooms, we didn't have to worry about these drawbacks. Sieg and James also understood this and used it a lot.

I got to take a look inside James's Room. There were a few female knights

waiting inside. The beastwomen—which included a fox tail tribe lady, a wolfen, and a chabian, among others—greeted us politely.

Apparently, these women were all part of James's party.

"Well, then, I'll be off for now. I enjoyed our hunt, ladies. Let's do it again sometime," James said, waving at Levia and Alice before joining Sieg.

"Sure thing," Levia agreed. "One doesn't often get to meet such a talented marksman. Watching you hunt was quite something."

"Yeah! Let's hunt together again soon, James!" Alice exclaimed.

James and the others had already drained the silver raptor's blood, so I only needed to skin it. *I'll make steaks with this one, as James suggested.*

I asked Akiha to wash the wild plants and mushrooms and then boil them. I'd heard that a quick rinse was enough to clean the mushrooms, so no need to waste time.

Akiha being able to cook was a great help. We could split the work and save tons of time.

While I was cutting the silver raptor meat, the edge of my knife suddenly cracked. *I must have damaged it on the crazed beast's sturdy skin.*

It was a pretty good knife so I was a bit bummed, but there was no helping it now. I could have used a mithril knife instead, but I wasn't sure how I felt about using a weapon I'd wielded to fight monsters to cook.

Guess I don't really have a choice now.

I created a window to my Room and called Fen. *I'll also invite her to eat with us while I'm at it.*

Sieg and the others were doing something next to their carriage, so I didn't think they'd notice. If they did, I'd just say Fen was my maid. They already knew about Rooms anyway, so there was no point concealing that ability from them.

"Big Brother Masaki? Is something...wrong?" Fen asked after I created the door.

"I just have a little favor to ask. Could you grab me the kitchen knife? The one

with a golden glow?”

“O-Of course... Actually, I have to apologize. I accidentally cut through the cutting board...using that knife. I’m sorry...”

“Don’t worry about it, Fen. It’s no big deal. I can just make another one.”

The kitchen knife I kept in my Room was stunning. It was sharp enough to cut right through bone, so it wasn’t a surprise Fed had sliced through the cutting board. It was a rare weapon, but it was better suited as a cooking utensil than as a weapon.

Fen disappeared into the Room and came back a few minutes later with the knife. She was holding it carefully with both hands. *I’m glad she didn’t run with such a dangerous knife in hand.*

I wouldn’t have known what to do if she’d gotten hurt in the back of the Room, so I was relieved.

“This is...the knife you wanted, right?” she asked, handing me the knife through the window.

“Yeah, that’s the one. Thank you, Fen.”

This knife was called Peerless Knife. It had been handed out as a reward for attending a real life event back when I was still a regular player. It only gave attack +1, which made it worse than a wooden stick, but it also came with the additional effect of boosting cooking skills. With it, I could easily cut tough meat and bones. Even stone pumpkins, which were notoriously hard-skinned, couldn’t resist its sharp edge.

Since it had been handed out as part of an event, this knife was also uniquely indestructible.

Now that I had a proper kitchen knife, I was ready to continue cooking. I cut an extra-large steak for Levia and made regular-sized ones for Akiha and me. I knew Akiha tried to be mindful of her calorie intake, so I made sure to pick a part without too much fat.

Girls are always preoccupied with their weight, aren’t they?

To be fair, I also paid attention to what I ate. I didn’t want to put on any belly

fat. *No harm in watching what we eat.*

I was still cooking when I heard cheers erupt. *Was that...Sieg and the others?*

When I looked, I saw Dan, who had changed into his hero, standing on top of a large boulder singing at the top of his lungs. He and the rest of the party seemed to be having a good time. *Are they drunk? It's my first time seeing this side of them.*

Dan was a surprisingly good singer.

I wonder if he used to be in a band back on Earth. He seems like the type.

I was watching his little show when I suddenly noticed he still wasn't wearing a groin guard!

Sieg, who must have noticed as well, suddenly yelled, "I told you to wear the damn groin guard, you idiot!"

He threw a stone at the self-proclaimed hero's crotch.

Dan yelped before collapsing onto the ground in pain.

The men—including myself—all winced while the ladies laughed.

You reap what you saw...

The meat had finished cooking while I watching the spectacle, so I took the steaks off the fire and plated them along with the stir-fried vegetables Akiha had made.

Fen preferred vegetables to meat, so I made sure to give her plenty of mushrooms and veggies. I still put some meat on her plate, though. Even if she wasn't fond of it, she still had to have some.

Alice had told me she wanted to have meat too today, so I'd made her a small silver raptor meat sandwich. Hopefully, it'd suit her taste.

"Yummyyyyy!!! The meat's so juicy. I love it!" Alice exclaimed after the first bite.

From what I'd heard, fairies didn't usually eat meat or fish. This only seemed like a matter of habit or custom, however. Fairies could digest meat and fish without any issue, and Alice seemed to be enjoying it. I couldn't imagine a

group of fairies hunting large beasts, so it made sense all things considered.

After we were done eating, I took some time to pat Fen's head before sending her back to my Room. I did that every day so that she wouldn't feel too lonely. I still felt terribly guilty about making her stay alone in my Room.

"I'm so sorry, Fen," I said. "We're in your birth country and yet I'm forcing you to stay indoors all day."

"I-It's okay... I don't...mind. You're all...so kind to me... You're treating me with such warmth..."

"Warmth? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I—When I was the shaman, I was always...alone... They treated me...coldly... Until Mister Nemea took me with him... I never knew that...food could taste this good, or...that you didn't always have to eat alone... You're all so...warm..." Fen struggled to say.

We all listened in total silence so we didn't miss a word.

"I've...never had...a family," she continued. "But I think...this is what it must be like..."

"You're right," I said. "Families enjoy meals together. They laugh together, go out together, tell each other about their day... Sometimes families fight, too..."

As I spoke, I couldn't help but be reminded of my family. I used to help my folks with their work in the fields. While we had our fights over the years, I couldn't help but feel lonely when I thought of the fact that I wouldn't see them again.

Akiha seemed lost in thought. She must have been thinking of Haruka and her parents.

"That sounds...wonderful... I wish I could have had a real big brother... Someone just like you, Big Brother Masaki..."

"I'll be your brother, Fen. From the looks of it, you don't know your parents, right? So if you're okay with it, I'll become your family. I've already been thinking of you as my little sister anyway," I told her.

"A-Are you...sure? Won't I be...a bother?"

“You could never be a bother. You know, I’m the youngest in my family. I’ve always wanted a little sister. How about it, Fen? Want to be my little sister?”

“I...”

Did I spring this on her too suddenly?

I looked around and Alice, Levia, and Akiha were staring at me, astonished. I meant every word I’d said, but perhaps this was all happening too soon.

“Did I surprise you, Fen?” I asked. “You can take your time to think about it, okay?”

“N-No... I—did you...mean it?” she asked.

“Of course. If you’ll have me, I’m happy to become your brother.”

Fen giggled. “I have...a true big brother...now.”

Her smile was so radiant that I couldn’t help but smile as well.

“I’m happy for you, Fen,” Levia said. “You have a family now.”

Akiha hummed. “You should call me big sister too, Fen,” she said.

“O-Okay... Big Sister Akiha...”

I could almost hear Akiha’s heart start to thump when Fen addressed her like that.

Akiha must be touched. She’s also the youngest in her family, so I’m guessing she’s always wanted a little sibling too.

Akiha squealed. “You’re too cute, Fen! You don’t have to worry about anything, all right? Big sister will protect you!” she exclaimed, squeezing Fen tight.

I was still patting Fen’s soft, fluffy ears.

“How adorable,” Levia agreed, hugging Fen too.

Before we knew it, Alice threw herself into what had become a group hug. Fen, crushed between Akiha and Levia, released a sound of confusion, but she seemed happy.

Fen had officially become a member of my household—my dearest little

sister.

Would Nemea get mad when he heard about this? Or would he be happy for Fen?

Knowing him, he'll probably be happy for her.

I also had to let Adel and Youko know about this. They'll be overjoyed to have gained a little sister.

Another round of cheers erupted from Sieg and the other's camp. It looked like Dan was starting another show. I looked over and—saw him get thrown straight into the air. *Wow, he's pretty high up there.*

Putting these idiots' antics aside, I was truly glad that Fen had become my sister. I never would have thought I'd gain so much after entering this world...

I promised myself that I wouldn't lose track of what was truly important: protecting them. I was ready to take down anyone, be it a god or a demon, if they came for the people I held dear. If I wanted to do that, though, I'd need to learn how to use my body properly first. Training with Levia had shown me my shortcomings. I relied way too much on my skills and stats. As I watched Dan disappear into the night sky, I resolved to become stronger for my loved ones. *Wait, did Dan just...smile at me? I'll have to give him a punch once he lands.*

Two more weeks of travel went by.

We'd been slowed down by unexpected storms and flooding, so after so many long days of sitting in the carriages, I was thrilled to see Saunshade, the capital of the south, come into sight.

Arth was enormous. I finally understood why the empire had only been able to attack the coastline. To invade the heartland of Arth would require a large, secure supply line—in other words, they'd need to control Rand completely. Moreover, the monsters and crazed beasts would also pose a serious threat to any invading army.

Walls over five meters tall encircled Saunshade. A sturdy, ornamental gate, of a sort I'd only ever seen before at the imperial capital and in the royal capital of Sentdrag, was the only way through the walls. Ballistae had been installed on

the walls—most likely to deal with monsters and crazed beasts.

Fen, sitting next to me, stared out at the city with a smile on her face as I stroked her soft hair and tail. Ever since Fen had become my sister, she'd sneak out of my Room to hang out with us in the carriage. It was an enclosed, private space, so I figured it was fine. The only issue was...Akiha and Levia's behavior.

"Fen, you're adorable! And your hair is so soft," Levia said, petting her.

"Your tail is so fluffy," Akiha added.

Fen didn't know how to react to their endless praise. I liked to dote on Fen too, but Akiha and Levia couldn't seem to ever stop themselves.

Every time I tried to send Fen back to my Room to sleep, Levia and Akiha looked as sad as lost dogs. *Sheesh, knock it off. You guys will get to see her in the morning.*

Alice and Fen were also getting along fine, thankfully without all of the excessive doting. That said, the little fairy sometimes followed Fen into my Room to sleep, so she probably didn't have as many occasions as Levia and Akiha to miss her.

"We'll enter the city soon, so let go of Fen, you two," I said. "I'm sorry, Fen, but you'll have to stay in my Room for the time being."

"O-Okay... See you...tonight, Big Brother Masaki."

Fen was such a good kid. She never threw tantrums and went back to my Room whenever I asked her to. *I wouldn't mind her being a little more assertive, though. She must be holding back.* I could only hope she'd learn to be herself around me eventually.

By the time Fen said goodbye and returned to my Room, we'd reached the gate.

Sieg stepped out of his carriage and went to talk to the gatekeeper. Soon after, the large doors opened and our carriages slowly entered the city. I leaned out of the window and took in the townscape. The buildings lining the road were all wooden—some of them having even been built within the trunks of enormous hollowed-out trees. Lush vegetation grew everywhere.

A tall, eight-meter-tall tree covered in windows and ringed by a spiral staircase, complete with a balustrade, stood out the most. Through the windows, I saw people going about their business. The most surprising thing was that, despite being used as a building, the tree was still alive. *Incredible! This is fantasy at its finest!*

In spite of all the greenery, the city was very well maintained. The roads were clear and the roots and branches did not impede traffic. There were even manholes and watercourses meant to funnel water into what seemed like an underground sewer system.

Akiha gasped. “Masaki-san... This city is amazing.”

“It is. Just getting to witness all this made the trip well worth it,” I said.

“It’s my first time in a human city! I love it! Oh! This shop looks interesting! I wanna go,” Alice exclaimed.

She tried to fly out the window, but Levia caught her by the scruff of the neck, pushing me aside pretty violently in the process. “Can’t you sit still for a moment, you idiot fairy?!” she admonished.

“Hey! What are you doing?!” Alice complained. “I just wanted to take a look!”

“And I’m telling you to stay put! You’ll get lost if you go alone, you idiot!”

“Stop calling me an idiot! You’re the idiot, you stupid dragon!”

“Who are you calling stupid?!”

You’re both idiots.

These two, with their constant bickering, seemed like they had the mental age of five-year-olds. People said that the closer you were with someone, the more you fought with them, but I honestly wished they’d stop screaming right next to me. *My ears hurt.*

“I want you both to sit still, got it?” I said, patting their heads in the hope of calming them down—thankfully, it worked.

I really wished they took after Fen more.

The carriages eventually reached a genos rhinos pen and came to a stop

within spots indicated by neat, white lines.

This is almost like a modern parking lot, I thought as I stepped out of the carriage. The only difference was that the genos rhinos had to be detached from the carriage and led to their pen after we parked.

The air around us was unbelievably heavy, just like it had felt when we were in the middle of the dense forest.

After we dismounted the carriages, Sieg, James, and Dan, accompanied by a group of soldiers, approached us.

For once, Dan was wearing regular clothes—a leather jacket, a pair of jeans, and a cowboy hat. This American style suited him very well—or, at the very least, much better than the hero suit he insisted on wearing most of the time.

"Masaki," Levia started. "I'm going to go see Lydea. Find us an inn in the meantime."

"You got it. I'll check out their local specialties and see what looks good while I'm at it," I answered.

"You know me so well," she said with a smile. "Well, then, lead the way, Sieg."

"Before we go, I have something to tell you, Masaki," Sieg said. "I got in touch with the Adventurer Guild here. Apparently, there's a letter for you from someone called Youko."

A letter from Youko?!

Since we couldn't contact each other because of the magic storm, Youko must have used the Adventurer Guild's bulletin board. The public messages posted at one guild branch could usually be found at other branches. I'd heard that people used these boards to pass messages or even look for missing people. Youko had done just that. Moreover, the different Adventurer Guilds used hawks to communicate so the magic storm hadn't been an issue for them. They took pride in their ability to pass on important information regardless of the circumstances and usually informed the local populations of landslides, epidemics, and other such tragedies. It was a good way to avoid secondary damage and prevent weird rumors from spreading.

If Youko had been able to hand a letter to the Adventurer Guild, it most likely meant that they'd managed to reach the capital of the Beastmen Kingdom, Wilgard. *I hope the three of them are all right.*

"Thank you for letting me know," I told Sieg.

"It's no problem. This Youko must be one of your precious comrades, right? I know how it feels to worry about your friends," he said. "You should send them a letter back to put their minds at ease."

"He's right. Adel and Youko must be worried. Go and send them a letter as soon as possible," Levia said before hopping into the carriage that would take her and Sieg to the lord's estate.

James and Dan would follow them in another carriage after throwing the criminals we'd caught in jail. At the moment, though, James was busy flirting with a female soldier. He had his arm around her waist and was whispering sweet nothings to her. *He never stops, does he?* I was amazed he'd yet to start a fight considering the number of ladies I'd already seen him flirt with.

We waved goodbye to Sieg and the others and decided to head to the Adventurer Guild.

Gaddle and his party wouldn't accompany us. They wanted to go look for an inn first. They probably wanted to rest after traveling by carriage for so long. Sibra had a pretty bad case of motion sickness and Gunha had to carry her around.

I asked them for the location of the Adventurer Guild before they left, though. Apparently, the guild had chosen the largest tree on the main street as their headquarters in this city. *I'm assuming it's that tree I saw when we entered the city. I can still see it from here, so we shouldn't get lost on the way.*

It didn't really come as a surprise, but as Akiha and I walked through the streets, we quickly noticed that there were far more beastmen than humans around. Alice was also with us, but since fairies didn't usually appear in public, we were afraid she'd stand out too much, so I'd asked her to hide in my hood.

For some reason, she'd taken my request as a personal challenge and had

declared that hiding from all these people would be as easy as pie.

I was worried citizens of Saunshade would treat Akiha and me badly because of what the empire had done to their people, but, so far, nothing of note had happened. Who knew if things would stay that way, though? After all, when we first arrived at the village, everyone had been nice to us...

A few beastmen did glare at us on our way to the Adventurer Guild. These people had probably been directly impacted by the war with the empire. The war was over, but hatred wouldn't fade that quickly. It was the same in my previous world.

Thankfully, none of them tried to attack us—either physically or verbally. They simply glared and clicked their tongues as they passed us by and left it at that.

I ignored them, but I noticed that Akiha seemed down. She kept looking at the floor and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes.

Now that I think about it, Akiha used to fight alongside the empire. She didn't have a choice, at the time, but what she was forced to do must still be haunting her.

From where I stood, Akiha was just as much of a victim as these people, but I wasn't sure she saw things that way.

She was gradually beginning to walk more slowly, so I took her hand and pulled her along. While she seemed surprise, she didn't dare look at me. She probably didn't notice, but I could feel myself blush.

I don't think I'll ever get used to holding a pretty girl's hand. I should ask James to teach me his tricks.

Still holding Akiha's hand, I used my free hand to push open the door of the guild. As soon as we entered the building, everyone stared us down, almost like they were sizing us up. Alice, frightened, hid even deeper in my hood.

I saw plenty of these murderous glares during the war. This is nothing.

The stares fixed on Akiha, I noticed, were much dirtier. The men leered at her chest in obvious excitement.

All right, let's check the bulletin board and get out of here... Here it is.

Innumerable postings cluttered the board, their content ranging from monster-hunting and herb-gathering contracts to for sale signs advertising land plots. There were even want ads promoting opportunities to be a test subject in strange experiments. *Is this legit?!*

There was also a huge notice regarding crazed beasts. It read: "If you encounter a damask lizard or a stronger crazed beast, please flee at once. No dwarf blacksmith is available, so your weapons cannot be repaired. Do not act rashly."

Come to think of it, Gaddle broke his sword while fighting damask lizards.

I couldn't help but wonder why the dwarves weren't available, but I'd probably need to ask the receptionist if I wanted an answer.

After looking through the bulletin board, I saw what I was looking for. *Ah, here's Youko's letter.* I removed it and began reading:

Dear Masaki,

We reached Wilgard without issue. We're staying at his master's house and gathering information. Adel wasn't doing all that great when we arrived, but she's cheered up and is currently fulfilling contracts for the Adventurer Guild. I can tell she's lonely, though, so please contact us soon. I miss you a lot too.

Youko.

Adel wasn't doing good? She has always been dignified and brave, but seeing us fall down the path right in front of her eyes must have come as a huge shock. She'd also cried when she thought I died fighting Leviathan...

By "his master," Youko probably meant Nemea's master. Youko probably thought it'd be safer to protect his identity. From what I remembered, Nemea's master was an otherworlder. Either way, I was happy to hear that they'd gotten help from someone trustworthy.

Youko did say that Adel was doing better, but I'm still worried about her. I should write back to put her mind at ease.

Youko's letter made it sound like she herself was doing fine, but I could tell it was a front. *I'm sure her tails are a mess.* I loved the softness of her tails against me whenever we hugged, and it pained me to imagine them all tangled up.

I wanted to compose a letter right there, but..

I probably shouldn't try asking the pretty lady at the counter.

With the way the men were leering at Akiha, I didn't want to give them any reason to mess with us. Instead, I spotted an old, chubby chabit man with a noticeably protruding belly.

"Welcomeow," he said as I walked up to him. "I've never seen the two of you around here before, meow."

"We arrived in Saunshade today," I answered.

"I see, meow. Are you sure you'd rather chat with this old cat instead of discussing your request with our beautiful receptionist, meow?"

"Nope, that's why I'm here talking to you. I won't want any trouble, and you sound nice enough."

"Meow ha ha! Well, well, I'm happy to hear you out, then. Once again, welcome to the Adventurer Guild. My name is Butata. Meow may I help you today?"

"I just read a letter addressed to me and I'd like to answer the person who sent it," I said, pointing at Youko's letter.

"This letter, meow? I assume your name is Masaki, then. May I see your adventurer card?"

I had nothing to hide so I presented my card to the chabit. He squinted at it before looking at my face intently.

"Meowster, how is it that you're only Rank D when you're obviously quite strong?" he asked.

"You can tell just by looking at me?"

"Naturally, meow. I'm not the guild master of Saunshade's Adventurer Guild for nothing, you know."

So this old man's the boss here, huh? You sure can't judge a man—I mean a cat—by his appearance.

Still... Why is the boss working at the reception desk?

"If you're wondering why I'm here, it's because I like lounging in the sunlight out here, meow."

Yeah, he's a cat all right.

He'd picked out a place with a nice breeze and a lot of sunshine. A black cat was curled up on his desk, having a nap—a relative, maybe?

"Anyway, if you'd like to send your letter right meow, it will cost you three silver coins. We will keep it posted on the bulletin for one week. If you'd like to have it up for longer, you'll need to add an extra silver coin per week. You can pay for the extension fee now if you'd like, meow."

"Hmm... I won't need an extension."

Three silver coins amounted to thirty flans, which was already fairly expensive.

I handed Butata the silver coins and he took out a thick piece of paper, a quill, and ink from one of the drawers of his desk.

"You need to use this paper and this ink when writing your letter, meow," he instructed. "They're magic items. Even the rain won't be able to wash away the ink once you're done. After one week, the letters will disappear. If you want them to reappear, you'll need to pay the extension fee. I already checked your identity, so you can go ahead, meow."

Knowing they were magic, I realized why the process was so expensive.

Let's get to writing.

Dear Youko and Adel,

We just arrived in Saunshade. Levia, Akiha, and I are all doing well, so don't worry about us. We ended up making an unexpected friend along the way. Her name's Alice. She's a fairy and a reliable ally. She's quite amusing, I'm sure you'll like her. We found people to guide us to Wilgard. We'll be on our way as soon as our preparations are complete. Please wait until then. Stay safe.

Masaki.

I'd written my fair share of letters, some of them addressed to other nobles or the king, but I struggled a little to compose a message knowing that anyone who passed by the bulletin would be able to read it.

I guess this will do.

For an extra silver coin, they'd give an extra letter directly to the addressee. I wrote the same letter, but added a few extra lines about adopting Fen as my little sister. I couldn't exactly talk about her in a publicly posted letter, but a private letter was fine.

"I need this letter to be put up in Wilgard," I said.

"Of course, meow. Will you be accepting any contracts too while you're here, meow?"

I was here, so I might as well accept one or two. *Crazed beast skin is in constant demand, isn't it?*

"I have some crazed beast skin I harvested during my travels. Any contracts that I could fulfill with that?" I asked.

"Sure thing, meow. The local ecosystem is a mess because of their recent behavior, so we reward people who hunt them. You'll also gain more rank points for contracts pertaining to crazed beasts, meow. Fighting crazed beasts is pretty dangerous, but it's a great way to increase your rank."

I should have gotten quite a few rank points, which you needed to advance from rank to rank, from slaughtering sea serpents, but since I became an adventurer after the fact, I started at Rank D. My current rank points were at zero.

I lucked out with the crazed beasts. It turned out to be a perfect opportunity to easily increase my rank. Being Rank D was starting to become a little inconvenient.

I'd fought bronze frogs, iron alligators, silver raptors, and a few damask lizards on our way here. I currently had three damask lizard skins, but I wanted to save two to craft a certain weapon. I had no use for bronze, iron, and silver, though.

Might as well give it all to the old chabit.

"So, how many crazed beasts did you hunt, meow? Depending on the number of skins you've got, you could get to Rank C in one go," he said.

"Errr... I've got thirty bronze frog skins, twenty iron alligator skins, twelve silver rapport skins, and one damask lizard skin. What does that get me?"

"Meow?! I can't believe it!"

"Is that not enough?"

"Not enough? That's incredible!, meow! You even managed to take down a damask lizard!"

Damask lizards truly were in a league of their own compared to the lower-ranked crazed beasts. Silver raptors' scales almost felt soft in comparison to a damask lizards'. The soldiers that traveled with Sieg and the others hadn't even dented the lizards' natural scale armor, which surprised me given they were strong enough to behead silver raptors with a single swing.

That said, I could bypass my enemy's defenses thanks to Silent Blow, so their scales didn't pose much of a barrier. Lost Dominion was also an option—it was sharp enough to cut right through their scales—but Silent Blow was optimal given that it allowed me to avoid damaging their skin.

Levia handled them easily enough by just punching them to death. When it came to crazed beasts, I had a feeling blunt weapons were more effective than swords.

Anyway, after that fight, we'd split the loot equally between our group and Sieg's.

"I'll go check these skins for you. Just wait a few minutes, all right, meow? Oh, Cynmeow. Come here, meow," he called out to an employee who was passing by. "Good timing, meow. Send this to Wilgard," he said, handing them my letters.

Butata put on his glasses and started evaluating the skins one by one. *He's probably checking them for quality and any damage.*

Before I knew it, a group of beastmen had gathered around us.

“Guys, check this out... How did he get so many?”

“He hunted iron alligators?!”

“What the hell?! That one is a damask lizard skin, isn’t it?”

I should have been more discreet.

“Take a few steps back, meow! I can’t work with you lot crowding around!” Butata complained, his fur bristling.

Our audience reluctantly listened to him.

I hadn’t wanted to draw attention, but I somehow managed to start a scene. *Maybe I should have asked Sieg and the others how much a damask lizard skin was worth before leaving...*

After a few minutes, Butata put his glasses back on his desk and started scribbling. The paper he was using looked completely different from the one I’d used for my letters.

“It’s a shame you didn’t bring their meat. We buy that too, meow,” he said.

“Well... We ate it already,” I answered.

We’d deep-fried the bronze frogs and ate them while we were traveling. Surprisingly enough, they tasted almost like chicken. Akiha had categorically refused to even try them at first, but the tempting aroma eventually persuaded her to have a taste. I remembered her repeating over and over again “This is meat, regular meat, don’t think about it” as she gobbled a few frogs down.

“I figured. Crazed beast meat is pretty tasty, meow. I don’t suppose you have any damask lizard meat left, meow?” Butata asked.

“I do have some left, but...”

The second these words left my mouth, Butata’s expression intensified. He looked like a bird of prey ready to lunge at its quarry. *You’re a cat, aren’t you?!*

“Let me have some, meow!” he exclaimed. “Anyway, moving on to your remuneration. Three bronze frog skins are worth one silver coin, each iron alligator skin is worth two silver coins, each silver raptor skin is worth four silver coins, and each damask lizard skin is worth one gold coin.”

“That makes ninety-four silver coins and one gold coin, huh?” I asked. “I didn’t expect them to sell for that much.”

“You’re good at calculating. Can you use the skill Secretary?”

I couldn’t, but I could probably replicate it by using Notes and High-Speed Processing... *I just worked it out in my head, though.*

“I’m just good at mental calculation,” I told him. “What about my rank?”

To be honest, I was more interested in increasing my rank than earning money. People would look down on me if I remained Rank D forever. Even if I couldn’t reach Rank A, I wanted to get to B at the very least.

“Mr. Butata, don’t you think this is shady? How could this scrawny human hunt so many crazed beasts?” someone suddenly said.

I turned to look at the man who’d just insulted me. He looked like a bird—a member of the garuda tribe, I assumed. A monkey beastman and a bear beastman accompanied him. They stomped toward us.

“He’s right. A human could never do that. He must have stolen them!” added one of his friends.

“Exactly! A measly human could never kill a damask lizard!”

“Yeah! Don’t you know what weaklings humans are?!”

I’d decided to avoid talking to the pretty lady to avoid trouble, but I’d ended up angering a bunch of idiots anyway.

“Could you stop accusing us of stealing? We killed these crazed beasts ourselves,” Akiha fumed.

I doubted they’d listen to her, especially given how much they seemed to despise humans. Besides, the other beastmen in the room were looking at them with a mix of scorn and fear. *They must do this kind of thing a lot.*

Akiha had already given up on resolving this peacefully and was getting ready to fight. *I really wanted to avoid making a fuss, though...*

“Your girl’s pretty hot, huh?” one of them said. “Beat it, weakling. We’ll take care of your girlfriend.”

All right, I'm done playing nice. I wasn't about to let people who wanted to lay their hands on Akiha get off scot-free. *I'm gonna have to break a few bones to make a point.*

"You get out of here, meow."

Meow?

Right as I grabbed the beaart's arm, Butata leaped and landed a kick on his chin, sending him flying back into his friends. They crashed onto the ground together, and I could tell the beaart, now unconscious, had dislocated his arm

Impressive! I would never have expected such a chubby old man to be so fast! He'd jumped onto the desk, leaped, and drop-kicked the beaart in just a split second.

Guess it makes sense why he's the guild master now.

"You kids are the weaklings, so quit running your meowths," Butata said. "I know you bothered a young girl last time. I hear you almost assaulted her, meow. She begged me not to say anything, so I let you leave—but I investigated, meow. You threatened her, didn't you? I won't stand for your misconduct any longer, meow!"

"Y-You bastard!" one of the men exclaimed.

Butata shut him up with another kick, then forced open his and his friends' item boxes. He took out their adventurer cards and put some sort of red mark on them.

"That's your third red strike. Congratulations, you're officially no longer welcome at the Adventurer Guild, meow."

"You have to be kidding me!"

"We didn't do anything!"

Third strike, huh? That meant these people had already received two red marks.

You reap what you sow.

They didn't even seem remorseful, so I had absolutely no sympathy for them.

One of them was trying to argue that they had done nothing wrong. Didn't they see how their behavior was reflecting terribly on the guild?

"I don't want to hear your excuses. Get out, meow. Or would you like me to help you out the door, meow?" Butata threatened.

His leg gleamed.

That's the skill Nemea used last time. Iron-Cutting Kick, was it?

If he unleashed that skill, these hoodlums wouldn't simply be kicked out of the door. They'd be cut in half.

As soon as they saw his glowing leg, the men screamed and scurried away, dragging their unconscious friend along.

They wouldn't be able to work as adventurers ever again.

I noticed that the chabian Butata had called "Cynmeow" was already done fastening a message to a hawk's feet. *She must be informing the other branches.*

Every Adventurer Guild branch would blacklist them, so they wouldn't be able to get a new card anywhere else.

"As expected of Godspeed Butata! I couldn't follow his movements at all!" one of the adventurers who'd been watching said.

"He's still going strong even after settling down as a guild master," said another.

The guild master seemed to have been given a nickname, just like us. In most cases, people didn't get to pick their nicknames—others simply began addressing them like that at some point. Nicknames usually had something to do with your abilities and, in Butata's case, I had to say "Godspeed" was a perfect fit.

The atmosphere shifted and the beastmen who'd been observing us approached us with smiles on their faces.

"Thanks for helping to drive those lowlives away!" one of them said, tapping my shoulder.

“Do you wanna go for a drink? My treat! I gotta thank you for the show!”

“Hang on! You’re broke, aren’t you?”

“Oh, shut up! Why are you telling them? I was trying to look cool!”

I was thankful this man wanted to treat us to drinks, but he shouldn’t have been putting on airs if he was actually broke.

A few women also approached to comfort Akiha, worried the rude idiots had frightened her.

“You can talk to them later, meow,” Butata interrupted. “Masameow.”

“Are you talking to me?” I asked after a pause.

“I am, meow. You have more than enough points to get to Rank C. You do know there are requirements you must meet to become Rank C, though, right, meow?”

“Yeah, I do.”

You couldn’t increase your rank simply by accumulating points, otherwise there’d be no shortage of Rank B adventurers who’d never done anything but gather medicinal herbs. There were other prerequisites and conditions to meet. To become a Rank D adventurer, for instance, you needed to kill at least one monster from a specific list.

To get to Rank C, what you had to do was...

“The training grounds are downstairs. Follow me, meow. I’ll be your examiner, meow.”

...take on an examiner in a one-to-one fight. You didn’t need to beat them, but you had to demonstrate that you were good enough for Rank C.

What should I do? I probably shouldn’t go all out...right?

“Masaki-san, Butata seems like a nice person, please be careful not to hurt him...” Akiha said.

“Yeah... I’m not sure how I’m going to handle this...” I replied, more worried about how to demonstrate my prowess to Butata without hurting him than I was with my odds of passing the test.

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“It’s been some time since I’ve had the pleasure of seeing you, Lord Sieghart,” the head butler greeted. Then, as he looked at Levia, his bunny ears twitched slightly. “And it’s been far longer, erm...”

Levia and Sieg had arrived at the estate of the ruler of the south: Lydea Erhart, one of the four Grand Dukes of the Beastmen Kingdom.

“It’s been a while, Sebas. I go by Levia these days,” Levia said. The frills attached to her sleeve swayed slowly as she waved her hand as casually as if she were greeting an old friend.

“Certainly, Lady Levia. It’s been far too long. Thank you for visiting us.”

Sieg folded his arms as he watched their friendly interaction. “You know Sebas, Miss Levia?”

“We do have a bit of history,” Levia answered. “How’s Lydea? Same as always?”

Sebas let out an awkward laugh. “Indeed. Nothing’s changed.”

“That’s a shame,” Levia said. “I’d hoped *some* things would have changed.”

“I take it you know how she is,” Sieg said, his eyes sympathetic.

Levia sighed, looking into the distance. “I have suffered the consequences of her behavior on a few occasions.”

“You must have had a hard time...” Sieg said before turning to Sebas. “Should we get to business?”

While Sieg explained why they were there, Levia’s forced smile gradually returned to her usual childish grin.

“I understand,” Sebas said when Sieg finished talking. “I’ll lead you to the office.”

As they walked through the corridors, they crossed paths with several butlers and maids. The beastmen and beastwomen bowed respectfully before returning to their tasks.

“You have a lot more domestics than you used to,” Levia pointed out.

“They’re all orphans Lady Lydea rescued. Some of them also work in town.”

“Glad to see that side of Lydea hasn’t changed either,” Levia said.

The lord of the south, Lydea, made a point to rescue the children who lost their parents to illnesses, crazed beast attacks, or, more recently, to the war. She funded several orphanages and made sure these children were well cared for. She often invited old merchants who could not travel anymore and retired aristocrats to teach at the orphanages as well.

Dan, who told Lydrea about how the elderly men of his neighborhood had taught him as a child, helped her come up with the idea.

At first, most citizens were adamant Lydea’s initiative was pointless. The retired gentlemen she’d called upon were happy to participate, though. Teaching young children provided them with a pleasant distraction and they came to adore them like their own grandchildren. Lydea’s initiative soon bore fruits when the first ‘class’ of orphan students was hired as apprentice merchants.

As for whether Dan had mastered any of the topics taught to him by the elderly men of his neighborhood... Well, sadly, his everyday behavior seemed to indicate otherwise.

Levia and Sieg arrived in front of a gorgeously engraved wooden door. Sebas knocked a few times, but no one answered. He knocked once more before opening the door himself.

The office was empty, but a stuffed bunny sat on the desk. It clutched a note in its hand that read: “I’m off to play!”

Sebas’s scream echoed through the mansion, “I can’t believe her! That idiot is playing hooky again!”

Sieg was astonished, while Levia simply sighed.

“For better or worse, she’s still a free spirit, huh?” she murmured.

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I still have to look for an inn, so I should get through this test as quickly as I can.

The training grounds were used for promotion examinations. From what I’d

heard, they even had wooden mannequins—which were in fact magic items—that could be used to show off new skills and win points.

The inner part of the building, in stark contrast to the bustling main room, was incredibly quiet. We followed Butata down a flight of stairs. There was no natural source of light, but some magic items had been hung on the wall to illuminate the way.

"It's quieter than I expected," Akiha said. "There were others taking their tests when I took mine, not to mention all the others training around us, too."

Akiha had already taken the promotion exam for Rank C back in Atami, so she was simply accompanying me. Unless the adventurer taking the test requested otherwise, only party members were allowed to sit in. This rule had been created to allow adventurers to conceal their abilities from others.

Before this rule was set, some unsavory characters would watch all of the examinations and target the newcomers they felt like they could beat. After a few too many incidents, the guild had been forced to come up with some sort of solution.

If you requested it specifically, though, you could permit the public to watch. Some adventurers used their exams to show off their abilities while others wanted to test themselves even further by performing in front of an audience.

Since I definitely didn't want to show my cards to everyone, I opted to only allow my friends to attend. Akiha had allowed her exam to be open to the public, and she'd taken Haruka along but, from what I'd heard from the latter, it had ended so quickly that no one had seen much.

She'd used Quick Draw to shoot a rubber bullet right at the examiner's head, knocking them unconscious right on the spot. Akiha had been deemed more than worthy of becoming a Rank C adventurer.

Apparently, the examiner had been so shocked that they didn't step out of their house for several days afterward.

I'll try to be a little more careful.

"Most of the adventurers who usually train are in Wilgard, meow," Butata said, his chubby belly and his chin swaying with every step he took. "The people

you saw in the main room are trying to earn enough to travel to the capital too. The crazed beasts have made completing requests quite difficult, though, meow," he added, twisting his whiskers.

So that's why the skins are worth so much, huh?

I was still surprised by how much I'd gotten from the skin, especially given how weak bronze frogs were. As long as you paid attention to their tongue movements, you could easily take them down.

I'll admit I was a bit taken aback when an entire swarm jumped out of the overflowing river all at once, though.

A few iron alligators had joined them, but Akiha shot them down with her magnum before they'd gotten a chance to do anything. *Nice try, but goodbye.*

Butata made it sound like something specific was going on in the capital, but Youko hadn't mentioned anything in her letter. *I should ask him.*

"Is something happening in the capital?" I asked.

"Meow? You don't know?"

"We've only just arrived in the Beastmen Kingdom, so I'm afraid I don't know much. We got separated from our friends on the way and they're in the capital."

"I see, meow. I'll fill you in, then. The Festival of the Beast King will take place in Wilgard soon, meow."

The Festival of the Beast King celebrated the birth of Wilgard's very first king, Hatilus.

Hatilus was a member of the fenrir tribe and he was exceedingly famous for having managed to beat all of the strong-willed beastmen and unite them under him, allowing him to found a brand new nation. His bloodline had officially long come to an end, but there were rumors that he'd had illegitimate children and that his descendants still lived. Popular rulers were often the target of all kinds of rumors, so there was no surprise here.

Hatilus's greatest feat was defeating a crazed beast as tall as a mountain—Apoitakara. At the time, natural disasters were commonplace and the people of

Arth suffered from widespread starvation. That's when the most vicious of crazed beasts decided to attack the newly created Beastmen Kingdom. Hatilus, who'd received the protection of Jörmungandr, led his comrades to battle and, after a long, strenuous fight, managed to bring down Apoitakara. He'd then used the meat and blood of the monster to save his people from starvation.

The Festival of the Beast King was made to celebrate his glorious achievement, which continues to this day. Each year, a specific region of the kingdom was chosen to host a hunting competition. The participants were welcome to hunt all kinds of monsters—including crazed beasts—to demonstrate their prowess and strongest abilities. Both beastmen and foreigners were welcome to participate. Apparently, even members of the demon tribe made the trip to enter the competition.

The Festival of the Beast King also had the second purpose of purifying the land. I was assuming that was why they'd decided not to push it back despite the magic storm.

"The winner of the hunting competition will receive an orichalcum weapon made by dwarven blacksmiths," Butata continued. "That's why so many of our veteran adventurers left for Wilgard. If I didn't have to work, I would have followed them as well, meow."

"I get it now. An orichalcum weapon is every adventurer's dream, after all," I said.

"You sure know what adventurers want, Masameow. For meowst of them, getting their hands on orichalcum will remain nothing but a dream, but it's nice to see them strive for something, meow."

I can't tell him I have orichalcum rods, spears, long swords, katanas, and more in my inventory... In fact, Lost Dominion's flavor text goes something like this:

Lost Dominion: A former sacred blade made from heavenly orichalcum that has long disappeared from every record. The specifics of its sacred nature and history were sealed by the gods as a punishment for beheading a primordial dragon.

All of which meant, of course, that it was made of orichalcum too...

It was a good thing I'd thought of using Iron Coating on it last time. I could already imagine the fuss people would make if they discovered it was made of orichalcum.

We'd arrived at the bottom of the staircase while discussing the Festival of the Beast King. A few steps later, we reached the exit of the corridors. *The training grounds must be right ahead. We went pretty deep, didn't we?*

"Welcome to our training grounds, meow," Butata said. "You're free to use powerful skills in here. The walls are very thick, so don't worry about breaking them."

"So, that's why you built this place underground..."

I knew I couldn't use destructive skills against Butata, though.

Which skills should I use? Hmm... Let's go with these:

Passive skills: Martial God Principle, Close-Combat Mastery (High), Physical Reinforcement (Extra-High), Heightened Senses (High), HP & MP Recovery (High).

Active skills: Homing Shooter, Swift Wind, Stamping, Non-Lethal Attack, Hexas Rush, Great Throw, EMPTY SLOT.

Oversword was a bit too powerful, so I decided not to add it this time. Instead, I went with Hexas Rush. It had a fairly weak attack modifier for an active skill—only 101 percent of your base attack—but it allowed you to deliver six blows in quick succession. Players often overlooked this skill and deemed it useless as long as you had Seven Arthur, but I didn't agree. Comparing their effects was pointless.

Stamping was all about infusing your feet with ki and stomping on the ground to inflict zone damage. Since it was an AoE attack, it wasn't all that powerful, but, with my stats, it would still pack a punch.

I'd used it once while sparring with Levia and knocked all the trees around us down. I could still remember how pissed off Levia had been. She'd yelled at me for carelessly destroying nature.

Great Throw was a straightforward, close-combat technique that allowed me to easily grab an opponent and throw them into the air. With this skill, I could

easily send a three-meter-tall bear flying. I'd tried throwing someone without the skill and I definitely felt the difference. The skill made my body automatically move in the most optimal way.

"You can use any of these weapons, meow," Butata said, pointing at a wall where dozens of weapons were hanging. "The edges are dull, but they can still kill someone if they hit a sensitive spot, so be careful, meow."

There were all kinds of weapons, ranging from long swords to claymores and —*Oh, a katana. That's rare.* I'd never seen any in Atami's armories.

After looking through the different weapons, I picked out a dagger and a long sword.

"Ah, so you use two blades at the same time, meow. I'll go with these, meow," Butata said, picking up a pair of brass knuckles.

As I thought, Butata was used to fighting with his fists.

Ah! I have to let Alice out of my hood before we start fighting! She'd been so quiet that I'd forgotten about her.

"Hey, Alice," I whispered.

She didn't reply, but I heard a soft snoring sound coming from the inside of my hood.

She fell asleep, huh?

I shook my hood a little and I suddenly heard her scream.

She peeked out of my hood. "What are you doing, Masaki?! I was having such a good nap!"

"You're in my hood, not your bed," I retorted. "Anyway, I need to fight, so could you go to Akiha for a while?"

Alice hmphed.

"Come on, Alice," Akiha called out. "I know you're a good girl, so you'll listen to us, right? Come here, please."

"Okaaaay..." Alice begrudgingly slipped out of my hood and flew into Akiha's chest pocket.

Butata, walking with his back turned to us, didn't seem to have noticed.

"Wow! Masaki! Masaki!" Alice suddenly screamed.

"What is it?"

"Akiha's boobs are incredible! I've never felt anything as soft!" Alice exclaimed, settling in her pocket.

"A-Alice?!" Akiha said, flustered. "What are you saying?!"

"Look! They're so nice and soft!" Alice continued, pushing her hands into Akiha's breasts. "You should try touching them too, Masaki!"

"S-Stop," Akiha whimpered. "Wait!"

"She's telling you to stop, you perverted fairy!" I admonished.

I could still remember how nice it'd felt when I woke up with my face pressed against Akiha's breasts, but...I was about to fight! Now wasn't the time to be thinking about this!

"Masameow?" Butata called. "I'm done with the preparations, so hurry up, meow!"

He was crouching at the edge of the arena, looking bored to death. *When he crouches, his belly looks like a kagami mochi,* I couldn't help but think.

"S-Sorry! I'm coming!" I exclaimed. "Well then, see you in a bit," I told Akiha.

"Do your best, Masaki-san!" she replied.

"Break a leg!" Alice exclaimed.

I came down from the bleachers and, as soon as I stepped onto the arena, I noticed that the air around me changed.

"It looks like you've noticed, meow," Butata said. "A protective barrier surrounds the arena so you don't need to worry about your friends in the audience getting hurt, meow."

So that's what I felt.

I'd encountered a barrier that prevented people from using magic in the past, so I wasn't too surprised that this type of barrier existed as well.

“Shall we start, meow?”

Butata’s easy-going nature immediately changed. He narrowed his eyes, looking at me like a hunter looking at its prey. I could tell he was an experienced fighter.

He clenched his fists and lowered, ready to charge. *Here he comes.*

Springing forward, his figure blurred. Then, in the next second, he was already in front of me, having leaped more than five meters in an instant! His right fist was coming straight for my face.

Aiming for my face on the very first blow? That sounds like a feint. I focused and noticed the muscles of his right arm relax. *His true target is...my stomach! He’s going to punch me with his left!*

I used my left hand to ward off the attack and swung my blade with my right. Butata was startled by my speed, but it didn’t stop him from reacting in time. He put more strength into his legs and leaped backward. My sword grazed his clothes, but I didn’t touch him.

“You saw through my feint pretty quickly, meow. Your speed and power are also impressive. Why are you a Rank D adventurer, again? Meow ha ha ha! I can already tell this fight is going to be a lot of fun, meow!”

“Thanks!”

Butata pitched forward as soon as he reached the ground and immediately followed through with a series of punches and kicks. I truly didn’t understand how he could be so fast when he was so fat. He used lots of feints and tricks to throw me off, but Butata was still much slower than Levia, Dan, or Tatsuma. I could follow his attacks and block them with my hand or sword.

I waited for a window and when I found it, I unleashed Hexas Rush. Butata blocked or dodged most of my hits, but a couple of blows reached him. I infused my mana into my sword to increase my speed and delivered another attack, but Butata’s leg shone and he kicked my sword upward. My arm vibrated as if a sturdy steel pole had connected with my sword rather than a leg. It wasn’t enough to make me let go of my blade, though.

“You’re good, Masameow! I’m getting fired up, meow!”

“I’d like to wrap things up soon, though. You’re still not convinced I’m worth advancing to Rank C?”

“Come on!” Butata said, looking like he was having the time of his life. “Keep me company for a little longer, meow!”

You damn battle junkie. I guess I have no choice but to rough him up a little.

I used Swift Wind to close most of the distance between us in an instant. With two meters remaining between us, I activated Stamping.

“Meow?!”

Swift Wind made me faster on my feet...which also meant that my legs were empowered for the duration of the skill. I’d realized this while training with Levia on a rainy day. I’d used Swift Wind and, after following up with a kick that hit the ground, I’d noticed that the crater left under my foot was much deeper than usual. This also applied to Stamping. The shockwave would be much more violent and the damage I dealt would increase as well.

Butata hadn’t expected this at all. He hurriedly leaped into the air.

“Meow! You split the arena! What an attack, meow!”

I looked down and, sure enough, the stone paving of the arena had cracked and splintered. *Wasn’t the barrier supposed to protect the room? Don’t ask me to pay for the damage later, okay?!*

That aside, Butata was in the air, just as I’d hoped. He wouldn’t be able to use his nimble feet to evade my next attack. Butata was truly worthy of his nickname—Godspeed—so the best way to handle him was to force him into situations where he couldn’t make use of his speed.

While he was mid-air, I threw my dagger at Butata using Homing Shooter. The dagger flew right for Butata. Though he was unable to dodge mid-flight, he managed to kick the dagger aside, but he was shocked when I jumped into the air right after. Even this didn’t make his smile falter.

As soon as I was close enough, I activated Non-Lethal Attack and swung my blade horizontally, leveraging the momentum of my jump. Butata brought his left arm down in an attempt to push my sword away but, right as he was about

to touch my blade, I put it into my inventory.

“Meow?!”

I reached out, grabbing the arm he’d extended to block the now nonexistent sword. I didn’t relent and grabbed his collar with my other hand.

“Here we go,” I said, activating Non-Lethal Attack and Great Throw at the same time, aiming for the floor.

“MEEEEEOOOOW?!”

Butata twisted his body right before hitting the stone paving, managing to land on his hands and feet. The force of the impact, however, made his limbs shake violently.

“Time for the finishing blow,” I said.

Butata yelped.

Wanting to finish this, I took the sword from my inventory. I turned it, aiming the pommel toward Butata, and threw it at him using Homing Shooter. It hit the back of his head and the chabit collapsed onto the ground.

Once I landed, I approached Butata to see how he was doing. He’d been knocked unconscious, a large bump already swelling on the top of his head. *Yep, that’s another kagami mochi right there.*

After a little while—during which Butata remained unconscious—a deeran woman hurried into the training grounds. She was so astonished to see Butata on the floor, a huge bump on the back of his head, that she forgot to speak at first, but eventually bowed to me.

“I’m so sorry! Another guild member should have taken care of your examination, but this stupid cat forced you into this fight,” she apologized.

“What? Do you mean to say that my exam is...invalid?”

Did I do all that for nothing?! In a way, our fight had been a good chance to put into practice what I’d learned with Levia, but I was still far from pleased.

I was starting to worry when another woman—a lunar rabbit—appeared behind the deeran.



“Don’t worry, you passed,” she said. “He did, right, Tetis?”

“O-Of course. As far as we’re concerned, you successfully passed your examination,” the deeran hurriedly said. “It’s just that a Rank B adventurer should have been put in charge of your examination, not this stupid cat...”

I was glad to hear I was done.

I kicked Butata lightly on his bump and he jumped up, his fur bristling.

“It hurts, meow!” he screamed. “Meow? Tetis? Why are you here, meow?”

“Cynthia told me what you were up to! What were you thinking? The guild master personally handling an examination is completely unheard of! What kind of Rank S adventurer fights Rank C candidates?!”

Cynthia? Ah, she must be talking about the girl Butata was calling Cynmeow. She was the only one who’d heard Butata say he’d take care of my examination and it sounded like she’d tattled on him.

It was my first time hearing about Butata’s rank, though. I’d heard that Rank S adventurers needed to receive the approval of a nation leader... *That’s impressive. Now that I think about it, he must have been holding back for the sake of the test. He hadn’t used any skills.*

“But—” Butata started

“No buts!” the woman they’d called Tetis immediately interjected. “I’m so sorry for what he put you through, Mister Masaki,” she apologized once more. “I’d like to offer you some sort of compensation...”

I did get to test the results of my training, so I wasn’t *that* mad about this. Besides, I’d gotten what I wanted—increasing my rank. *Asking her to get me all the way to Rank B in one go would be pushing it, right? If memory serves me right, the condition to get to Rank B is to have cleared a dungeon and I’ve never even entered one. I kind of want to try dungeon diving, so I’ll leave that for another time.*

“What about letting him stay in one of our lovely inns? Hospitality in Saunshade is wonderful, so I believe it’d make for a good compensation,” the woman with the bunny ears said.

“That’s a good idea... Mister Masaki, if you have yet to book an inn, would you allow us to lodge you while you’re in Saunshade?” the deeran asked.

“I was actually thinking of looking for an inn right after my exam, so I’ll take you up on that. May I ask who you are, though?” I asked.

“Oh my! I forgot to introduce myself. Where are my manners?” the lunar rabbit lady said with a smile. “I’m the ruler of the south, Lydea Erhart. Welcome to Saunshade, Masaki Toudou and Akiha Kisaragi. Sieg mentioned how strong you were in his report, but I’m glad to confirm it after meeting you in person.”

“Erm... I suppose...”

“No need to get all stiff! Relax, relax! You can be casual with me! Sieg isn’t one to exaggerate, so I was curious to meet you. Wouldn’t you be curious if you were in my shoes?”

“Well... Yes, I guess.”

I hadn’t asked Sieg to keep my presence a secret. It made sense to let your higher-ups know if otherworlders were in their territory.

“I knew about you before Sieg told me anything, though,” Lydea added. “I know you’re one of the people who brought the empire to ruin in Rand. You also crushed the Phantom Blau and its slave market...and saved one of my dear daughters.”

“One of your daughters?” I asked.

“Don’t you remember her? She’s called Meluna.”

“Oh, right.”

The fangirl. I never would have thought I’d run into someone related to her.

“Thank you for saving Meluna,” Lydea said. “I don’t know where she gets it, but she’s always brimming with curiosity and can’t stay put! She always pokes her nose into everything...That’s how she got abducted. I’ll be sure to punish her harshly when she gets home.”

The fact that Lydea was smiling while talking about punishing her daredevil daughter made her all the more terrifying.

“Did you come here because you had something to discuss with me?” I asked.

“No. I just wanted to see what kind of guy you were. I thought I might have a little taste if you looked tasty enough,” she said, looking at me from head to toe and licking her lips.

I felt a chill run through my spine as she thoroughly examined every nook and cranny of my body. I wasn’t sure how to put this, but...I felt like she was about to devour me whole.

Akiha, who’d been waiting in the bleachers the entire time, rushed to my side. She grabbed my arm and glared threateningly at Lydea. *I’m happy to see you standing up for me in front of the ruler of such a large territory, but that’s rude, Akiha.*

“Don’t get so tense! It’s a joke! I’m not so hungry that I’d sink my teeth into someone who already has a lover. Anyway, I need to be on my way. I can already hear my butler screaming at me for slipping away. I trust you’ll take good care of them, my little Tetis.”

“Yes.”

Lydea turned back and walked away. She moved like a runway model, drawing attention to her voluptuous curves with every step.

“I feel like a storm has passed...” Akiha said.

“So do I,” I agreed.

“Mister Masaki, I’d like to recommend Lutz’s Silver Fox. We’ll write you a letter of introduction and the guild will take care of your expenses.”

“You don’t need to go that far. We can pay for ourselves.”

I didn’t think they would go that far for us. If they could find us an inn, we could take care of the rest ourselves.

“Don’t worry, Mister Masaki. We’ll use the stupid cat’s salary to pay for your expenses, so it’s no problem at all. There’s a hot spring at the inn, so please enjoy it thoroughly.”

“Meow?!”

The deeran girl seemed pretty pissed at Butata. He was using his eyes to plead with me for help, but there wasn't much I could do. I didn't want Tetis to get mad at me as well, so I figured keeping my mouth shut was the best course of action.

Sorry, Butata, but I gotta look out for myself first. Besides, I'm dying to soak in their hot spring.

"Masaki-san, let's just accept her good will," Akiha said firmly.

Alice nodded.

They both seemed to agree. Akiha, in particular, was pretty adamant.

"All right, then," I stated.

"Masameow?!" Butata exclaimed as if I'd betrayed him.

Tetis took out a piece of paper and a quill from her pouch and started writing. She pressed the guild's seal to the bottom of the page before handing it to me. "Here is your introduction letter."

There were animals printed on each corner of the piece of paper—a bird, a panda, a lion, and a rabbit.

"Well, then, I'll take my leave. I have to puni—erm, I mean train our stupid cat. Please allow me to apologize once more for our guild master's behavior," Tetis said.

Is training him supposed to be any better than punishing him?!

"No! Someone save me, meooooow! I don't wanna be dropped from the top floor again, meow!" Butata lamented as Tetis dragged him away.

Sorry, but this sounds like a you problem, Butata.

We went back to the guild's reception and were greeted by the woman Butata had called Cynmeow. *Her name was Cynthia, wasn't it?*

"Congratulations on passing your rank examination. Please show me your adventurer card."

"Sure," I answered, taking it out of my inventory and handing it to Cynthia.

Cynthia said a few words and the card changed from blue to green.

I asked her if it was all right for her to process the results without waiting for Butata to come back and vouch for me, but she explained that the barrier used to protect the arena also had another function. If the examiner was defeated or said out loud that the candidate had passed, it would automatically be recorded into the adventurer's card. I'd beaten Butata, so it had already registered my results.

"Congratulations, you're a Rank C adventurer now. You can now exchange your points for weapons, equipment, or items. Would you like to look at the list of items available?"

I didn't know that becoming Rank C allowed you to use your points like that. I was curious to see what weapons I could get here. *It wouldn't hurt to look at the list at least once.*

I took a quick look but Rank C adventurers couldn't access the good stuff. I could only get iron weapons or armor. As for the items, they mostly offered potions, antidotes, insect repellants, and other useful consumables . We had burned insect-repelling incense every night while traveling in the armored carriages.

You could also get monster encyclopedias, wild plants encyclopedias, or maps. They'd also appraise items for you in exchange for points. Needless to say, I had no need for any of this.

I asked Cynthia to show me one of their maps just to check it out, but mine was a hundred times more precise. *I figured.*

"I won't be needing anything for now," I concluded. "Could you tell me how to get to the inn called Lutz's Silver Fox, though?"

"Lutz's Silver Fox? Sure, you need to—"

"We'll show you the way, Masaki. We're staying there too," a familiar voice said behind us.

We turned around and saw Gaddle and his friends.

The adventurers around us suddenly got noisier:

"H-Hey! Isn't that Gaddle the Steel Breaker?"

“Gaddle’s party is back!

It looked like Gaddle also had a nickname. Now that I thought about it, he had held his own against damask lizards with an iron sword, so he was certainly strong.

“Welcome back, Mister Gaddle,” Cynthia greeted him. “Do you know Mister Masaki?”

“We met on the road,” he answered. “Can you exchange my loot for money?”

“Of course.”

Gaddle took out his loot, including the crazed beast skins, from his inventory. Cynthia started inspecting them, but considering the sheer quantity, it would take her some time.

“Did you find the letter, Masaki?” Gunha asked.

“Yeah. My comrades made it to the capital without a hitch. I feel much better now that I know they’re safe.”

Knowing that Adel and Youko were both all right had set my heart at ease. Our sudden separation had helped me see how important the two of them were to me. They were my fiancées, so it was only natural, but being far away from the people you held dear still had a way of making you realize how important they were.

Nemea was also an important comrade as far as I was concerned, but he couldn’t compare to Adel and Youko. *That’s just how it is. I care for my precious fiancées the most.*

“I sent them a reply and I also took my promotion exam while I was here,” I added.

“‘While you were here,’ huh? You know that normal people don’t usually take their exams off the cuff like that, right? You’re a strange one, Masaki,” Gaddle stated.

“And?” someone behind Gaddle said. “Did you pass? I don’t know why I’m even asking. I’m sure you did.”

“It’s Masaki we’re talking about,” Gunha said. “Of course he did.”

“Yep.”

What the hell, guys?

Did I really seem that strange to them? Maybe I was, but being told to my face had me feeling a little conflicted.

While I was lost in thoughts, Alice poked her head out of Akiha’s breast pocket. *You’re still in there? I’m getting a little jealous now—just a tiny bit.*

“Masaki is amazing!” she exclaimed. “He went BAM and BOOM and destroyed that Butata cat!”

I tried to stop her. “Alice, don’t say that.”

“Why not? It’s the truth! The way you finished him off with that last BAAAM was so cool!”

Even though it was the truth, certain things were better left unsaid. *Besides, what do you mean I “finished him off”? You’re making it sound like I killed him.*

I glimpsed at Gaddle and his friends and...sure enough, they were staring at me in shock.

“You’re truly something, Masaki. What are you doing out here? Beating up Rank S adventurers?” Gaddle asked.

“You should ask Mister Butata what he’s doing!” Eris chimed in. “What is an S Rank adventurer doing playing examiner? What kind of joke is that?”

I agreed with Eris. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Butata was the one who’d started this. *Yep, I’m innocent. One hundred percent innocent.*

Butata was probably getting “punished” or “trained” at this very moment. I didn’t want to know what Tetis was doing to him. He’d mentioned not wanting to be thrown off the top floor and, as far as I was concerned, that already sounded scary enough.

“Sorry for the wait, Mister Gaddle. Here is your reward,” Cynthia said, handing him a small pouch filled to the brim with money.

Gaddle accepted it with a smile and put it away in his inventory.

As we stepped out of the building, a few guys offered to take us out for a

drink or a meal. They were easy-going, and seemed nice. A few others invited us to complete requests together with their parties. I didn't plan to stay in Saunshade for long, so I most likely wouldn't have the time for that, but I wasn't necessarily against the idea. As a man, I could rarely resist the chance for an adventure.

We followed Gaddle and the others to Lutz's Silver Fox.

It probably seemed like we were part of Gaddle's party to the citizens and adventurers on the roads. Although there were several women with us, no one came up to hit on them. Gaddle seemed popular in the area and I assumed no one wanted to mess with him. Lots of people did approach for a casual chat, though.

I was relieved, at first, but I soon realized we wouldn't be left alone either. Tons of women were calling out to us because they were interested in Alice.

"A fairy! That's amazing!"

"She's so cute! Little fairy, can I shake your hand?"

"Hey, hey! How did you make friends with a fairy?"

"Sell me your fairy! I'll pay you handsomely!"

The ladies were crazy about Alice. We couldn't walk ten steps without someone stopping us to ask about her. *Does that last lady think fairies are pets? Like hell you can buy her! She's a person!*

For some reason, Alice seemed to be in a good mood. She was giggling the entire time.

"Why are you in such a good mood, Alice?"

"Because I'm experiencing so many new things! In the forest, no one really cared about seeing me or got excited about shaking my hand. I'm having a lot of fun today!"

"How was your life in the forest?" I asked.

"Boring. All I did every day was gather nectar, pray, and play the same old games with other fairies. It was so dull! The elders were always talking my ears off too. Do this, don't go out of the village, don't talk to humans... They were so

annoying!”

The Fairy Village seemed to be completely closed off from the outside world. I’d heard that the people who somehow found their way there were also kicked out almost immediately.

“You say your life there was dull, but you still care about your village a lot, don’t you, Alice?”

“Huh? What makes you say that?”

“You’re not the type to mince your words, and you never said outright you hated your village.”

“Well... It’s a boring place, but that doesn’t mean I hate it...”

“Having a place you can call home is precious, Alice. Exploring the outside world is great, but you should show your face at home from time to time. I’m sure some people are worried about you.”

“I... I will... But for the time being, I’d rather stay with you, Masaki!” she exclaimed before jumping into my hood.

I was glad to hear she understood my point.

After twenty minutes of walking, I spotted a sign with a fox tail on a three-story building with a large tree poking through the roof.

I opened the door. The base of the magnificent tree stood tall in the center of the room, surrounded by six fully occupied tables. There were also a few counter seats, but they were all taken too. *Looks like we won't be getting lunch here—or at least not anytime soon. Let's get rooms first and worry about food later.*

The receptionist was a silver-haired lady with a silver fox tail—unsurprising, given the tavern's name. She seemed to be in her twenties.

"Welcome to Lutz's Silver Fox," she greeted. "Are you here for a meal or will you be staying with us?"

"We'd like to book a couple of rooms," I replied. "I have a letter of introduction from the Adventurer Guild..."

"Huh?" the fox lady said, momentarily surprised. She quickly composed herself. "May I take a look?"

She read through the letter, then ran into the back. "Mom!" she called, then someone—her mother, I assumed—gasped.

"Hey, you! Take over," the woman called to someone else. Apparently, the letter was creating a bit of a stir. I felt bad given that the staff already seemed busy.

The fox lady returned with a woman who looked nearly identical. She was a few years older, and her chest was a little bigger.

I can't believe that's her mother. They look like sisters.

"Sorry for the wait," the mother said. "Thank you for showing us the letter you received from Miss Tetis. You will be needing one room, I suppose," the mother said.

"Two rooms, actually," I answered.

She looked puzzled. "Huh?"

"Is that an issue?" I asked.

“N-No, of course not.”

“All right, then...”

I turned around to find Gaddle grinning at me. Eris kicked him in the shin and he fell to the ground in agony. *What in the world are these two doing?*

We got a suite with separate rooms on the top floor. We were free to use the hot spring baths whenever we wanted to, but, naturally, they were separated by gender. There were almost no coed baths in this world, which was probably why the pool I’d created in Atami was so popular.

I would have loved to eat here, but they were already fully booked for lunch. As long as we reserved in advance, we’d be served meals in our rooms even if the dining area was full, so I requested meals for tonight. *Levia loves her meat, so I’ll ask for the meat course.*

We parted with Gaddle and his group for the time being and decided to look for a place to grab lunch. Gaddle and the others had already eaten and I would have felt bad dragging them along for no reason.

“Hmm... Is there anything you’d like to eat, Akiha?” I asked.

“Let me think... We’ve been eating a lot of meat recently, so seafood sounds nice,” she said.

“Right... Crazed beast meat is good and all, but having that every day is a bit much. I’ll ask around and see if there’s a good fish place around here,” I said.

“I wanna have fruit!” Alice exclaimed.

“Sure, sure.”

We walked down a street packed with food stalls, but they were all selling meat, vegetables, or fruit. Moreover, the streets were crowded with people. It was lunchtime, after all, but I worried we’d lose sight of one another in the crowd. It was especially bad around intersections.

Right as I was thinking about that, I noticed a group of adventurers walking straight toward us. They were engrossed in some drunken conversation. *We’re definitely going to get separated by the crowd if we’re not careful.*

I took Akiha’s hand and pulled her toward a corner. Thankfully, the large

group of people passed us by without any issues.

“Erm... M-Masaki-san?”

Looking down, I realized I hadn’t let go of Akiha’s hand.

“S-Sorry...” I said.

I tried to let go, but Akiha grasped my hand tighter.

“I might get lost, so...can I hold your hand?” she asked.

“Y-Yeah.”

Akiha’s hand was a little sweaty, but I squeezed her hand back and escorted her through the crowd. We managed to get past the busiest intersection without losing each other. I saw a crying child who had most likely lost his parents in the crowd. Before long, a beastman—his father, I assumed—found him and ran up to him.

Now that I thought about it, I’d spent time alone with Adel and Youko on many occasions, but I’d never had the chance to enjoy time alone with Akiha, even in Atami.

Walking hand-in-hand with her made it feel like...

“Masaki-san, it’s almost like we’re on a date, isn’t it?”

I choked on my saliva and coughed.

“A-Are you okay?”

I told her I was fine and did my best to calm down my breathing. I hadn’t expected Akiha would point it out right as it occurred to me...

“You’re right. We do look like a couple, don’t we? Sorry. I imagine you’d much rather be holding hands with a cooler guy...”

I’d always had a pretty average face. I was never all that popular. Hell, at the mixer parties back on Earth, I’d mostly stand around, never interacting with any of the girls. The fact that two beautiful women like Adel and Youko had chosen me as their future husband was already nothing short of a miracle.

Akiha squeezed my hand tighter.

“No! I’m happy because I’m with you! I want to be with *you*, not with someone else!”

“A-Akiha? Does that mean that you...?” I trailed off, turning to look at her.

She brought a hand to her mouth and turned bright red.

“I... Erm...” Akiha stammered, flustered. “I didn’t mean to say that... I... It doesn’t mean anything at all! L-Look, that stall looks pretty good, doesn’t it? Let’s eat there!”

Akiha was trying to brush off what she’d said, but I wanted to know if she’d meant it. I decided to wait until later in the evening to ask her about it. Akiha pulled me toward the stall she’d mentioned. It was the only one in the vicinity that sold grilled fish. It tasted like sweetfish and was pretty good.

After filling our stomachs, we headed back to the inn.

It was already time for dinner when Levia came back. *Did the smell of the food lure her here?*

Like usual, our resident hellion didn’t waste any time indulging her obsession with food. She immediately started munching on a morsel of meat. “This is tasty,” she commented.

Meat dishes, including mutton meat pie, spare ribs, venison stew, and deep-fried bronze frog were piled up on the table. I felt full just looking at this mountain of food, but Levia was heartily gobbling down one plate after the other.

I really don’t get how she fits so much food into her small body.

Alice was currently having pancakes I’d made for her myself. She’d specifically asked for something sweet.

Akiha and I had the venison stew along with a salad and some bread. I’d used Upgrade to turn the dark bread we’d been served into white bread.

It was my first time having venison, but it tasted pretty good. *As expected of an inn recommended by the Adventurer Guild.*

“Ah, I just remembered something I wanted to tell you, Levia. I met Lydea at the Adventurer Guild,” I said.

“Huh?” Levia noisily swallowed a mouthful of meat. “So that’s where she was,” she said as she wiped her mouth with a napkin.

“You probably had a talk with her too, right? How did it go? Did you learn anything”

“Yeah. She told me they’d discovered the land had been corrupted in several places.”

“Corrupted?”

“I should give you a proper explanation,” Levia said.

According to her, local deities such as her or Jörmungandr each had territories determined by where people revered them the most. This worship is how they gained their power. However, when the land became corrupted, the spirit of the land would die. Plants would wither, water would become toxic, and eventually everything would become barren desert, depriving the deities of their power. *What a tragic ending.*

The dwarves and elves—the races that were most in touch with nature—had been put in charge of investigating the land. They were sensitive to such changes and were able to sense the corruption.

“She also asked that we hurry to the capital. According to Lydea, the garuda are mobilizing countless soldiers to accelerate the corruption,” Levia added.

“They’re *accelerating* the corruption? But why?”

“We don’t know. However, one of Lydea’s servants reported that someone who knows about you is helping the garuda.”

“Someone who knows me?”

“The hooded individual who was pulling the strings in the empire.”

Them?!

I’d told Levia about what had happened in the empire. Naturally, I’d also mentioned No Face, the mastermind that Shou had fought.

“Apparently, that person has a peculiar presence. They’re not like humans, beastmen, or even monsters. They can also control strange thorny vines. That

sounds like the hooded individual you told me about, right? This information cost Lydea a lot, though... Her spy network was decimated. Only one of them made it out alive."

"Only one of them made it out alive?" Alice repeated. "Masaki... You fought such scary people?!"

Alice was usually carefree, but the thought of such a fearsome foe must have scared her.

"Yes, Alice. Now that you know that, I have something important to ask you. Do you want to go home?" I asked.

"No! I'm scared, but...I'll stay with you! Fen... Fen is going too, right?"

"She is."

"I'm her friend! I can't get scared and run away while she's out there! I'll come with you!"

I didn't know whether to call her reckless or courageous. Either way, one thing was for sure: Fen had made a trustworthy friend.

"Good grief," Levia sighed. "Are you sure you won't regret this?"

"I won't! Besides, I'm also worried about you, Levia! You're so careless sometimes!" Alice exclaimed.

Levia hmphed. "I'm not as bad as you."

You guys are sure getting along, huh? Alice and Fen were close friends but, no matter what she said, the little fairy also cared about Levia deeply.

"What do we do, Levia?" I asked. "I know we need to leave as soon as possible, but how are we supposed to get there? We can't use the genos rhinos again so soon, can we?"

The genos rhinos that had pulled our carriages here were out for the time being. They needed to rest before they could travel again, and there weren't any other genos rhinos available. We could try to push the ones we'd used to get there, but I could already tell they'd run out of strength halfway through.

"Lydea will arrange our means of transportation. She seemed pretty sure of

herself, so we probably won't have any issues. She only asked that—"

"We are ready to depart at all times, I suppose?" I finished Levia's sentence for her.

"Exactly. Now that this is settled, I want seconds!" she stated.

You're gonna eat more *meat?!*

Eating well to build your strength before a fight was important, but Levia could never seem to stop.

Recharging my batteries before another journey sounds nice, though.

They had hot springs here, so it was my best chance to enjoy a nice relaxing time before we were on the road once more. The suite they'd given us came with a private bath, so I figured I should make the most of it. *I need to thank Butata later.*

I left the girls behind and returned to my room to get a change of clothes before heading to the private bath. I was happily walking back to the bath when I ran into Akiha, right in front of the changing room.

"Did you want to take a soak here too, Masaki-san?" she asked.

"Yeah, but you can go ahead and use this bath, Akiha. I'll go to the common bath."

Bad timing.

The common bath would likely be bigger and I was sure I'd enjoy it just as much.

I started walking away when I felt Akiha tug at my clothes.

She didn't say a word, but fidgeted with the fabric in her hand, a deep blush settling on her cheeks.

"Hmm... Akiha? I can't go if you don't let go of my shirt."

"You... You don't need to leave..."

"But—"

"Masaki-san... The innkeeper... She said that we're free to use the private

bath together if we'd like..."

◆◇◆

Akiha had been in love with Masaki for the longest time.

She'd first met him when he'd rescued her and Haruka from the clutches of the empire. At first, she worried he'd ask for something in return, but Masaki didn't. He even helped them further and did everything he could to keep them safe.

Akiha's powers were suited to combat, but Masaki had never pressured her into fighting. If anything, he'd offered to let her stay in his room and tried to keep her away from the battlefield.

Akiha was taken aback by his kindness, but she refused to take advantage of it. She didn't want to receive without ever giving back. After talking it over with Haruka, she decided to stand on the frontline alongside him to keep an eye on him. There, she'd seen for herself how strong he truly was. People called him a hero and she came to understand how fitting that nickname was. Masaki *was* a hero.

And yet, he was also incredibly kind. When Akiha was with her sisters, most men wouldn't so much as notice her. Haruka was a gentle, well-mannered beauty with a voluptuous body—most men immediately fell under her spell. Prince Leon, for instance, had fallen in love with her at first sight.

But Masaki wasn't like them. He treated both sisters with the same kindness. He was there for them whenever they needed him and he sometimes relied on them as well—not only on Haruka, but on Akiha too.

She thought he might have relied on her because of the abilities she'd gotten from playing *Commando City*, but after observing him for so long, Akiha had a feeling it wasn't the case. Even though she was also an otherworlder, she could see that Masaki's powers were special. Still, that didn't mean he could take care of everything alone—there were limits to what a single man could do.

Masaki understood that very well and he had no problem delegating tasks or requesting help. The fact that he was viewed as a hero never got to his head and he never hesitated to ask for help when he needed it.

Akiha had observed him for so long that, before she knew it, her eyes began landing on Masaki whenever she wasn't paying attention. Before she could realize it, she'd fallen deeply in love with him.

After coming to terms with her feelings, she wasn't able to keep them buried deep inside her heart anymore. Even though she knew that Masaki was already engaged and that he was older than her, she couldn't quell these feelings any longer.

When she went to her sister for advice, Haruka said, "This isn't Japan, Akiha-chan. You're free to follow your heart." Akiha hadn't known what to do with this piece of advice. Her sister was a free spirit, but that didn't mean she could truly do anything she wanted, did it?

Akiha was living in Atami at the time, working hard every day to revive the city. One day, Youko got in touch with her. Akiha had fought alongside both Adel and Youko in the past and she'd worked with them to restore Atami. She knew them and thought of them as friends.

"Akiha, are you in love with Masaki?" Youko asked after they met.

Akiha choked on her mint tea, stunned by Youko's forthrightness.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?" Youko asked. "Breathe! One, two, one, two... You're doing great!"

"That's how you help a woman delivering a baby! Not someone choking!" Akiha exclaimed after catching her breath.

"Is that so? But Haruka taught me to say that..."

"Well, it's all wrong. I have no idea what she was thinking..."

Youko laughed. "Sorry, sorry," she said with a smile. "Still, you're all better now, aren't you?"

"Good grief... Anyway, why would you ask me something like that out of the blue?" Akiha asked, trying to keep her anxiety in check. One of Masaki's fiancées had noticed her feelings. She wouldn't be able to stay here anymore.

Youko's next words came as an even greater shock. "It's obvious. You're always looking at him. You run to him with a smile on your face whenever you

get the chance too. Adel and I discussed it and I wanted to tell you we wouldn't mind if you became his concubine."

Akiha couldn't believe her ears. "You... Huh?"

She was embarrassed to hear they'd seen through her so easily but, beyond that, she was absolutely flabbergasted. Masaki's fiancées were welcoming her as a concubine?! Akiha didn't know what to say.

"You're from the same world as Masaki," Youko continued. "If you do love him, I'd appreciate it if you could support him alongside us. You can understand him in ways Adel and I never will. Besides, Adel also thinks that you'd be a good fit for him."

"You want me to support him..."

Akiha wanted nothing more than to become Masaki's strength. If they were open to her staying by his side as a concubine, perhaps she could do just that.

However, Akiha's Japanese sensibilities made it difficult for her to accept polygamy.

"Please give me some time to think about it,"Akiha said, the best answer she could give at that moment.

After getting separated from Adel and Youko in the Beastmen Kingdom, Youko's words returned to Akiha.

She was happy that Masaki had continued caring during their perilous journey, but it had been his actions at the inn—where she was drugged and nearly raped before Masaki saved her—that had truly made up her mind.

Her drug-addled brain had struggled to make sense of the situation, but she remembered the overwhelming fear she'd felt as Masaki lost control and mercilessly beat the man who'd tried to defile her. While she was touched that Masaki was so upset on her behalf, she couldn't stand to see him lose control like that. She was terrified that, if it happened again, she wouldn't be able to pull him out of it.

Although she had been barely conscious, Akiha felt like she'd finally understood what Youko had meant.

Masaki was the type of person who could lose himself to his rage if something happened to the people he cared about. But Akiha didn't want him to lose himself—to wander too far from her to the point she wouldn't be able to reach him. She'd mustered all of her strength to reach out and hold onto him. After that, everything had become dark and the next thing she remembered was kissing him. The aphrodisiac had made her realize how badly she needed him.

I love him. I really do. My sister's right: this isn't Japan. I'll follow my heart and do what I want to do.

Youko and Levia had both encouraged her too. Akiha decided not to hesitate anymore—she would tell Masaki how she felt and go from there.

◆◇◆

After Akiha convinced me to use the bath at the same time as her, I couldn't help but think, *Was she always so assertive?*

I turned my back to her and started undressing. I found a cover-up in the basket where I stored my clothes, so I put it on. Apparently, it was all right to wear them even in the water. *I couldn't very well bathe with Akiha naked—not without talking it over with her, at the very least.*

I finished putting on the cover-up, then snuck a glance at Akiha. She'd also put on a cover-up, but I could see her beautiful nape, though... *Calm down. I shouldn't get excited now.*

The private bath only had a smallish window, so we couldn't gaze at the scenery while bathing. *I shouldn't expect every bath to be as nice as the ones in Atami*, I thought. *They're only like that because I invested time and money into them.*

The bath wasn't all that bad, though. It was large enough for several people to share without being cramped. I was more than happy enough with that.

Akiha cleared her throat. "Masaki-san, would you like me to wash your back?"

"Oh, hmm... Sure, thanks."

The hot water she poured over my back warmed me to my core. It might have been because I hadn't gotten to go to a hot spring in a while, but it felt

incredibly good.

“Could you give me some shampoo and soap, Masaki-san?” Akiha asked.

Oh right. In this world, shampoo and soap were so precious that only royals could use them. Even though we were staying in a luxurious suite, it would have been rude to ask the innkeeper for some. Instead, I took out shampoo and soap from my inventory and handed them to Akiha. She scrubbed my back vigorously.

Luffas were available for us to use, but Akiha and I both agreed that scrubbing with towels felt better. We’d tried both options in Atami and had reached this conclusion a while ago.

To be fully honest, I thought that silk towels were the best when it came to scrubbing, but I didn’t have any on hand.

When Akiha was done, I washed her back for her too. I was scrubbing pretty strongly, but Akiha seemed to like it that way. I couldn’t peel my eyes off her nape the entire time, but I still did my best and washed her back properly.

(IMG: Black-haired man is washing black-haired woman’s back.)

For some reason, looking at a Japanese person’s skin tone calmed me down. Adel and Youko both had beautiful white skin, but Akiha’s skin tone popped out more—there was a healthy glow to it.

We washed our hair and the rest of our bodies ourselves before entering the bath.

Ah... I feel alive again... This is amazing.

I felt bad for Butata, but I was so glad we got to stay in this suite. I could practically feel my fatigue melting away.

Akiha giggled. “You sound like an old man, Masaki-san.”

“Did I sigh out loud?”

“You sure did.”

How embarrassing. I must have been even more tired than I realized.

Akiha sat down next to me and sighed contentedly too. I inadvertently looked

at her cleavage before averting my eyes. I looked through the window instead. *The moon shines bright tonight. Must be a full moon.*

“Hmm...” Akiha started.

I looked back at Akiha again. She was staring at me intently.

“Masaki-san, I...I wanted to thank you. For what happened at the village.”

“Ah, that... Don’t mind it. I just did what I had to. How could I stay put when one of my precious comrades was being assaulted? If anything, I should be apologizing to you.”

“Why would you apologize?”

“Well... It was necessary, but I still fed you the antidote mouth-to-mouth... I’m sorry for taking advantage of you.”

Akiha looked puzzled. “Were you worried about that? It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Your body is precious, Akiha,” I admonished.

“I... It actually made me happy. I’m so glad I got to give you my first kiss, Masaki-san.”

“R-Really? Then it’s all good... I think?”

Being told something like that by a younger girl made me strangely bashful. *I’m probably all red right now.*

“If you still feel bad about it...how about doing something for me in return?” Akiha asked.

“Of course, anything you need. As long as it’s in my power, I’ll do it,” I answered.

Akiha hesitated, then said, “Well... Then... Erm... I want you to...kiss me properly, please.”

Oh boy, that got to me. I never would have thought a girl would ever say something like that to me. *Well, Adel and Youko can be pretty direct too, but still...*

“Okay... Are you sure?”

Akiha nodded, blushing even harder. I pulled her closer. Her light cherry blossom-colored lips were brimming with youthfulness.

Our lips connected. It was our first kiss—at least the first one where Akiha was in her right mind. Unlike previously, in the village, I had all the time in the world to focus on the softness of her lips against mine. Back then, I was in a hurry to save her, and didn't get to savor the moment.

We kissed for only ten seconds, but it felt like much longer. Akiha moaned as we parted.

I hadn't kissed anyone in a while and it felt...divine. I wordlessly praised myself for staying in control enough not to immediately wrap Akiha into another kiss.

"Haaa... Masaki-san..."

"What is it?"

"I love you. I love you so much. Please take me as your concubine."

Huh? My concubine? Do you want me to marry you, Akiha? It felt like she'd just dropped a bomb on me.

"Wait, wait, wait. Please calm down for a second, Akiha."

"I'm perfectly calm. Youko and Adel already gave me their blessing back in Atami. They said I was right for you."

What in the world did my fiancées do? They discussed all of this already and didn't keep me in the loop? *Wait, does that mean Youko and Adel noticed Akiha's feelings that long ago?* I'd recently started to realize that something was up, but I'd figured Akiha had fallen for me fairly recently. *Women's intuition is a scary thing...*

"You...don't want me?"

Is there any man who could say no to that? I was barely holding onto my self-control.

It must have taken Akiha so much courage to confess her feelings. I needed to get my act together and answer her properly.

“I do. Of course, I do,” I said resolutely. “If Adel and Youko already gave their consent, I have no reason to push you away.”

I embraced her tighter. Akiha trembled slightly in my arms. It sounded like she was crying a little, but when I looked at her face I saw she was weeping out of happiness, not joy.

“How should I say this...” I started. “Please look after me from now on.”

“Of course, Iwill. I’ve never been with anyone before, so...please look after me too, Masaki-san.”

I now had a third fiancée. I’d yet to marry any of them formally, but I made up my mind to hold a ceremony after the business with Jörmungandr was settled. I refused to push it back again.

I leaned in and kissed Akiha again.

“Masaki-san... Kisses aren’t enough... I want more, please...”

“I’ll be as gentle as I can,” I told her.

Unable to hold back any longer, I resolved to share a night of passion under the moonlight with Akiha.

Hm? Is it morning already?

My body felt sticky with sweat and...other fluids. *I need a morning bath*.

I couldn’t even remember how many times we’d gone at it. After finishing at the hot springs, I’d tried to let Akiha rest, but she’d pushed me down on the bed...and we ended up enjoying ourselves all over again.

I’d done my best to please Akiha, and she had been amazing in turn. Without contraceptives, she would surely have gotten pregnant, so it was a good thing I always stocked up on them.

I’d had a good time and I was pretty sure Akiha had enjoyed herself as well.

“Masaki-saaan... Love...” Akiha mumbled in her sleep.

She was sleeping on my chest. I tried to wake her up gently to no avail. *She must be tired. I’ll let her sleep a little longer.*

I kissed her and felt her lips move against mine. *Is she waking?*

She moaned softly. “Masaki-san... Good morning. It wasn’t a dream... I’m so glad.”

“If it had all been a dream, you would’ve had to confess all over again.”

“Don’t tease. It wouldn’t be so bad, though. Confessing again, then...”

“Hold your horses. Would you care for a bath together, instead?”

“I’d like that.”

I felt refreshed after washing up. We decided to have a late breakfast together.

It was already so late into the morning that the pub area on the first floor was almost empty. Adventurers usually roused early so they could head out and complete requests. *The early bird catches the worm, as they say.*

Levia was sitting in a corner, still munching on her food, so we joined her.

While we were waiting for our orders to arrive, Levia suddenly jumped off her seat and started smelling me.

“What’s up, Levia? Do I smell?” I asked, watching her continue sniffing.

I’d just bathed, so I couldn’t have smelled that bad already.

“It smells like you enjoyed yourself last night,” she answered.

Akiha and I choked at the same time. Denying it would surely hurt Akiha’s feelings, so I just remained silent. As for Akiha, she was bright red. *At least she looks cute like that.*

Gaddle and his group joined us. They seemed to have woken up even later than us.

For some reason, Gaddle was worn out while Eris looked content, her skin practically glowing.

I’ll pretend I haven’t noticed anything. Gotta cut a man some slack.

Our food eventually arrived. I was having an omelet. There were potatoes inside, so I supposed it was closer to a Spanish omelet, actually. It was well-

seasoned and pretty tasty.

After finishing our meal, we headed back to our rooms to get ready to go out.

Soon, someone knocked at the door. Outside, a voice said, “Excuse me, dear customers. The lord sent for you. One of her servants is waiting in front of the inn...”

“Thanks for letting us know. We’ll be there shortly,” I answered.

Lydea had sent someone, huh? What did she want?

We followed the inn employee and found a lavish carriage waiting for us right outside the inn. Lydea’s butler stepped out of the carriage and greeted us.

We climbed into the carriage and headed to the lord’s estate.

Lydea’s mansion was at least two times bigger than mine. It was also much more extravagant. Southern flowers bloomed in the garden and gave me the impression I’d somehow entered a whole new world.

The butler escorted us into the mansion and a crowd of beastmen and half-beastmen domestics greeted us. All of them were beautiful young men and women. After asking around, I learned that they were all orphans Lydea had picked up and raised. Apparently, Lydea was operating orphanages, and these youths had all lived there before entering her service.

Lydea could only afford to do so because she was a prominent noble. Aristocrats in more humble positions would find orphanages too difficult and expensive to handle. After all, the long war against the empire had orphaned countless children—it was incredibly hard to house and care for all of them. In Atami, the orphanages were mostly operated by major religious groups such as the Church of Yggdrasil and the Church of Sentdrag. Lydea had the financial resources and skills to match the philanthropic achievements of these religious groups, which just went to demonstrate her status.

We were shown to a lavishly decorated door. The butler knocked.

“Lady Lydea, I brought Lord Masaki and his party.”

A relaxed voice came from the office, “You can come in.”

The butler opened the door with a practiced motion and we were faced

with...

“Come in, come in! I’m just changing, don’t mind me.”

...a great deal of nudity.

The butler slammed the door shut, hiding Lydea’s naked form.

“I apologize. Please wait a moment,” the butler said. He bowed, then slipped into the room alone.

“You knew your guests were arriving momentarily. Why aren’t you done changing yet? How stupid can you get?!” the butler screamed.

“Sorryyyy,” Lydea said, unbothered. “But I just woke up, it’s not my fault.”

“Stop making excuses and put on your clothes! I can’t believe you! Where did you even throw your underwear?”

Lydea sounded like an...*interesting* person.

I’d only gotten a glimpse of her body, but the huge chest, slender waist, and large butt of her hourglass figure certainly didn’t pale in comparison to Adel’s or Akiha’s.

“Is that lady...the lord of the south? Are lords usually like that?” Alice asked.

“She’s...one of a kind. Don’t go thinking that all lords are like her, alright, Alice? Good grief... Lydea will never change, will she?” Levia said with a sigh.

“Masaki-san... Did you see?” Akiha asked, glaring at me.

“Not a thing.”

Nope, definitely not—so you can stop staring daggers at me now, Akiha!

After a couple of minutes, the butler opened the door once again.

“I apologize for my master’s behavior,” he said. “Please come in.”

This time, Lydea was wearing an elaborately designed dress. She looked regal, sitting at her desk with all the refinement of a noble lady.

I felt kind of sorry considering the efforts she’d put—or been made to put—into trying to gloss over her “mistake,” but I had trouble taking her seriously after seeing her like *that*.

“Welcome, Masaki, Levia. I’m sorry for summoning you so suddenly,” she apologized, her tone as carefree as usual.

“It’s quite unusual for you to summon people,” Levia said. “Could it be that...” she trailed off.

“It’s exactly what you’re thinking. They’re moving faster than I expected.”

Lydea was talking about the garuda and No Face.

“They took the Great Earth Sanctuary,” Lydea added. “Levia, did you feel any changes in Jörmungandr’s presence?”

Levia paused, her face darkening. “I’m undeniably closer to him, but his presence feels weaker.”

“I see... So they’re really trying to get rid of one of the Three Dragons,” Lydea concluded.

“Why would they want that?” I whispered without meaning to.

Lydea looked at me gravely. “The reason is fairly simple,” she said. “They’re trying to kill a deity so they can unleash something that is sealed deep, deep inside the earth. They want to get their hands on the Seven Pillars, weapons that can rival the gods.”

“The Seven Pillars?!” Levia exclaimed in shock.

“Levia, what are those?” I asked.

“They’re weapons that were crafted long, long ago. The god of creation made them in order to vanquish an evil god. They hold divine powers so strong that they can distort the very fabric that makes up our world. They could very well erase an entire country from the maps in a single night,” she explained.

“I’ve never heard about such weapons.”

“Obviously. They’re incredibly dangerous, so no one goes around advertising them. Only ancient deities like us or people who wield ancient powers like Lydea would know about them,” Levia retorted.

“That means Lady Lydea is...”

“Don’t you know bringing up a lady’s age is rude, Masaki?” Lydea cut me off.

I'd almost stepped on a landmine, hadn't I? I had a feeling Lydea would have destroyed me if I'd finished my sentence.

"Still, you did well discovering their plan," Levia said.

"Some of those in my care have connections to the garuda. I offered them a night of pleasure and they were happy to tell me everything they knew."

So, that was her method, huh? It must have been effective. I didn't think most people would be able to turn down a beautiful noble lady's invitation. I would, though!

"Putting your questionable methods aside...at least we finally know what their goal is thanks to you. If they already have the Great Earth Sanctuary in their grasp, though, we don't have a moment to lose," Levia said.

"Indeed. Hence the summon," Lydea said. "Come in."

Lydea clapped and the door that most likely led to an adjoining room opened. Inside, I saw that Lydea had already enlisted the best people I knew for the job.

"Sup Masaki. It's been a while."

"Hello, Lord Masaki."

"Shou and Colona, huh?" I said. "I already feel much better with you guys here."

"Oh my, do you know each other?" Lydea asked.

"We worked together a few times in Rand," I said. "But aren't you supposed to be in Rungard, Shou?"

"I was. I took Gardenia home. She was getting worried about what was happening in the Beastmen Kingdom and asked me to go check it out for her, so here I am. I didn't think it would be this serious, though."

"Right."

He'd found out that the disturbance he'd come to investigate was actually a huge crisis that threatened the kingdom's very existence. It was no laughing matter.

Rungard was close to the Beastmen Kingdom, so they definitely couldn't

afford to ignore this. I understand why Gardenia—who probably wanted nothing more than to keep Shou by her side—had sent him to investigate.

“This being said...” Shou said, leering at Akiha.

Uncomfortable, Akiha shifted behind me.

“You look sexier than before, girly. Colona, don’t you think?”

“Indeed. It would seem that Akiha has...changed somewhat.”

“Y-You think so?” Akiha asked.

“Yes. You have become a little more mature since we saw you last,” Colona said.

Akiha nervously played with her hair. She looked absolutely adorable. Shou grinned, elbowing me in the side.

“Masaki, did you finally seal the deal with her?”

“You’re the last person I want to talk about this with.”

Talk about tact.

“Come on, don’t be like that,” Shou said. “If you have yet to do so, I might just do it myself.”

“It’s been five minutes since you walked into the room and you’re already making me want to punch you,” I said. “If you keep this up, I will.”

“It was a joke! Don’t get your panties in a twist!”

I wasn’t about to listen to Shou tell me what he wanted to do to *my* girl. Even if he was joking, he was just the kind of guy who’d actually have a chance with Akiha—hence why I’d gotten mad.

“So young and so full of energy—how nice!” Lydea said.

“They sure don’t have any shame, huh?” Levia commented. “I suppose it’s better this way. I’d hate to see them frozen in fear.”

“It somehow makes me feel like they’ll manage to fix everything,” Lydea said.

This was how we found ourselves teaming up with Shou and Colona to save the Beastmen Kingdom—even if Shou and I were messing with one another,

just like we always did.

That’s just how we are.

Chapter 6

Shou had once again summoned something...*incredible*. I felt like I was going to strain my neck if I kept looking up at it.

“So, this is another iron beast,” Akiha commented. “This one’s nearly as big as the Cthulhu we saw previously.”

“I’d heard that Shou—that’s his name, right?—could summon creatures, but I didn’t expect them to look so...imposing,” Levia said.

“It’s so big!” Alice exclaimed.

“Cool, right?” Shou bragged. “I’m quite proud of this one. It’s called Wings of Light, Quetzalcoatl. It’s as rare as Colona is.”

He was pretty lucky to have pulled both cards. A friend of mine spent tens of thousands of yen fruitlessly trying to get Colona. From what I heard, her card—and other rare cards, I assumed—sold for a hundred thousand yen at the very least in online auctions.

“You’re lucky with your pulls, Shou,” I said.

“Not so much, actually. I just pull *a lot* to make up for my bad luck. Though I suppose it was kind of different this time. I just had a feeling that I needed to roll and...it just came. It’s a little embarrassing to say, but I felt like it was fate.”

“I’ve gotten that feeling too,” I answered. I used to play trading card games when I was younger. Sometimes, you’d just draw the one card you needed to turn the game around. I read an interview of a pro in a magazine once where he explained that he somehow felt when something like that was about to happen before he even drew the card.

“Glad to hear that.”

Shou rubbed the Quetzalcoatl’s neck and it let out a soft cry—a purr, almost. Unlike most other iron beasts, you could ride the Quetzalcoatl. While other rideable iron beasts could only carry you a rather short distance, the Quetzalcoatl could travel *very* long distances.

“We can transport dozens of people at once with this baby,” Shou added. “We’ll get to the capital without a single stop. If we leave now, we’ll be there by... Hey, Colona, how long will the trip take?” Shou asked.

“Considering the weather, we should arrive in the afternoon. However, I’d like to point out that there is a considerable chance we’ll be spotted if we ride such a large iron beast. I suggest taking the Quetzalcoatl close to our destination and finishing the trip on land. I estimate we’ll arrive in the evening if we do so.”

“Getting there in a single day is amazing enough,” I said. “I want to regroup with Adel and the others as soon as possible.”

“You must miss them,” Shou said. “Knowing them, they’ll have investigated and should have some good intel for us.”

I agreed. Adel, Youko, and Nemea weren’t the type to sit and wait. They’d most likely made a move already.

“If the garuda tribe’s soldiers are on the move, the situation will be pretty tense. I would have liked to have gathered more manpower, but we don’t have any time to waste, so our current party will have to do,” Shou said.

“Yeah,” I agreed.

Since No Face was involved, we’d need to be on our guards. He’d been the one to throw the imperial capital into utter chaos with his strange vine monsters.

Even with Youko’s Exmizer on our side, there was no guarantee we’d win. Nonetheless, Akiha, Fen, Levia, Alice, Zieg, Shou, Colona, and I would be heading to the capital.

A barrier around Saunshade kept the effects of the magical storm at bay, so I was finally able to properly let Fen out of my Room.

“We’re riding this?” Fen said, staring at the Quetzalcoatl.

“Are you scared?” Shou asked her.

“No... I’ve always...wanted to ride on a giant birdy...and fly...high in the sky... I’m excited...”

“Glad to hear that,” Shou said, patting Fen’s head with a smile.



“The Quetzalcoatl’s defensive capabilities will protect you. I’ll get the best seat ready for you, Lady Fen, so you can enjoy the view,” Colona said with a smile before reaching out to fix Fen’s messy hair for her.

I didn’t want to put Fen near any danger, but I also didn’t want to keep her trapped in my Room for too long, lest she be reminded of her time as a shaman. I’d asked Shou and Colona for their opinion before making the decision. We’d reached the conclusion that we’d be safe while in the sky. Besides, no matter what happened, there were enough strong fighters here to protect her.

James, Dan, and Gaddle and his party would remain in Saunshade. According to James’s investigation, undead monsters had been sighted in the area. They’d be a headache for the citizens who already had to worry about the ferocious crazed beasts. Gaddle and his party would be part of the team of skilled adventurers sent to dispatch them.

Just before we left, they came to say goodbye to us.

“Sorry, Masaki. We promised to take you to the capital, but we didn’t deliver,” Gaddle said.

“It’s all good, don’t worry about it. The situation’s changed. Besides, you guys have a lot of friends here, right?”

“Yeah... We don’t want to abandon them...”

“I get it. Take good care of them.”

I’d noticed how popular Gaddle and his friends were around Saunshade at the guild. Seasoned adventurers and newbies alike had greeted them.

To be fully honest, Gaddle and his party would have been a great help if they joined us, but I couldn’t ask that of them—not when I knew they’d be risking their necks. We’d be fighting an army. Even though Gaddle and his friends were better equipped than before, there was no guarantee they’d make it out alive. Adventurers lived risky lives, but I didn’t want to try to persuade them into a perilous situation. Besides, they had people they wanted to protect here. I wanted them to prioritize that. Shou and Colona would get us to the capital.

“I know you’re worried about breaking our contract, so allow me to change

it," I said. "I want you to protect your friends with the sword I gave you. That's my new request."

"Who am I to refuse my client's wishes?" Gaddle joked. "I also have a request of my own: come back alive. How will I fulfill our contract if you're dead? I need someone to report to."

"Don't worry. I'll come back alive. We all will."

We fist-bumped and I turned back to climb the ladder that would lead me atop the Quetzalcoatl.

It would be my first time riding an iron beast. Interestingly enough, the Quetzalcoatl looked very much like an Asiatic dragon. Its large wings, light almost seeming to flow from the tips, looked angelic.

"Impressive," I said. "It's almost like a plane. I can see why you're so proud of this beast, Shou."

Shou laughed. "And it won't break no matter how hard you fight," he said with a grin.

"You know I can't help my fighting style... It's a bit rough, but that's what I do best. Anyway, that's good to hear."

Zieg stood next to Shou, surveying the iron beast. Its broad back was like the deck of a ship. Enough seating had been installed to allow sixty people to board at once. Rails were installed all around the sitting area to prevent falls while a barrier protected us from the wind.

"All right then! Fasten your seatbelts and let's get going!"

We all followed Shou's instructions.

Alice was too small for the seatbelts, so she hid into my hood. As for Levia and Fen, they didn't understand how to buckle up, so I did it for them.

"We're good to go, Colona," Shou said.

"Understood, my lord. The take-off checklist has been cleared. Ready to depart. Destination set to: WILGARD, capital of the Beastmen Kingdom. Wings of Light, Quetzalcoatl, please depart."

The Quetzalcoatl let out a high-pitched cry as it opened its large wings. Before long, I felt a sense of weightlessness as we ascended into the air. The Quetzalcoatl was so quiet that I almost missed the moment we left the ground. More light poured out of its wings as it flew higher.

“We’re so high! Look, Masaki! It’s amazing! The city is so tiny!” Alice practically screamed in my ear.

Looking down, I watched the city become smaller and smaller. Eventually, the Quetzalcoatl leveled out of its ascent and surged forward with a flap of its wings.

The sudden acceleration should have taken a toll on our bodies, but we didn’t feel anything thanks to the iron beast’s powers. We cut through the wind and clouds, the magic storm raging high in the sky, but the Quetzalcoatl paid it no mind.

Looking at the landscape rushing past us, I had no doubt we’d arrive in less than a day.

It was maybe a bit ironic of me to think this, but Shou was pretty damn overpowered.

If any of this world’s powers learned of this beast’s existence, they’d be at Shou’s throat trying to steal it for themselves. Shou knew the risks, but he’d summoned it anyway.

He did that to help us. I’d have to thank him properly later.

Adel, Youko, Nemea, wait for me. I’ll be there soon.

I squeezed Akiha’s hand as I waited for the Quetzalcoatl to get us to our destination.

◆◇◆

A hooded woman hurried through the back alleys of the capital. She frequently looked over her shoulder, but her small stature helped her escape notice. Eventually, she reached a mansion. Its wood and plaster, in sharp contrast to the stonework of the buildings around it, felt oddly organic—reassuring, even.

The woman pulled back her hood, revealing golden hair and pointy fox ears. Her long hair swayed gently in the wind.

A maid who'd been attending to her tasks by the window saw her and immediately rushed to open the shoji—the Japanese-style paper sliding doors—that separated the interior from the garden.

"Welcome back, Lady Youko," she said.

"I bought what you asked for, Rina," Youko answered cheerfully.

She removed her hooded cloak before grabbing the hem of her shirt and fanning it. She was hot.

"Thank you. I've prepared iced barley tea, if you'd like," the maid offered.

"You're my savior, Rina."

Youko removed her shoes before stepping inside. This place wasn't like Masaki's mansion in Atami. It was similar to the building she'd known in Yamato, her home country.

The otherworlder who was currently welcoming them had been the one to build this Japanese-style house. The garden was also different from what was usually seen in the Beastmen Kingdom.

Rina led Youko to a tatami room.

"Welcome back, Youko."

Youko smiled. She looked around and noticed Nemea's absence. "Where's Nemea?"

"Training in the dojo. I don't know how he does it under present circumstances."

"Right. Even going out to shop is a pain these days. I stopped by the Adventurer Guild," Youko said, "and it seems like the rumors were true."

"The rumors about the garuda tribe getting ready to attack?"

"Yes. I heard it from a soldier, so I'm sure the information's legit."

"Good grief. What a mess. Who could have imagined we'd get dragged into a coup d'état?"

Youko had gone out with two objectives: purchase daily necessities and gather intel at the Adventurer Guild. She'd been an adventurer far longer than Adel and she was a half-beastwoman, so her presence wouldn't attract any attention.

After getting separated from Masaki and the others, Adel and Youko had followed Nemea to the capital. Thankfully, they'd arrived without a hitch. Nemea's master lived there and he'd agreed to house them. While waiting for Masaki to arrive, Adel and Youko had decided to do whatever they could. At the moment, their main focus was gathering information.

What they'd learned, thus far, was that the Great Earth Sanctuary had been sealed off roughly a month before their arrival, sequestering the priests and battle priests within from the outside world. This barrier had initially been set up by Jörmungandr himself to protect the sanctuary in case of emergencies.

No one seemed to know why the barrier had activated now, and while the sanctuary had ample supplies, they weren't boundless. Naturally, no one wanted to wait until the people inside willingly put down the barrier, so soldiers and adventurers tried to break the barrier. It didn't budge.

The garuda tribe had started moving after that. They purchased great quantities of food and military equipment and even hired mercenaries; they were preparing for war.

As the tribe marched, they used letters marked with the seal of the Great Earth Sanctuary to conscript the priests they found in the villages they passed along the way. With the Great Earth Sanctuary entirely sealed off, it shouldn't have been possible for the garuda to obtain such letters—and yet the seal was unmistakably that of the Great Earth Sanctuary.

After hearing of this matter, the Beast King had tasked his most skilled spies with investing. Only one of them came back. At that point, there was little doubt: the garuda were planning a coup.

The mysterious individual who was helping them, No Face, was also plotting behind the scenes. The king's spies soon discovered that the crazed beasts' attacks that had been causing unrest all over the kingdom weren't due to chance. No Face was behind them.

While crazed beasts had always attacked villages on occasion, they seldom ventured near large towns and cities. Now, emboldened, they attacked in packs, assaulting cities and towns at all hours of the day and night.

The roads weren't safe anymore in spite of the adventurers and soldiers working hard to deal with the crazed beasts. An atmosphere of tension and anxiety had fallen over the entire kingdom. Soldiers and adventurers alike were growing increasingly stressed out by the unending, unpredictable attacks.

Under such circumstances, even trivial matters were enough to trigger quarrels between adventurers. For the time being, most conflicts didn't escalate beyond scraps and fistfights, but it wouldn't be long before someone was killed—then everything could fall to chaos.

The situation in the capital was especially tense. People didn't go out anymore unless they absolutely needed to. Children were cooped up in their homes and the streets were empty. Every little shopping trip became a tense expedition.

Women, in particular, were too scared to go out unless someone was accompanying them. They could feel the danger looming at every turn. In fact, while Youko was outside, she'd been approached by several men. Needless to say, Youko was strong enough to fight back. She'd knocked down those who'd tried to physically assault her and handed them over to the soldiers guarding the city. While escorting them to the guards, she got to know them, which was how she came to learn about the garuda tribe's preparations for war.

"They told me to get out of the city while I still had the chance, that there was no reason for an unrelated adventurer to get caught up in all this. They even offered to help me get out if I wanted to... What should we do, Adel?" Youko asked.

"You already know what I'm going to say, don't you?" Adel answered. "I'll wait for Masaki here. Aren't you planning to do the same?"

"Obviously. Besides..." Youko smiled. She reached into her pocket and took out a piece of paper.

Adel looked at the paper, puzzled, before suddenly realizing what Youko's good mood could mean, what this white piece of paper could be.

“Youko! Don’t tell me—” she began.

“Yes!” Youko answered happily. “Masaki sent us a letter!” Youko showed Adel the precious piece of paper.

It was much whiter than the paper usually used in this world. Youko and Adel both remembered Masaki producing large quantities of paper to raise his woodworking skill. The paper he made was especially fine, a rarity in this world. Only royalty would have access to it.

Adel smiled. It was very much like Masaki to use such precious paper so casually. Adel didn’t dare blink as she read through the letter.

She was so relieved that she let out a sigh. “I’m so glad he’s fine...”

“Yes. They’re all fine,” Youko added. “I can’t believe he picked up a fairy on the way, though.”

“I’m curious about how she came to travel with him... But I supposed it’s very much like him.”

“It is.”

Adel and Youko were reminiscing about Masaki, giggling between themselves, when the shoji opened. A man in a white dogi appeared, his black hair streaked with gray. The man was approaching the end of his prime, but the muscular body rippling under his half-opened dogi belied his apparent age.

In fact, Rina, the maid who’d served Adel and Youko tea, was beside herself with excitement. She pressed a hand to her face to contain her nosebleed with very little success.

The man’s name was Iiyama Satoshi. He’d been summoned to a coastal city in Rand five years ago, where he quickly sided with beastmen and made his way to Arth to help them during the war. He was a fearless fighter.

“I can’t approve of the way they brutalize beastmen,” he’d said at the time. “I’ll have to give them a proper scolding.”

Then, he hijacked an empire ship and sailed off to fight alongside the beastmen.

Satoshi, in spite of his powerful musculature, had the calm and relaxed air of

an intellectual. He looked at Adel and Youko.

“You seem pleased,” he said. “Did anything good happen?”

“Yes. We’d like to let Nemea know as well, but... Mister Satoshi, can he talk at all?” Adel asked, looking at the unconscious, bruised battle leo Satoshi was carrying over his shoulder.

“You didn’t go easy on him,” Youko added, eyeing Nemea.

Adel and Youko were so accustomed to this sight that they were hardly concerned.

“If I go easy on him, how will he get stronger?” Satoshi asked. “You have to push them to the brink of death to see true progress. That’ll help him avoid death when push comes to shove.”

Satoshi’s training methods were strict. He beat up Nemea so much that an outsider would have wondered whether he was truly out to kill him. He delivered blow after blow without hesitation.

Adel and Youko were used to fighting, but they had still tried to stop Satoshi the first time they watched them train. Nemea had calmly told them that he was all right before getting on his feet to face his master once more. Adel and Youko hadn’t been able to do anything more than watch from the sidelines.

They’d watched this happen so many times over the past few weeks that seeing Nemea unconscious didn’t move them anymore.

“If you want Nemea to hear this, I suppose I’ll have to wake him up,” Satoshi said.

He sat Nemea down and gently woke him up.

The battle leo gasped as he opened his eyes. “AH! Oh... Did I pass out again?”

“You held out for much longer today. You did well, Nemea.”

“Thank you for your praise, master.”

“Well then,” Satoshi said, “it sounds like they have something important to tell you.”

“Something important?” Nemea repeated, sitting up.

He took a sip out of the cup of tea Rina had poured for him and listened to what Adel and Youko had to say. He couldn't help but let out a deep sigh of relief when he heard that Masaki and the others were okay.

Nemea knew that Masaki was strong, so he was confident they'd somehow manage to pull through and join them, but hearing it he'd actually pulled through was different. He discovered a sliver of doubt had snuck into his heart, but he finally felt at ease.

He wasn't worried for Masaki so much as he was worried for Fen—the person he'd sworn to protect and who was currently hidden in Masaki's Room.

He'd tried to tell himself that Masaki was reliable and could protect her, but he couldn't help but worry.

Nemea was handed Masaki's letter and, when he reached the part about Fen, his eyes widened in surprise.

"So, Fen became Masaki's adopted sister..." he said.

"Masaki has a knack for going through with crazy ideas," Adel said.

"He was already treating her like a younger sister, so isn't it fine? You're also like a big sister to her, Adel," Youko said.

"Well..." Adel thought about it for a moment. "I suppose you're right."

"Then let's rejoice. We have a new addition to the family. I, for one, am more than happy to welcome Fen. The only thing is... Nemea, how do you feel about this? You've always been by Fen's side, and now she's found a family."

"I don't have any complaints about this. If anything, I'm glad for her. The shaman..." he stopped, catching himself. "Fen has always wanted a family. To be honest, I never had the confidence that I could give her the protection she needed. I was never strong enough. Masaki has both the strength and the self-confidence needed to accomplish that. He'll protect her. And Fen will get the family she's always dreamed of. That makes me happy," he said, a soft smile on his face.

Seeing his reaction, Youko couldn't help but think of her own family in Yamato.

I'm sure Fen already thinks of you as family, Nemea. You're a father to her, anyone can see that. I'm sure you feel like any parent seeing his children leave the nest... I wonder if my parents felt similarly when I left...

Youko hadn't seen her parents in years, though she had sent a letter back home to inform them of her relationship with Masaki. A new family member might be the perfect occasion to visit home, she thought.

"So, that child finally has a family, huh?" Satoshi said. "I've long wished that for her, but I never would have expected someone from my world to take her under his wing. Life has a way of surprising you, doesn't it?"

Satoshi had met Fen when she and Nemea were on the run, right before they'd left the Beastmen Kingdom for good. He wasn't one to pry and he'd never asked for details, but somehow, the way Fen gazed at families walking together on the streets, yearning obvious on her face, had stuck with him.

"It's a good thing Fen found a family at last," Rina said. "You know, Nemea, in addition to worrying about you, master was also quite concerned for Fen. Last time, he told me he'd adopt her if you didn't."

"Master... I never knew about any of this..." Nemea replied.

"Some things are better left unsaid, Rina," Satoshi said. "Given how large this home is, I thought it wouldn't hurt to welcome a few more people. Either way, that child finally has a family. There's no need to burden her with that knowledge, so do not repeat it in front of her."

Satoshi took a sip of tea, a soft smile on his face. The next moment, his eyes suddenly darted to the window. Something was wrong.

The sky, which had been clear since early morning, had suddenly filled with dark clouds. It looked like it would start pouring rain at any moment now.

Satoshi soundlessly set his cup of tea on the table and quickly stood.

"If we want her to arrive safely, we'll need to take care of some troublesome matters first," he said calmly.

"What do you mean?" Adel asked.

Right as she finished speaking, a large explosion shook the ground.

“What was that?!” Youko exclaimed.

“The sound came from...the Great Earth Sanctuary. I apologize. I know you’ve only just returned, Youko, but it looks like we’ll have to go out at once. Blood has been spilled. I can feel it. The battlefield has come to us.”

Youko gasped, her eyes following Satoshi’s line of sight. “A battlefield?! Here?! In the city?! How can you tell?!”

They could vaguely make out some sort of din in the distance, but neither Youko nor Adel could tell what the noises were or where they were coming from.

“I happen to have been bestowed with an ability that helps with that. As a Martial Artist, it’s only natural that I should feel these things,” Satoshi answered before adding. “Rina, help our neighbors evacuate. Make sure they find refuge.”

“Yes, master. Please be careful,” the maid said.

She hurriedly opened the closet, took out a black suit, and handed it to her master.

As soon as Satoshi touched it, the suit and the dogi he’d been wearing shone. Then, a second later, he was wearing the black suit.

“Well then, I’ll be on my way.”

“I’ll be waiting for your return, master. Make sure to come back before tea time.”

“I shall.”

“I’m not so sure you should be talking about this like we’re going for an afternoon walk...” Adel said, her voice a mix of astonishment and admiration.

As she watched Rina and Satoshi interact, she couldn’t help but hope that, one day, she’d reach that level of familiarity and trust with Masaki. The two sounded like they were family.

“My master’s always like that,” Nemea said, fastening his belt. “You should get used to it.”

He was getting ready to fight.

They all stepped outside. Black smoke rose from the heart of the city. Satoshi's residence was close to the slums, away from the city center. As they got closer, they saw the chaos in the main street. Citizens were running around like headless chickens, trying to flee from the fighting. A large beastman passed carrying his friends in his arms. They saw a fleeing half-beastmen run by, each one clutching the other's hand so they wouldn't lose each other in the confusion.

These sudden attacks hadn't only hit the Great Earth Sanctuary. The four city gates—north, south, east, and west—had all been attacked as well. The capital was surrounded.

No one knew which way to run to safety, but panic had already taken over. As for Adel and the others, they were currently dashing through the empty back alleys to avoid being slowed down by the crowd.

"You head to the northern gate," Satoshi said. "That's where the fighting will be the fiercest. I can feel it."

"Understood," Adel answered. "But where will you go, Mister Satoshi?"

"The Great Earth Sanctuary."

"Are you sure you want to head there alone? I think Nemea should—"

"I'll be fine. I'm Nemea's master, I can handle myself. Leave the sanctuary to me and run along."

"I got it... Don't overdo it!"

"Sure," Satoshi said, then he leaped, kicked off the nearby wall, and sprang onto the roof of the building above them. He dashed forward, jumping from roof to roof.

"He's amazing," Youko said in awe. "He's not using any magic, is he?"

"He isn't. This is nothing for my master." Nemea's nose twitched. "We should hurry. The smell of blood is getting stronger."

Youko, whose sense of smell was also more developed than that of humans, could also detect the stench of blood in the air. She remembered that dreadful smell very clearly—the stench of death had been omnipresent during the war.

She solemnly took out her talisman, ready to call upon one of her golems.

The group continued to travel through the small alleys, dodging the crowd of panicked citizens. They were faced with a grim spectacle when they reached the closest street to the northern gate. Most of the soldiers who'd been manning the gate were already dead and so were dozens of citizens who'd been too slow to flee.

They spotted a crying child, frozen in place by fear. *He must have been separated from his parents during the attack*, Adel and Youko thought.

The garuda and crazed beasts, as expected, were behind the attack. The crazed beasts worked in tandem with the garuda tribe members, as if given orders. This wasn't the only strange part of the assault, however: the attacking garuda were covered in black scales and their eyes had a dangerous red gleam.

"Fuck! Hold the gate!" one of the soldiers screamed.

"But we can't cut through their damn scales!"

Another soldier groaned. "Our swords can't even make a dent! I feel like I'm fighting a crazed beast!"

One of the soldiers, badly outnumbered, desperately tried to protect the child who'd gotten separated from his parents.

One of the garuda roared, bringing his sword down.

"Damn! Run, kid!" the soldier screamed, locking swords with the garuda warrior.

Without giving either of them a moment of respite, a crazed beast lunged at the child. Adel jumped, unwilling to see another life lost before her eyes.

"I won't let you do that!"

Adel's blade, coated in a layer of red mana, pierced through the crazed beast's forehead just before its sharp fangs could reach the child. She'd made her blade so much sharper and sturdier than before with Mana Coagulation that it easily pierced through the crazed beast's scales, skin, and skull.

"Impossible!" one of the garuda exclaimed. "How did you pierce through its scales with that toothpick of yours?! Who are you?!"

Adel had just killed a damask lizard. It was the kind of monster you couldn't take out with a regular sword; especially not with a thin rapier—unless it was an artifact, that is.

"YAAAAAAAH!!!"

The soldier didn't let the opportunity Adel had created slip. He ran his sword through the garuda's throat.

The garuda gurgled, blood spurting out of his throat, before falling limply to the ground. The soldier was drenched in blood. He used his sleeve to wipe his eyes before looking around. A few moments had been enough for the situation to change dramatically.

"Dullahan! Get them!" Youko exclaimed.

A headless suit of armor rose to answer her call. Dullahan swung a thick log and used it to mow down the enemy—crazed beasts and garuda tribe members alike. A couple of crazed beasts sprang at Dullahan between its swings, but they quickly discovered they'd bit off more than they could chew when they tried to puncture the jet-black armor. Dullahan grabbed the beasts that had tried to attack it and used their bodies as improvised weapons to smash the garuda with.

The golem's large movements attracted attention, so, naturally, the garuda began focusing on the golem. Having noticed that, Nemea closed in on them swiftly. No one could have expected someone with such a large build to be so nimble and inconspicuous.

"Heavy Blow," he screamed, punching one of the garuda.

Nemea's powerful fists shattered its scales and sent its battered body tumbling back several meters. Nemea, using the skills he'd learned from his master—such as Iron-Cutting Kick or Heavy Blow—that could break his enemies' defenses, leveraged his speed and technique to provide cover for Dullahan. The golem was thus able to unleash its destructive power without hindrance. The two of them defeated this pack of garuda soldiers one after the other.

Before long, their group had gotten rid of most of the garuda tribe members

and crazed beasts. Seeing that the tide of the battle had turned, one of the last garuda standing swore. He'd finally understood that this battle was lost. He turned his back to Adel and the others and started flapping his large wings.

"Damn it! It wasn't supposed to go like this! I have to report to Lord Zand!"

"I don't think so!" Adel exclaimed.

She created a spear and hurled it at the garuda attempting to fly off. It pierced through his back right under one of his brown wings.

"ARGH!"

The last of the garuda was dead.

Adel was catching her breath when a soldier drenched in blood walked up to her. "Thank you for your help. You saved us. It doesn't look like you're from this country. Are you adventurers?"

"Something like that. Sorry to be so forward, but I need you to explain what's going on."

"As I'm sure you've heard, the garuda have decided to attack. What's shocking is that the crazed beasts seem to be helping them..." The soldier stopped and seemed to suddenly remember something. "That's right! There are dozens of garuda soldiers flocking to the northern gate! Please help the guards there! I'd run to them if I could, but my wounds are..." he trailed off.

The soldier's arm was bleeding. He'd most likely been lacerated by a crazed beast's claws. He was in no condition to continue fighting, that much was obvious to anyone.

Adel turned to look at Nemea. He nodded without a word and walked up to the soldier.

"Don't worry. We were already heading to the northern gate," he said, resting his hand on the soldier's wound softly and using a healing spell.

A pale light illuminated the soldier's body as his wound started closing up.

"Healing...?!"

"My spell is affected by the magic storm, so I can't completely heal you, but

you should feel a lot better. Please don't follow us to the gate, though. There's something else you should do," Nemea said, looking at the trembling child.

Not far from the child was a young man lying on the ground, clutching at his wounded arm. Plenty of other wounded citizens scattered the streets.

The soldier followed Nemea's gaze and nodded.

"You're right," he said after a pause. "Us soldiers are here to protect the people. I'll entrust the gate's defense to you."

"You can leave it to us!" Youko exclaimed, the cheerfulness of her voice in sharp contrast to the violence of the battle. "We'll take care of everything!"

The soldier smiled at her, then left to help the wounded find shelter.

"Follow me!" he exclaimed. "Form a circle—women and children in the middle! Help those who can't walk on their own!"

The citizens helped each other up and followed behind him. Children held each other's hands as they walked in the middle of the group.

Adel and the others headed in the opposite direction: toward the northern gate where the fighting was supposed to be the fiercest.

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At the northern gate, an army of crazed beasts and garuda was fighting the guards. The garuda were attacking from the ground and the air at once, leaving the garrison with few opportunities to fight back.

Most of the soldiers of the Beastmen Kingdom were beastmen. That meant their bodies were strong and suited to battle. They'd managed to overtake the elite troops of the Granfang Empire and did not fear death. Still, faced with the fierce attacks of the crazed beasts, they were quickly exhausting themselves. They also had to contend with the vicious aerial attacks of the garuda soldiers.

A mound of the dead, dying, and wounded was already forming in the shadow of the large gate.

Zand, the king of the garuda, sat on his stone throne and watched this grim scene through a crystal ball. The corners of his mouth warped into an ominous smile. What he saw brought him joy.

He laughed. “Destroy them! Ruin them! Kill them all and die if you must! Your lives shall make our dearest wish come true!”

Zand didn’t seem to mind seeing his brethren die. If anything, each death seemed to fuel his good mood. His entourage could see that something was wrong with their king, but they didn’t react. The light had disappeared from their eyes and they remained perfectly still, like lifeless puppets.

“No!” A cry of despair echoed behind Zand. “How could something like this happen...”

“Would you look at that?” Zand said. “Someone still has the strength to scream. I’m impressed, Great Priest.”

The old man who’d just screamed was the highest-ranking priest of the Great Earth Sanctuary—Zarandi Cyro. He wore a gold amulet around his neck, the symbol of his office.

Zarandi had been buried in the ground up to his neck. His lavishly embroidered outfit couldn’t be seen and the gold of his precious amulet was almost indiscernible under the dirt.

“Duke Zand! Are you insane?! Even if you succeed in taking over the kingdom, you’ll rule over nothing but a pile of ashes! Why would you destroy everything?! What are you trying to achieve?!”

Zand looked down at Zarandi. The priest could see the madness in his eyes, the cruelty in his warped smile.

“You want to know what my goal is?” He laughed. “Isn’t it obvious? The garuda will rule over this country—No! Over this continent! That is our dearest wish. I’m simply getting rid of those who stand in our way!”

“You’ve gone insane...” Zarandi said, casting his eyes down in anguish.

Zand snickered. “You’re entitled to your opinion, my dear priest. But before long, you’ll fall into despair, just like them,” he said, gesturing at the ground around him. “Your powers only exist for my benefit—for me to steal!”

Just like Zarandi, the rest of the priests had been buried to their necks.

“Urgh...”

“Wa... Water...”

“Someone... Please... my God...”

The priests’ weak cries of agony filled the dark room.

Zand was laughing at them when the door opened. A hooded figure stepped into the room—No Face. No one could have said whether they were a man or a woman.

“Zand,” the peculiar double voice said. “How is our plan coming along?”

“Oh,” Zand said, “it’s you, No Face. Well, see for yourself.”

He angled the crystal ball toward No Face. It showed the garuda soldiers killing citizens of the empire while crazed beasts devoured soldiers.

Zand laughed once more. “With the crazed beasts we borrowed from you and the miracle that made us evolve, it’s only a matter of time before the country falls into our hands! Mwahahaha!!!”

“If you could just make Jörmungandr’s power your own, there would be no contesting your superiority anymore,” No Face said, looking behind him. At the bottom of the chasm in the back of the chamber was a gigantic dragon—Jörmungandr, one of the Three Dragons. Countless vines crawled over his enormous body, wrenching his scaless off. Blood flowed continuously, staining the earth under him dark red.

“Are you sure this plan will go without a hitch, No Face? You said the Three Dragons would attack us.”

“That won’t be an issue. As long as we get our hands on *that* sword, Leviathan and Bahamut won’t be threats to us anymore. That’s why I made sure to capture Jörmungandr first. He’s the greatest obstacle between us and breaking the seal,” No Face said, looking at the thickest vine coiled around Jörmungandr’s body.

The vine, which had long been saturated to a blood red, crawled into Jörmungandr’s body like an artery, slowly siphoning his powers away from him. It was connected to the backbone of a large, glowing golden beast: Apoitakara—the ancient king of the crazed beast. Its empty eyes shone with a red light and

its frame shook in time with the pulse of the thick vine that poured Jörmungandr's powers into it. Apoitakara's body was said to be made of hihiirokane, a legendary metal, and he was almost as large as Jörmungandr himself. According to the tales of old, its powers also matched those of the Three Dragons.

The most eye-catching part of its body was without a doubt the gigantic horn, a manifestation of its power, but No Face eyes focused on something else. A red sword was sticking out of the base of Apoitakara's neck, stabbing deeply into its spinal cord.

No Face extended a vine and tried to grab the sword, but an invisible wall repelled the vine before it could touch it.

"We've siphoned so much power from him, but Jörmungandr is still maintaining the barrier. I shouldn't have expected any less of one of the Three Dragons," No Face said. "Zand, remember that the crazed beasts are nothing but sacrificial pawns. Don't be afraid to use them."

"I know that," Zand said with a laugh. "I sent a mithrilosaurus to every gate and I'm having oreichalkos guard the Great Sanctuary. Even if the three other dukes ally against us, they will not get past them."

"Splendid," No Face praised. "Please focus on undoing the seal as quickly as possible. Time is of the essence. We need to finish things here before unwelcome guests come poking their noses."

Zand was surprised. "For you to feel so strongly about them, they must be quite something."

"I've learned from my mistakes," No Face said. "Besides, the number of spies coming after us will only increase. I want everything settled before more otherworlders take notice of us. Wouldn't you agree, Kokuu?" No Face asked, turning to face the door.

Kokuu—the man who'd passed himself as the hunter—was leaning against the door. He wore a black suit.

What?! I didn't notice a thing... How long has he been standing there?! Zand thought. Just like his brethren, his body had changed. He was much stronger

and, more importantly, much sharper than before...so how had he not noticed the man entering? He hadn't even smelled him.

Zand was still staring at Kokuu when No Face suddenly said, "Oh my."

No Face had turned to look at the crystal ball showing the activities happening at the northern gate, where something peculiar was happening.

Crazed beasts poured through the door while garuda attacked from the sky. Needless to say, the guards were unable to react to both offensives simultaneously. They were collapsing one after the other into a pool of expanding blood.

That wasn't much different from the situation at the other gates. The only difference, in fact, was the sheer number of crazed beasts present. The northern gate was a crucial location to defend the city, but it had already been partially destroyed while most of the guards and soldiers manning it were dead.

Countless crazed beasts and garuda soldiers were entering the city through the broken gate. The soldiers were still containing most of them around the gate for now, but it wouldn't be long before they were overrun and the horde stormed through the entire city. The soldiers were almost powerless against the evolved garuda.

Even the battle leos—the strongest warriors amongst the beastmen—were struggling to pierce through their sturdy scales.

The situation was already hopeless, but yet another tragedy befell the guards.

BOOOOM!!!

An explosion erupted from the northern gate, its shockwave so powerful that it reverberated through the streets.

A mithrilosaurus had crashed through what remained of the gate. Its large horn stood proudly atop its head while a strange scale—shaped almost like a sword—stuck out from its back. Its limbs were as thick as logs and its body as large as a house.

A single attack from the newcomer had been enough to blow away what was left of the gate.

The mithrilosaurus roared as if to let the entire city know it had come. And its presence was enough to instill fear in the hearts of the soldiers. They'd been teetering on the edge of despair ever since the Garuda had launched their attack, but this was the coup de grâce. They'd lost the will to fight.

Right at this moment, something unbelievable flew past them. It was a fist—a gigantic fist. The most shocking thing, as far as the soldiers were concerned, was that nothing was attached to this fist. The silvery metallic fist was soaring through the air on its own.

When it reached the attacking force, it sent several crazed beasts and garuda flying back.

"GAAAAAAH?!"

The silvery fist cut right through the first wave. When it reached the mithrilosaurus, it struck with so much force that it blew the beast right back out of the city.

The soldiers couldn't believe their eyes. They didn't move, dumbfounded, until a large shadow covered them. They turned around in a hurry and were faced with a gigantic, mobile set of silvery armor.

"Phew, we made it in time," Youko, the pilot of the Exmizer said from inside the giant robot.

She looked down at the soldiers staring up at the robot.

"Wh-What in the world...is this thing?"

"A silver...giant?"

The soldiers were at a loss.

Adel, who'd been sitting on Exmizer's shoulder, jumped down and shouted, "Why are you all standing around?! This is your chance! Hit the enemies while they're hesitating!"

The soldiers came back to their senses at her words. They returned their attention to the crazed beasts.

"S-She's right! Charge! We'll protect our country with our own hands!" one of them exclaimed.

Cheers erupted.

The soldiers picked up their swords and rushed toward the gate.

“We’ll clean this up in a jiffy!” Youko said. “Follow me, soldiers!”

She activated Exmizer’s boost and it flew forward, knocking down the crazed beasts that stood in its way and making way for the soldiers. She pushed back the mithrilosaurus once more.

The large beast wasn’t about to go down without a fight, though, and it tried kicking Exmizer with its thick legs. However, someone else was sitting on Exmizer’s shoulder. Nemea, who’d been patiently waiting for his opportunity, jumped and brought down his leg on the mithrilosaurus’s thick neck.

“Iron-Cutting Kick!”

The battle leo’s strong kick crushed the monster’s scales and cut through its flesh. He didn’t manage to cut through the strong mithril bones of the beast, though. Nemea didn’t mind. He’d distracted the beast, so his job was done.

“GAAAAAAAAAH!!!” the mithril beast roared.

“And... Now!” Youko exclaimed. She used Exmizer to punch the faltering monster in the face.

The sound of bones shattering filled the air as the gigantic beast was blown away. It flew in a neat parabola before crashing onto the ground, shaking the earth.

Dozens of crazed beasts and garuda tribe members had been dragged down by the mithrilosaurus and they now lay under it, crushed to death beneath its weight.

The crazed beasts and the garuda were so shocked that their assault halted for a moment. Needless to say, the soldiers had no intention of letting that chance slip.

“CHARGE!!!” one of them—their leader, Youko, and Adel assumed—screamed.

“OOOOOH!!!” the others shouted in unison as they followed behind him.

“Let’s do our part,” Adel said. “Nemea, you have have my back, right?”

“Of course. I know I can’t hold a candle to Masaki, but I’ll make sure to protect you,” the battle leo said.

“I’ll get to work too!” Youko exclaimed. “Let’s go, Exmizer! Do your worst!”

Adel and Nemea fought together while Youko split away with her robot. They killed every crazed beast and garuda in their wake, turning the tide of the battle.

No Face stared at the crystal ball, annoyed. Under their hood, a sour expression twisted their face.

“Zand,” the double voice came, “send all of your forces to the northern gate.”

“Huh? Why? Wasn’t the point of this attack to demoralize them with incessant waves of crazed beasts?”

“The situation’s changed. Someone is operating a relic of the other world. And they’re not alone. Here, look.”

“Oh!” Zand gasped. “Are they the players you warned me about?” he asked, looking at Exmizer through the crystal ball that showed the northern gate.

When No Face didn’t answer, he added, “I understand. Not enough blood will flow if this keeps up. I’ll send the rest of my forces their way.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” No Face said. “I’ll start the ritual. It’s a little early, but we need to push the plan forward. Kokuu, protect the gate if everything else fails.”

“All right.”

After giving a curt answer, he went through the door and disappeared into the dimly lit pathway.

No Face jumped down the precipice, joining Jörmungandr, while Zand used yet another crystal to contact his troops. They were waiting in a forest near the northern gate. After giving his orders, Zand coughed a few times. He wiped his mouth, and when he looked at his hand, he saw it was stained with blood.

“Time is running out... That bastard’s using me, but I’ll return the favor,” he

said with a wicked laugh.

Zand clenched his bloodied hand and returned his crazed eyes to one of the crystal balls—the one that showed his army going through the forest.

A wave of crazed beasts would soon descend upon Adel and her comrades.

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The arrival of Adel's group had entirely changed the situation at the northern gate. Before long, the enemies had all been pushed back to the gate itself.

Adel and Nemea fought relentlessly, prioritizing the vicious crazed beasts that the soldiers couldn't handle on their own. Even the sturdiest of scales did nothing to stop Adel's rapier and Nemea's fists, and the crazed beasts fell one after the other.

As for Youko, she was utilizing Exmizer's gigantic frame to the utmost. The robot's size allowed it to easily reach the flying enemies, and each punch struck several garuda soldiers out of the air.

The soldiers were astonished. They'd thought the battle lost, but Adel and the others had turned the tide against all odds. Watching the newcomers fight had inspired the soldiers to rush back into the fray, weapons in hand, while others stayed back to use debris to create a new line of defense.

Just as they were beginning to think they would repel the attack, however, something unexpected happened once again.

"Huh? Wait... That's..." Youko said, surprised.

Exmizer was equipped with a precise map—much like Masaki's, so Youko was the first one to make sense of the situation. Her expression stiffened as she stared at the map.

"Be careful, Adel!" she shouted. "More crazed beasts are coming out of the forest! There are so many I can't even count them!"

"What?!" Adel replied, shocked.

"They'll be here any second!" Youko warned and, right at that moment, the trees at the edge of the forest came falling down as countless crazed beasts stormed toward them. They were packed so densely together that they almost looked like a single wave—a gigantic tsunami ready to crash down on them.

The first row of crazed beasts was covered in the blood and gore of the unlucky monsters and animals that had been standing in their path. When the soldiers saw them approaching, they couldn't help but picture themselves—what would be left of them, at the very least—similarly painted across the

beasts, and unconsciously took a step back.

Adel and Nemea looked at each other and nodded. Without hesitating even for a second, they ran past the soldiers to face the approaching wave of crazed beasts.

“Don’t be reckless! Retreat! Retreat!” the leader of the soldiers screamed.

Adel and Nemea paid him no mind and continued running.

Youko, who’d started advancing with Exmizer too, replied without even looking. “We can’t retreat. If we do, the city will fall. We promised someone important we’d wait for him in this city and we certainly won’t be leaving until he gets here!” she screamed, before activating Exmizer’s boost so she could catch up with Adel and Nemea.

In the meantime, Adel was busy using Mana Coagulation to strengthen her rapier once more. She’d made it sturdier and, more importantly, longer.

“I’ll break their line with one of my techniques. Cover me, Adel,” Nemea said.

“All right. I’ll leave it to you.”

Nemea nodded and took a firm step forward with his right leg. His left leg started glowing. He’d used Iron-Cutting Kick in front of Adel and Youko many times, but, this time, they noticed something different. The light that glowed over his limb wasn’t white, as it usually was, but a pale blue.

Adel knew that glow. She’d seen it several times— it was the characteristic hue of healing magic. Nemea was using healing magic on his own leg.

“Iron-Cutting Kick...Flying Swallow!” he shouted, swinging his glowing leg at the speed of light.

A gigantic blade of light—an extension of his leg—appeared. Over four meters long, it cut right through the wave of crazed beasts. The ground was split in two as well, effectively separating the monsters into two groups.

Adel was astonished by his destructive power, but she didn’t let that distract her. She had to make her move now.

The crazed beasts rushed toward Nemea, but the battle leo was still recovering. It was only natural considering the powerful blow he’d just

unleashed. To achieve that destructive power, Nemea had been forced to bypass his body's limitations by continuously healing himself. He'd forced his body to give more than it possibly could. The cost was high and he was in so much pain that he could barely bear it. Thankfully, it would only be temporary, but it still left him vulnerable to the crazed beasts charging at him.

One crazed beast roared as it lunged at Nemea. However, right before it could reach him...a crimson spear erupted from the ground and pierced through it.

"Crimson Pike!"

Adel had stabbed her rapier into the ground, creating a red light that spread across the ground in a circle. Blood-red spears erupted from the glowing earth, creating a wall of pikes that protected them from all sides.

Adel had created Crimson Pike by combining her unique skill, Mana Coagulation, with the skill she'd learned from Asta during the war against the empire, Mana Transfer.

Mana flowed through the earth just like it flowed through people. That had given Adel the idea to pour her mana into the earth using Mana Transfer and transform it into the shape she wanted with Mana Coagulation. Adel simply had to pour more mana into the ground to enlarge the circle and stab through countless crazed beasts with her spears.

"Adel, are you okay?" Nemea enquired. "You're using so much mana..."

"I'm fine. I'm using these guys to replenish my mana," she answered, pointing at the crazed beasts.

Even though vampires were born with large reserves of mana, they too had their limits. Adel should have already run dry, but she was making up for the mana loss by sucking mana out of the crazed beasts she stabbed thanks to Mana Transfer. She could only leach a small amount of mana from each of them, but the sheer number of crazed beasts she was drawing from allowed her to break even.

Adel had only recently learned how to use Mana Transfer in this way but, unbeknownst to her, vampires—ancestor vampires, to be specific—were feared for that very ability. They could suck the mana out of their enemies and fight

without ever tiring. According to old tales, a vampire had once defeated an entire nation alone by using this ability.

The soldiers cheered. Adel and Nemea's bravery helped them believe they still had a chance to protect the city.

"Oh my," Youko said, "Adel's really going at it. I need to show what I can do too! Let's go, Exmizer!"

Exmizer released a metallic rumble in reply.

The combat robot was over ten meters tall and each swing of its arms was powerful enough to scatter dozens of smaller crazed beasts like they were nothing but leaves. There was one crazed beast, however, that could resist Exmizer's blows. It grabbed its fist and wouldn't let go.

Youko gasped. "I didn't expect that..." she whispered. "Why is an orichalcus here? Its orichalcum body will be hard to deal with..."

The orichalcos were the strongest crazed beasts there were. They were large orichalcum dragons of over nine meters and usually never left the depths of the forest, so few people had actually laid eyes on them. Just like the other crazed beasts around, the eyes of this orichalcus shone with a dangerous red gleam—it seemed to be under someone's control.

Exmizer and the beast were still engaged in a struggle when Youko noticed that the orichalcus's throat was glowing.

"I won't let you!" she exclaimed. "Exmizer! Spiralling Knuckle!"

Exmizer swatted the orichalcus's hand away to free its arm, then swung a fist at the beast's head. Exmizer's fist spiraled like a drill and hit the crazed beast's chin at an angle, turning its head right as its golden breath erupted from its mouth. The crazed beasts that were hit by the breath were annihilated on the spot. Needless to say, the trees and foliage were also destroyed, leaving a trail of desolation where the dragon's breath had hit.

If the orichalcus got off more of these breath attacks, the buildings and forests around the capital would soon be devastated.

"Return the favor, Exmizer!"

Exmizer answered Youko's command with a high-pitched, mechanical noise. Its eyes shone red, like two burning infernos, as it started accumulating energy.

A new lever popped out inside the cockpit. It was shaped like a gun and came with a sight. Youko had never used a gun in her life, but Exmizer would let her know what to do.

Youko effortlessly operated the lever, adjusting her aim so that the sight was lined up with the monster. The blow to the chin had left it stunned, so aiming wasn't too difficult.

"Target locked! BURNING BEAAAAAM!!!" she screamed.



Light pulsed through Exmizer, then excess smoke was expelled out of its back. At the same time, a large beam of light cut through the air. It sliced right through the orichalcus and opened a gaping hole in its body.

“Gu...o?” the monster groaned weakly.

It didn’t seem to understand what had happened, then it collapsed to the ground with a thump, dead.

Exmizer’s Burning Beam hadn’t only taken down the orichalcus, however: its beam of light exploded after finally striking the ground, eradicating countless crazed beasts.

Youko had only been able to deliver such a powerful blow thanks to her contract with Exmizer, which allowed her to use a hundred percent of its power. Chogokin, Exmizer’s previous owner, for all his piloting skills, wouldn’t have been able to unleash such a powerful attack. Strangely enough, Exmizer had surpassed its initial limits here, in a whole new world, inspiring all of the soldiers watching in awe.

“So powerful... I can’t believe it...” one of the soldiers said. “But if that giant is on our side...”

“Then we can do it... We can win this fight!” another added.

“We’ll use this chance to push them back! Let’s go help them!”

“Follow the silver giant—No, the Silver God! We’ll show them what beastmen can do when they put their mind to it!”

War cries erupted among the soldiers. The crazed beasts—few were left now—jolted at the loud sounds and slowed down. Such powerful war cries were intimidating. If hundreds of soldiers roared at the same time, the crazed beasts, which were ultimately animals with wild instincts, were bound to react.

The same went for the garuda soldiers. Their minds and bodies had been strengthened, but their beastly instincts were stronger still. Now that the crazed beasts and garuda soldiers were stricken with fear, they were no match for the soldiers of the capital. Adel, Youko, and Nemea had already gotten rid of most of the crazed beasts. Morale plummeted among the enemy as they realized

there would be no coming back from this attack.

The next hour was spent decimating the last of their ranks, until the large army that had covered the horizon had been turned into piles and piles of corpses.

Toward the end, a few garuda soldiers tried to flee to avoid death, but Adel and Youko killed every last routing soldier.

In the midst of the garuda's rout, Nemea spotted a peculiar garuda. Unlike the others, he was wearing a luxurious set of armor and was riding on the back of a mithrilosaurus. Nemea immediately understood that this beastman had to be a commanding officer. He grabbed the tail of a nearby damask lizard and hurled it at the garuda officer.

"FASTER! GO! FASTER!" the garuda cried, spurring his mount forward. "Damn it! Stop dawdling, you trash!" he screamed at the remaining crazed beasts. "Listen to my orders! You should be thankful we're using you! Now hurry before that giant gets here!"

Having seen Exmizer's prowess up close, the officer was terrified of the robot. He was so focused on barking reckless orders at the crazed beasts that he hadn't noticed the beast flying at him. By the time he did notice it, it was right in front of his eyes.

The officer gasped. "Fuck!" he swore.

He drew his sword, but one of the damask lizard's limbs severed his head before he could try to slice the large beast to pieces. As his headless corpse hit the ground, the crazed beasts all stopped in their tracks.

"What's going on?" Youko asked.

After pausing for a moment, one frenzied crazed beast gave up on the fight altogether and started retreating.

It roared...and was soon answered by another crazed beast. Before long, all of the crazed beasts were retreating.

The mithrilosaurus on which the officer had been riding also turned its back to Nemea. The ground shook with every one of its steps as it retreated back to the

forest.

“What happened? They were fighting with everything they had and now they’re leaving?” Adel said, puzzled.

“That garuda must have been responsible,” Nemea said.

He found the officer’s corpse and discovered a golden jewel covered in vines within one of his pockets. The jewel was cracked and the vines were already starting to wither.

“I’m just speculating, but,” Nemea continued, picking up the stone. “I assume the garuda were controlling the crazed beasts with this.”

“You’re probably right,” Youko said. “This stone feels so ominous. The mana it emits is very similar to that of the crazed beasts. I’d love to study it, but—woah!”

While Youko was speaking, the crack deepened, splintering across the gem. Then it shattered, leaving only dust in Nemea’s palm.

Adel looked at Youko.

“Can you study that?” she asked.

“Obviously not!” Youko fumed. “There’s nothing left!”

Adel let out a strained laugh. As for Nemea, he was staring at the powder left in his hand. He closed his fist and looked at Adel and Youko.

“Still, we learned something crucial,” he said. “The crazed beasts are victims, too. No need to hunt down the ones that are no longer under the garuda’s control.”

“Right,” Adel said. “We took care of the northern gate, but the other gates will still be trying to repel the attacks. Youko, can you take us to the next battlefield?”

“Leave it to me!” she exclaimed, making Exmizer kneel. “Get on, get on!”

Adel and Nemea jumped onto the other knee before effortlessly climbing onto the towering robot’s shoulder. Even with the effects of the magic storm, Adel could still fly to some extent. As for Nemea, he made use of his strong

lower body to jump.

After making sure that her passengers were holding on to Exmizer properly, Youko pulled a lever.

“Up we go!” she exclaimed. “Hold on tight, guys!”

Exmizer’s boosters were activated and he slowly rose into the sky. Youko vigorously pulled on the lever once more and the robot soared across the battlefield, kicking up a cloud of dust.

“I feel like a storm has passed...” one of the soldiers said, watching them leave.

“A divine storm... No, a divine wind...” another whispered.

None of them said another word, but all of the soldiers thought the same as they looked at their savior’s back:

Silver God, protectors, please... Save our people.

Adel, Youko, and Nemea would go down in history as the “Silver Protectors” that had saved the city. Naturally, at this point in time, they had no way of knowing that.

Exmizer dashed along the city walls, batting aside the crazed beasts that tried to stop its advance, until the eastern gate came into view. Adel and the others were taken aback by what they saw: there wasn’t a single crazed beast around the gate.

Instead, they noticed dozens of garuda soldiers on the floor, lying in a puddle of blood, as well as a gigantic crater. A gigantic dragon—bigger than even Exmizer—was looming over the crater.

Adel and the others were on guard until they saw someone jump down from the dragon’s shoulder.

“That’s—” Youko exclaimed, unable to finish her sentence.

Adel immediately jumped off Exmizer’s shoulder and flew straight toward that person.

“Masaki!!!”

“Adel! I’m so glad you’re all right!”

The gigantic dragon—the Quetzalcoatl—had finally reached its destination.

Youko followed behind Adel with Exmizer.

“That’s not fair, Adel! You got a head start!” she complained, coming out of the cockpit.

“Youko! I’m so relieved to see you’re fine too!”Masaki exclaimed, pulling Youko into the hug he was already sharing with Adel.

“W-Wait, Masaki! I can’t breathe!” Youko said, flustered.

“Oh. Sorry,” he apologized, but did not let go. “But let me hold you for a moment. I’m just so happy to see the two of you again...”

Youko blushed and stopped wiggling. Instead, she hugged Masaki tighter and took in his smell. It felt familiar and grounding and she realized once again how much she’d missed him.

“I don’t know what to say...” Adel said. “I suppose ‘Welcome home’ would be fitting.”

“I agree,” Youko said. “He finally came back to us—his home. So, welcome home, Masaki.”

“Youko, Adel... I’m home,” Masaki said softly.

“Thank you for making it home, Masaki,” Adel said.

“Thank you and welcome back,” Youko added. “I always knew you’d be fine, but finally having you back and seeing you unhurt and healthy is all I could ask for. I’m so thankful.”

For the next few seconds, the three of them continued to hold each other, their hearts quivering with relief.

Eventually, Youko noticed Akiha jumping off the dragon’s back.

“I’m glad to see you’re okay too, Akiha,” Youko said.

“Likewise. I’m relieved to see you’re both safe. And...erm...there’s something

I need to tell you...”

“What is it?”

“Well...” Akiha was struggling to speak. Her face had turned bright red and she squirmed restlessly.

“Guys? I get you’re having a moment here, but did you forget where we are?” Shou asked.

“Sorry, my bad,” Masaki said.

Shou shrugged. “I can tell you’re not really sorry,” he sighed. “Well, I get why you’re so happy to see them, though.”

Colona jumped down from the Quetzalcoatl, holding Fen in her arms. As soon as she put the little girl down, she rushed to Nemea.

“Mister Nemea!”

“Shaman... No, Fen, I’m relieved to see you safe.”

“I’m happy...that you’re fine too,” Fen said before running to Adel and Youko. “And...hmm...I’m happy to see you again, Big Sister Adel and Big Sister Youko...”

Adel smiled and affectionately started patting Fen’s head. Youko, who’d also reached out but had been beaten to it by Adel, let her hand hover awkwardly a few centimeters away from Fen’s head. She seemed a bit disappointed.

“Fen, is it really safe for you out here?” Adel asked.

“You always worry too much, Adel,” Youko said. “If Masaki let her come out, it must mean she’ll be safe. Right, Colona?”

“Indeed,” Colona said. “It’s been a while, Lady Adel, Lady Youko. We made sure Fen would be safe on the way here and will continue protecting her.”

“That’s good to hear,” Adel said. “And I assume that dragon is one of Shou’s iron beasts,” she added, looking at the Quetzalcoatl.

“It’s so big. Isn’t it almost as big as Leviathan?” Youko asked before suddenly remembering something. “Speaking of Levia, where is she? I have so many questions for her! For all of you, actually!”

“We’ve also got questions,” Masaki said. “For starters...what’s going on

here?”

◆◇◆

I see.

Apparently, the king had noticed that the garuda tribe was acting shady a while ago, but he’d been so busy dealing with the crazed beast’s attacks that he hadn’t done anything about them before it was too late.

The Beastmen Kingdom had exhausted its resources fighting the crazed beasts, its supply lines frequently harassed by their attacks. It was no wonder they were unable to put up a decent fight now that the garuda had launched their coup d’état.

The garuda and No Face’s planning had been perfect—save for the fact that they hadn’t expected us to be there.

Adel, Youko, and Nemea had most likely disrupted their plan. The three of them were powerful enough to take on a battalion on their own—more even, if Youko used Exmizer.

For some reason, Adel, Youko, and Akiha were huddled together whispering between themselves.

“So, you finally told him how you felt, Akiha?” Adel asked.

“Yes... Hmm... I’m so sorry. I should have talked it through with the two of you before acting on my feelings.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure you got closer while traveling together. There’s no helping that. Besides, I told you before we were fully ready to accept you. I’m just happy to have another like-minded friend around and I’m sure Adel agrees,” Youko said.

“Exactly. We’ll be a family from now on, so let’s take care of each other, all right, Akiha?”

“Adel... Youko... Thank you very much. I genuinely appreciate the kindness you’re showing me and—”

“Stop acting like a stranger, Akiha. As I said, we’re family now,” Adel cut her.

Youko giggled. “As she said.”

“Ah... I apologize... I suppose that makes it sound like we’re strangers too, huh? I’ll just say thanks, then.”

“Perfect,” Youko praised.

Adel nodded.

My three wives seemed to have reached an agreement. *Boy, it’s kind of hard for me to butt into their conversation. I probably should, though, since it’s all on me. I’m the one who made a move on Akiha, after all. That first time at the village doesn’t really count.*

After the three of them finished talking, Adel turned to me.

“Anyway, Masaki, dozens if not hundreds of crazed beasts were supposed to be at the eastern gate. Where did they go? Did you defeat them after arriving?”

Oh, that.

“That would be Fen and Colona’s doing,” I said. “We didn’t have to tire ourselves out thanks to them.”

“Fen and Colona?”

“Indeed,” Colona said. “We left Saunshade, the largest city in the south, for the capital, but when we reached the vicinity of the capital, we were faced with a peculiar phenomenon. An abnormal number of crazed beasts were marching toward the city. Lady Fen then stated that she felt a strange presence.”

“Yes... Hmm... It was a very bad presence... I didn’t really know what it was...but I just felt like I had to stop it...somehow... So, I asked Big Sister Colona to look into it...”

“Big Sister Colona...” Colona repeated before clearing her throat. “Indeed, that would be me. I investigated the crazed beast army from the sky and discovered an odd source of mana in their midst. After observing them for a while longer, I discovered that the closer to the mana the crazed beasts were, the more precise their movements were. Conversely, those who were further away behaved erratically. I informed Lord Masaki and my lord immediately.”

“Which led us to assume that the dude with the strange mana had something

to do with their behavior. So, we had my friend there shoot him," Shou said casually, pointing at the Quetzalcoatl.

The large iron beast proudly cried out.

"As it turned out, the attack hit the right guy," I added. "The crazed beasts started scattering immediately after we wiped him out. Only the garuda soldiers remained, but Akiha and Colona took care of them from the sky."

Akiha and Colona nodded. Their aim was so good that shooting people from the back of a moving iron beast had been easy as pie—the garuda had practically looked motionless to them.

We had been only surprised by one thing: even from the sky, we'd been able to tell that these garuda soldiers didn't quite look like what we'd heard garuda tribe members looked like. They were covered in sturdy scales.

Akiha's bullets had pierced through them, though. Her bullets could easily go through mithril, after all. As for Colona, she used a laser rifle that seemed right out of a sci-fi movie. I had doubted my eyes for a moment when I saw her laser shoot through several soldiers at once.

Anyway, the garuda were all dead by the time we landed.

"After we landed near the southern gate, Levia, Alice, and Sieg headed to the western gate. We went the opposite way, to the eastern gate."

Just like at the southern gate, the battle ended in the blink of an eye. There were more garuda soldiers at the eastern gate, but they were no match for Akiha and Colona. They rained bullets upon them while I used Sonic Blade to take out those that managed to get close.

"Alice is sensitive to magic, so she must have looked for the abnormal mana source at the western gate. Fairies are able to sense the smallest perturbation in the flow of mana. They're even more perceptive than dragons," I explained.

"Alice is the fairy you mentioned in your letter, right?" Adel asked.

"Yeah. She's a bit of an oddball, but I can guarantee her strength. Sieg is an otherworlder, just like Akiha and me. We met him by chance when we were in the south. He's strong and reliable. Levia and Alice are in good hands with him."

“I see. In that case, Levia and the others should be back soon, I suppose,” Adel said.

“Speak of the devil, here they are. Heyyy! Leviaaaaa!” Youko called out.

Youko was the first to notice them and used Exmizer to wave. It was a bit surreal, watching a gigantic robot wave its hand like that.

Levia and the others were currently riding on an iron beast they’d borrowed from Shou, the Jet Falcon.

Most iron beasts could only be controlled by Shou himself, but the smartest ones could follow others’ orders if their master commanded them to.

Leaving Alice and Levia alone worried me, so I’d asked Sieg to tag along and watch over them. He was strong enough to fight garuda soldiers and responsible enough to deal with the problem children of our group.

The Jet Falcon glided through the air until it landed, a few meters away from us. The sound of the engine had yet to quiet down, but Levia and Alice jumped down anyway.

“Oh! Adel, Youko! It’s been a while! Glad to see you’re doing good,” Levia said.

“Hey! Don’t jump off before the Jet Falcon comes to a complete stop!” Sieg yelled.

“It’s fiiiine. I can fly and Levia won’t get hurt even if she falls,” Alice said.

“It’s *not* fine. I’m getting stressed out just looking at you,” Sieg muttered, coming down from the Jet Falcon now that it had fully stopped.

Sieg had yelled, but I could tell it was only because he was worried for them. Levia was an ancient dragon but, right now, she looked like a kid. Anyone would worry.

“So, Levia,” I started. “How was the situation at the western gate?”

“We took care of everything. Alice found the garuda controlling the crazed beasts for me and I took him out in one attack,” she answered.

Alice giggled, a proud grin on her face.

“Good grief. Watching her fight was bad for my heart,” Sieg said. “I didn’t quite believe she was one of the Three Dragons until then, but seeing a little kid unleash a dragon breath was quite something.”

I understood where Sieg was coming from. No one would believe that a young girl like Levia was truly one of the Three Dragons—until they saw her in action, that is.

The garuda army that’d been closing in on the capital had been entirely dealt with. The last place we needed to take care of was the Great Earth Sanctuary.

The ground suddenly shook violently.

“Huh?!”

“W-What was that?!”

“The ground...is shaking?”

“An earthquake?”

The ground only shook for a few seconds before stopping. I hadn’t felt an earthquake in ages. I looked around and noticed that Adel and Youko were more shaken than expected.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“What? Oh. Hmm... Yeah... It’s just that, the ground shook. What was that?” Adel asked, a worried look on her face.

“It did! What in the world was that?!” Youko added, clinging to me.

Considering their reaction, it didn’t seem like earthquakes were all that common in this world.

That reminded me of that time when I’d asked Jimmy what our tsunami countermeasures were. I was shocked to find out he didn’t even know what a tsunami was. I’d looked through a few records after that, but there were no mentions of a tsunami ever occurring.

If an earthquake had occurred...it most definitely meant that something strange was happening.

I was so lost in thought that I didn’t notice Fen approaching until she pulled

on my sleeve. She looked distressed. In fact, I'd never seen her so scared. Her hair was standing on end.

"Big Brother Masaki! Lord Jörmungandr... Lord Jörmungandr is in danger!"

"What happened, Fen?" Levia asked. "Did Ouroboros speak to you again?"

"I don't know! I don't know, but...I can tell that Lord Jörmungandr isn't himself anymore! Soon, it will be too late..."

Fen was obviously not in her normal state and what she was saying didn't make a lot of sense, but she'd heard Ouroboros's voice before. If she felt that something was wrong with Jörmungandr, it was most likely the case.

"We need to hurry up, Masaki. Fen's gut feeling and that earthquake have to be linked somehow. Besides...I can't feel the old man's presence," Levia said.

"I agree. Something's up. Let's hurry to the Great Earth Sanctuary."

Everyone nodded and we started running toward the sanctuary. We didn't know what was going on, but we didn't have much time to find out.

I like to take things easy, but No Face is forcing my hand here. I'll have to make them pay for that.

Chapter 7

The sound of glass shattering filled the dimly lit room.

“I won’t allow this,” Zand groaned. “I will *not*!”

He gritted his teeth, eyes locked on what remained of the crystal ball he’d just smashed into pieces. He’d punched a hole into the desk, collapsing the wood into a heap over the glass shards littering the floor.

“Now that the situation has come to this, I’ll have to rely on my last resort. Gather everyone,” he said.

“At once!” a garuda knight who’d been on standby exclaimed before hurrying out of the room.

“What do you intend to do?!”

Zand snickered. “Zarandi,” he started, “do you know how the garuda came to be?”

“Well... I believe your kind descended from the beastmen that have long ruled over the skies.”

“You’re partially correct, but you got something wrong. The garuda weren’t originally beastmen.”

Zand’s unexpected answer surprised Zarandi. The great priest was an elf. Over a century old, he’d witnessed and heard many things over the course of his long life. He’d never heard anything about the garuda not being beastmen, though.

“If we’re not beastmen, then what could we be?” Zand asked. “Any guess?”

“Another race that inhabited this continent since the olden days...” Zarandi stopped to think for a moment. “There were...crazed beasts, elves, dwarves...” he trailed off.

“I’ll make it easier for you,” Zand said.

He spread his wings out. There was a peculiar cracking sound and the scales that coveredhis wings broke away, revealing neither feathers nor skin but a

translucent membrane that was oddly reminiscent of an insect's wings. They looked very much like the wings of a dragonfly.

"No way... You are—"

"Indeed. We, garuda, are fairies. We're the only descendants of the great faes of old!"

Zarandi had only read about this ancient race in old records. Zand seemed eager to narrate the truth behind his ancestry and spoke with no pauses.

A long time ago, the great faes lived in Arth. They settled in places filled with strong energy and used the rich mana they found inside the earth for sustenance. Magic storms often swept over their dwellings, but the great faes did not mind for they helped keep outsiders far from their land.

For the most part, the great faes were a peaceful race. They were happy to live in isolation and did not seek to contact other races. Some, though, used their power to get what they wanted.

In those days, beastmen were engaged in a constant war as various tribes fought over border conflicts and disputes. One day, a great fae was born. His name was Garuda and he would later go on to become the founder of the garuda tribe. Garuda was born with an unparalleled talent for wind magic. He could fly as freely as a bird and unleash wind gusts and tornados at will. Unlike most great faes, Garuda was a fighter. He waged wars against every tribe he could, using wind magic to lay waste to them, destroying entire races at times.

Great faes had a particularity. Whenever they used strong magic spells, a fairy that resembled them would be born out of their mana. Garuda fought so often that he gave birth to thousands of vicious fairies.

Before long, a third of the continent had fallen under Garuda's rule. Windstorms and magic storms raged all over the land. The strong winds uprooted trees and dried rivers, while the barren land developed large cracks. Arth was on the verge of turning into a desolate desert—a continent of death.

Understanding that something had to be done, the beastmen, elves, and dwarves sought the help of the fairies. Together, they sealed off the entrance of the Material World, the source of the fairies' powers. In fact, the Fairy Paths

that still existed nowadays were vestiges of those times.

Great faes were a type of fairy, so naturally, Garuda and his minions were greatly affected. Their powers weakened so much that their lives were in peril.

Unable to rely on their fellow great faes for help, the other great faes cast Garuda and his minions away to avoid needless conflict with the beastmen and other races and, after the door to the Material World was closed, they decided to retire far, far away from all others to live in greater isolation than ever before.

After this, Garuda and his minions were left with two choices: face death at the hands of their countless enemies, or disguise themselves as beastmen and live hidden among them.

At the time, no one really knew how many species of beastmen existed and winged beastmen weren't unheard of. Harpies and birdmen, for instance, were known to live in the mountains. Garuda made use of that fact. He and his own ran away from the beastmen, elves, and dwarves, and used the last of their magic to change their appearances, shedding their delicate features to become ugly beasts with bird-like characteristics. They held onto their grudge, however, and swore to seek revenge.

"We lived in disgrace for generations, but we never forgot our history," Zand said. "We bided our time quietly and, centuries ago, the perfect opportunity presented itself. The garuda almost succeeded in placing one of our own on the throne of the Beastmen Kingdom. They would have all cowered at our feet. Someone spoiled our plans, though."

"The first Beast King... Hatilus," Zarandi whispered.

"If that damn fenrir hadn't gotten in our way, we would have ruled over this entire kingdom! The fenrir tribe is dead now, and the last annoyance, Jörmungandr, has fallen into *their* hands. Our time has finally come, but these pests are getting in our way... How dare they interfere with my plans?!" Zand sighed. "They leave me with no choice. I didn't want to resort to this, but..."

"Resort to what?" the great priest asked.

Zand's subordinate seemed to have relayed his orders, and the garuda were

steadily gathering. A knight was summoning them one by one and ordering them to take their spot atop a line drawn on the floor.

“You stand there!” the knight directed. “Don’t move!”

“Understood.”

The garuda were given no explanation whatsoever, but they still diligently followed their orders. They stood at their designated spot without a word of complaint.

The first circular line was connected to several other lines that eventually stretched all the way to Zand’s throne.

Zarandi was captivated by the strange spectacle.

Soldiers were expected to follow their superiors’ commands regardless of place or time, but such peculiar orders usually raised questions or hesitation. There was neither question nor hesitation here, however. The garuda obeyed Zand’s command like it was perfectly normal.

While it surprised Zarandi, their reaction was only natural. These people could not defy orders anymore. In exchange for the new powers they’d earned, they’d lost their free will.

“Behold! The supreme rulers of this continent...the great faes will rise once more!” Zand exclaimed.

He slowly stood up and started chanting. Even Zarandi, who’d lived for a century, had never heard this language.

As Zand chanted, light started overflowing from the magic circle drawn in the room. It gradually became brighter and brighter.

The garuda standing on the lines did not move from their spots, though they did begin to tremble. Their lips curled into twisted smiles. They almost seemed to be in a trance.

The light rose from the circle and started covering their entire bodies.

“AAAAAH!!!” one of them screamed.

The next second, his body exploded into countless particles of light. One after

the other, the rest of the garuda soldiers burst open in the same way. The magic circle swallowed this light, growing brighter and brighter with each garuda it consumed. Zarandi could feel the power contained inside the circle grow stronger and stronger.

By the time all of the garuda vanished, the magic circle was as bright as the sun. Zarandi couldn't keep his eyes open.

"Watch in silence, Zarandi!" Zand shouted. "Garuda, the great fae shall be reborn!"

The light emitted by the magic circle converged on Zand. The ominous light was now even more blinding than the sun itself. At the same time, strong winds started blowing inside the room.

Zand started laughing hysterically. With a single movement of his wrist, the wind and light spiraled violently. The room shook and small fragments fell down from the ceiling until, finally, the storm settled.

A beautiful young man with delicate, elven features stood proudly in the rubble. His long green hair almost reached the floor and six black, elliptical wings sprouted from his back. He wore a light green outfit that brought to mind the wind.



“Power is coursing through my veins... That’s the strength of the great faes! Mwa ha ha! This is nothing like those fleeting powers I’ve been borrowing...this is the real deal! I’ll rule over this entire world!”

Strong winds once again threw the room into disarray.

Wanting to try out your new powers immediately was an instinct every living being shared and Zand was no exception.

He played with his new powers for a while before looking up and extending his hand toward the ceiling.

He laughed once more. “Zarandi, bear witness to my powers!”

Zand gathered the winds into his palm and condensed them to a fine point, then released them. A black tornado rose from his hand and broke through the ceiling, piercing through the ceilings of the upper floors one after the other.

Eventually, his tornado destroyed the roof, and sunlight flooded the room.

“This place is far too cramped for me to unleash my full powers. No matter, I’ll relocate. I need to show these fools what a true ruler looks like.”

Dark winds gathered around Zand and he rose into the sky.

Zand’s dark winds had reached the bottom of the precipice. There, No Face was busy stabbing vines into Jörmungandr’s large form. The vines ran crimson as they wound through Jörmungandr. They pulsed rhythmically, making the ground beneath No Face quake.

Jörmungandr’s eyes were closed and it didn’t look like he was about to wake up any time soon. On the other hand, a red light shone in the empty eye sockets of the gigantic skeleton that lay next to him. The flickering light gave the illusion that the beast was alive.

No Face laughed. “Finally. It’s almost time. Zand could have been a little faster, but I suppose this is fine. I don’t mind him clinging to his delusions, but he could have made up his mind faster. It’s not like he can turn back anyway... Well, I do hope he’ll do his job before falling apart entirely.”

No Face sounded pleased as they looked at Zand through a crystal ball.

“I’ve made it this far. I won’t let you get in my way, otherworlders. This is the first step to making our wish come true...”

No Face reached out for the black wind that floated next to them, a wicked smile on their face.

“Earth Dragon, Jörmungandr. I’ll make good use of you and your powers...for our sake,” the double voice whispered.

No one was there to hear them or witness the eerie smile they hid under their hood.

◆◇◆

We went through the nearest gate and were faced with a ghastly sight: crumbled houses and burning shops, walls stained with blood and streets filled with the corpses of crazed beasts and garuda soldiers.. Among them, I spotted several beastmen, elves, and dwarves too.

“Don’t look, Fen. Keep your eyes closed,” Nemea said, covering Fen’s eyes with his hand as he carried her.

“O-Okay...”

She hadn’t gotten to see the capital for so long. Letting that be her first memory here would be too brutal. I wished I hadn’t let her out of my Room, but it was a bit too late for that. The effects of the magic storm were much stronger here than in the forest and I couldn’t even create a window anymore.

Nemea was taking care of Fen, but Alice, who was in my hood, had seen everything. I could feel her trembling.

“What in the world... How... How could something like this happen?!”

“You should close your eyes too, Alice,” I told her.

It was a difficult sight to take in. Alice had seen her fair share of fights, but she’d never witnessed a battle of this scale. This was too much for her.

“No... I don’t think I should avert my eyes... I shouldn’t ignore this horror...” she said. “All I know is that I won’t ever forgive those who did this.”

Alice was usually carefree and optimistic to a fault, but she was the most

empathetic person I knew—or should I say the most empathetic fairy? *I'm glad to see you stand up for what's right, but don't get yourself into danger!*

The Great Earth Sanctuary stood at the center of the Beastmen Kingdom. The capital itself had been built around it, so we'd reach it easily if we headed toward the center of the city.

When looking toward the city center, I could also see the royal castle. It was located at the top of a gigantic tree and looked right out of a fantasy novel.*It's almost a castle in the sky!*

The tree that supported the castle was so big that the castle could probably fit inside it several times over. On top of serving as the castle's foundation, the tree also doubled as a defense mechanism, making the castle itself unapproachable.

In fact, the current mayhem had not reached the castle at all. The fire had spread to the base of the tree, but it was nothing serious and the tree itself wasn't damaged.

I checked my map and noticed that there weren't that many red marks—enemies—left. Most of the marks that appeared on my map were neutral. They represented the soldiers of the Beastmen Kingdom. The people I hadn't met yet usually appeared this way unless they were hostile toward me or my friends.

This time, we'd made it here before it was too late. It wouldn't end as it had in the empire.

Some crazed beasts and garuda soldiers attacked us on the way, but we took care of them while running. Our team was quite impressive in terms of fighting power. Youko was leading the way with Dullahan, Adel, Akiha, and Colona were in the middle and fired preemptive strikes with their long-distance weapons, and Nemea and Sieg ran at the back to finish off the crazed beasts we encountered.

Shou, who was running with his sword carelessly resting on his shoulder, suddenly said, "Man, fights sure are easy with so many capable allies around."

His carefree tone didn't feel quite appropriate considering the situation, but he wasn't wrong.

“Doesn’t mean you should just laze around, though,” I said. “Come on, two small crazed beasts to the right. They’ll come out of that alley.”

“On it,” he answered.

My job was to keep an eye on my map and inform my allies, as usual. I didn’t do anything flashy, but information was crucial. It allowed us to be efficient and avoid traps.

Shou slashed at the first iron alligator as soon as it poked its nose out of the alley. With a flick of his wrist, he killed the second iron alligator.

Shou wasn’t using any magic. He wanted to preserve his mana in case he needed it later. Shou had tons of cards he could play, but he’d need mana for that, and his reserves weren’t bottomless.

For the time being, he’d made the Quetzalcoatl remain on standby in the sky. Most of the crazed beasts and soldiers that had attacked the city had already been taken care of, but there was no telling how many enemies were lurking in the forest. It was best to remain on our guard.

Besides, most of the mana cost had come from the invocation itself. Keeping an ironbeast around only required a small amount of mana, so it was much more cost-efficient than unsummoning it only to resummon it later.

Youko, on the other hand, had unsummoned Exmizer. Unlike Shou, she needed to use a considerable amount of mana to keep her golems active. There were more of us now, so she didn’t necessarily need Exmizer.

Instead, she’d brought out Dullahan—one of her favorite golems, these days. It had great offensive abilities and did not budge even while blocking the crazed beasts’ attacks.

As we got closer to the Great Earth Sanctuary, the number of crazed beast corpses on the ground increased.

The carcass of an orichalcus, in particular, caught my eye. Its neck had been cleanly snapped and it was lying atop a collapsed building. While I didn’t stop running, I did crane my neck to get a better look.

“Hey Shou, you see that? That’s kinda impressive,” I said.

“Yeah. One clean hit. I wonder who did that...” he answered.

Nemea provided the answer. “That would be my master,” he said. “He’s more than skilled enough to kill an orichalcus like this.”

For real? How incredible is that guy?

I remembered Nemea saying that his name was Satoshi, so I assumed he was Japanese too. According to him, Youko, and Adel, he’d headed straight to the Great Earth Sanctuary. We’d probably run into him eventually.

In fact, I could already see the sanctuary from here.

The attacks from the crazed beasts got more frequent. According to my map, the crazed beasts were actually coming out of the Great Earth Sanctuary.

“Good grief... Even if we resolve this mess, the old man’s prestige will be hard to restore. I suppose that was all part of their plan...” Levia said, leaping. She brought her foot down on the head of a mithrilosaurus that had come charging at her, smashing its head into the ground with a sharp crack. Levia’s powerful kick had crushed its skull.

“Why are there so few enemies, though?” Akiha asked, looking around the area.

While talking, she’d pulled the trigger and opened up a hole in the wings of a flying crazed beast with silvery scales. The alumiptera struggled to fly toward us with its torn wing and was quickly dispatched by Akiha and Youko’s Dullahan.

As their name suggested, alumipteras looked a lot like pterosaurs. Their scales were made of aluminium and they could fly. They were smaller and lighter than most crazed beasts. One hit from Dullahan was enough to deform their soft bodies and they were light enough to bounce off a wall if they collided with it.

“My master must be dealing with them as soon as they come out,” Nemea said. “Could you check, Masaki?”

Indeed, there was a neutral mark that fit the bill.

“Looks like it. There’s someone in front of the main gate. No crazed beasts are not getting past them.”

Nemea’s master was waiting for them to come out right by the door and he

took them out as soon as they stepped out.

The crazed beasts we'd run into had most likely come out of the sanctuary from different gates. *Nemea's master can't possibly handle every gate at once.*

He'd killed an insane amount of them, though, so was grateful for that.

What bugged me, though, was that there was someone else beside Satoshi in front of the main gate—an enemy mark. It looked like that person and Satoshi were fighting, actually.

The marks bumped into one another and separated at a speed I could barely follow with my eyes. They were constantly on the move, but remained in the vicinity of the main gate.

Every time they bumped into one another, any nearby crazed beasts disappeared from my map, so I could only assume the impacts were pretty damn strong.

We got closer to the Great Earth Sanctuary and started hearing the tempestuous sounds of combat.

"The sounds are so loud... I can't believe we can hear them fighting from such a distance," Shou said.

"There's a weird noise, though..." I said, listening to the strange, droning hum that persisted between the sounds of buildings collapsing and people striking one another.

"Right! I noticed that too," Shou said. "I feel like I've heard that sound somewhere before though..."

Just like Shou, I had a feeling I'd heard that somewhere, but I couldn't pinpoint when or where. *Where did I hear that...? I guess I'll find out when we get there.*

When we finally reached the Great Earth Sanctuary, I immediately saw a man wearing a dogi. His hair was streaked with grey. *That must be Satoshi, Nemea's master.*

He was fighting another man in a black suit with his hair swept back. In his hand was a lightsaber.

“Hang on! What’s *he* doing here?” Shou said.

Kokuu.

In the empire, he’d led an army while pretending to be the hunter. Shou had later told me that he’d been impersonating him all along. We hadn’t heard of him since his fights with Jirou and Shou, but there he was again.

Kokuu was one of the strongest otherworlders I knew and neither Jirou nor Shou had managed to defeat him. He could use a great variety of weapons and was so fast that I had trouble following his movements. Just like a hunter, he never hesitated when making a move. I supposed that was why he’d played that role so well.

When Satoshi noticed our presence, he looked at us for a split second. Kokuu didn’t let that opportunity pass him by and immediately swung his lightsaber at him.

We all panicked, but...

“Huh?” we all said at once—except for Nemea.

The battle leo simply let out a strained laugh and nodded.

Satoshi had used his bare arm to block the lightsaber, but he wasn’t hurt. A high-pitched clanging noise simply echoed. Satoshi pushed his chest out and Kokuu was sent flying back, as though hit by an invisible wall.

I knew this move from fighting games: a critical counter. If you pressed the defense button with frame-perfect accuracy, you could completely nullify your opponent’s attack. You could usually counterattack after that, but Satoshi hadn’t gone for a regular counterattack. Instead, he’d used some sort of pushing attack to create some distance between himself and his opponent.

“Whoa... That guy’s a monster,” Shou whispered.

What Satoshi had just done was difficult to pull off in a game, let alone in real life. Had his timing been even the slightest bit off, he would have lost his arm. He wasn’t even wearing any defensive equipment—perhaps to avoid being obstructed when he moved. He was only wearing a plain dogi and leather gloves.

I could only agree with Shou: that man was a monster. I understood why Nemea looked up to his master that much. *I still can't believe he just did this.*

After pushing Kokuu back, Satoshi leaped back. He was approaching us slowly, at first, but then he accelerated out of nowhere. *He can even air dash?!*

"Master!" Nemea exclaimed.

"It looks like you found your friends," he said before addressing me. "You must be Masaki. Nemea's told me a lot about you." He didn't turn to face me. His eyes were still trained on Kokuu.

"I am," I answered. "Nice to meet you. I'd love to introduce myself and greet you properly, but this probably isn't the best time."

"You're right. Let's end things here first."

"Yes. We'll help you."

"No. I want you and your friends to enter the Great Earth Sanctuary without delay. I can feel something ominous underground. Several somethings, in fact."

Underground, huh?

I opened my map and zoomed in. There were several marks underground and they were all red. Under the sanctuary was a large, deep basement. It looked bigger than the royal castle. There was also a space I couldn't see properly on my map. I could see pathways leading to that place, but the lowest floor was a large void. Even my GM map couldn't fill in the details. Something was fishy.

"Do you think I'll just step aside and let them pass?" Kokuu asked, taking out two machine guns and pointing them at us.

"I think you will. I'll keep you busy, don't worry," Satoshi said. "Thousand Thunderbolts!"

Right as Kokuu pulled the trigger, Satoshi slammed his right foot into the ground. A wall of lightning rose from the ground right in front of him.

The lighting wall sent Kokuu's bullets flying right back at him.

"Go on!" Satoshi exclaimed. "I'll catch up in a moment. You don't mind if I defeat him first, do you?"

“Hey! That’s a death flag!”

I hadn’t expected him to make that kind of joke. In spite of the death flag he’d just raised out of the blue, he still sounded reliable enough.

We used the light of the lightning wall as a diversion to sneak into the Great Earth Sanctuary.

I shot a glance behind my shoulder and Satoshi had leapt toward Kokuu. He was kicking the bullets with his legs as he went. I heard Kokuu click his tongue.

I had no doubt Satoshi would emerge victorious—even with that death flag. *We can leave Kokuu to him.*

According to what Adel and the others had told me, the sanctuary was currently protected by a barrier and no one could get in.

The thing was: there was no barrier.

“The old man’s barrier should be protecting this place...” Levia said.

“Well, it completely disappeared,” I answered. “I guess that makes it easier for us.”

I wonder if the crazed beasts broke it when they started coming out of the sanctuary.

As soon as we went through the gate, the stench of blood assaulted our nostrils. It was very different from the putrid smell that came out of the crazed beasts’ corpses.

“How sickening,” Sieg said, kicking away a roof tile.

The interior of the sanctuary was a mess. The furniture was broken. Dead bodies hung from the dragon sculpture that was meant to symbolize Jörmungandr. Considering their clothes, the poor people had mostly been sisters and priests.

They’d obviously been tortured before being killed. One of the sisters—a half-beastwoman—had been disfigured so badly that I could barely tell she was a woman anymore.

“Eek...”

Fen saw the bodies and she leaned onto Nemea, clearly shaken.

“Are you okay, Fen?” the battle leo asked. “Masaki, we should really find a way to get Fen out of—”

“No... I’ll be...fine...” Fen cut him. “We don’t have...any time to waste... Let’s hurry...”

“You’re a very courageous little girl,” Sieg said. “At your age, I would have cried and shrieked. I agree that we need to hurry, but we can’t leave these people like this.”

He took out his gun, aimed, and pulled the trigger several times. The gunshots were even noisier than the ones Akiha’s regular gun made.

The bodies fell to the ground with a thump. Sieg walked up to them and used strips of fabric he’d most likely been keeping in his inventory to cover each of their eyes.

“Big Brother Sieg...”

“Leaving them like that would have been too awful,” Sief said. “I know we can’t afford to do so now, but let’s give them a proper burial when this is over.”

“Yes... I... I’ll pray for them...during the ceremony,” Fen said. “I’ve been praying a lot...since I was a child...so I’m good at it.”

“Thank you, Fen. I’ll be counting on you,” Sieg agreed, patting Fen’s head softly.

Fen looked a bit embarrassed, but she smiled at him.

Fen was stronger than we gave her credit for. It had to be hard for her, but she still offered a short prayer.

“We probably shouldn’t shelter her too much, right, Nemea?” I said.

“I agree. It looks like Fen is stronger than I thought,” he agreed.

We watched Fen sincerely pray for the departed in silence. *She truly is strong. I have faith she’ll grow up to be a good person.*

Right as Fen finished praying, the ground rumbled under our feet.

“Whoa!”

It didn’t feel like a regular earthquake. Something else was making the ground shake. One thing was certain, though: the hypocenter was directly below us.

The vibrations grew stronger and stronger, then, suddenly, a loud noise echoed and a strong gust of black wind assaulted us.

I grabbed Fen and found a place to hide. The others followed me.

We waited motionlessly for the wind to calm down. I’d been forced to close my eyes because of the strong winds, but when I opened them again, I saw a gaping hole in the middle of the room.

The black wind was still coming out of that hole, albeit less violently.

I was still waiting for the wind to settle when I noticed something was wrong with Fen. Her body had started emitting a pale silver light.

“F-Fen?”

“It’s coming! Big Brother Masaki! Stay behind me!” she shouted, slipping out of my arms.

“What?! Wait! Fen?!”

She created some sort of barrier around us and, a second later, the ground shook violently once more. A huge explosion resounded through the entire sanctuary and a black tornado came from below us, destroying more of the floor. It pierced through the ceiling as well and rubble started raining down upon us.

Thanks to Fen’s barrier, we weren’t hurt by the debris. The same went for the bodies Sieg had taken down from the statues earlier.

“Would you look at that... And here I thought you were dead.”

The tornado settled down and we all turned to look at the person who’d just spoken. A young man wearing light green clothes was floating over the gap in the floor. He looked a lot like an elf, but I could tell at first glance that he wasn’t one. The young man had translucent wings on his back. *A fairy?*

“Is he...a fairy?” I asked. “Can fairies be as tall as humans?”

“I don’t know... I’ve never seen a fairy like him either,” Alice answered.

Even Alice didn't know what he was.

The man snickered. "I'm no lowly fairy, so don't lump me in with the likes of them. I'm Zand, a great fae. I'm the new ruler of this continent—no, of this world!"

Zand? Wasn't that the name of one of the four Grand Dukes of the Beastmen Kingdom? Was he the leader of the garuda and the culprit behind this coup d'état?

The man in front of us didn't quite look like a garuda, though.

Zand noticed the bodies of the priests and sisters on the floor and frowned.

"Who took them down?" he asked, displeased.

"I did," Sieg immediately answered, glaring at Zand. "Are you the one who murdered and tortured these people?"

He didn't bother to conceal the anger in his voice.

"What would you do if I said yes?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'd beat the shit out of you. These people have helped me so many times. I owe them this." Sieg didn't raise his voice. He was quiet, like a volcano just before an eruption.

He'd snapped.

I later learned that Sieg had been summoned at a time when different tribes were fighting. He'd refused to participate in the conflict and ran away the very next day, fed up with the selfish people who'd pulled him out of his own world for the sake of their ridiculous turf war. After wandering for a while, he'd ended up serving Lydea, but before that, he'd received a lot of help from the priests and sister of the Great Earth Sanctuary when he had nowhere to go.

"You want to beat me up?" Zand laughed. "That's a good one! Sure, bring it on. Be grateful. You get to become a sacrifice for the new king on this land!" Zand lifted his palm and pointed it toward us. "Magic Missiles!"

Richly colored magic bullets flew at us. I'd seen this spell several times before: it was one of Alice's favorites.

I'd never heard of the great faes before, but that guy could use fairy magic and he was better at it than Alice. She could fire up to seven bullets simultaneously while Zand had easily created over fifty.

I unsheathed my sword immediately. I was on the verge of using a defensive skill, but Shou beat me to it.

"Adamas Shield!" he exclaimed.

A magic shield appeared in front of us and blocked Zand's bullets. Colona was in tune with her master and she followed up without a moment's delay. She leaped and cut off one of Zand's wings.

Zand retreated, trying to put some distance between himself and Colona, but Sieg fired his gun. The bullets flew straight for Zand and he was forced to create a wall of wind to shield himself. The bullets lost their momentum in the gust and dropped into the gaping hole.

Zand clicked his tongue. "How impudent!"

"Masaki! We'll deal with him! You go on ahead!" Shou exclaimed.

"You can leave him to us, Lord Masaki," Colona said.

"I have things to settle with him. I'll stay behind too," Sieg said.

"All right!" I exclaimed.

I decided not to tell them to be careful. They knew how to take care of themselves and, to be fair, being a little reckless was just the way we did things —especially when facing a powerful foe.

"Let's hurry, Masaki!" Adel said.

I nodded "Yeah. Fen, make sure you hold on tight, okay?" I said, picking her up.

"Y-Yes!"

The hole was so deep that I couldn't see the bottom. I picked up Akiha and Fen, Adel picked up Youko, and Levia picked up Nemea. Then, we took the leap. As for Alice, she was still inside my hood.

While falling, we could hear the intense fight going on above us, but we could

no longer see Shou and the others.

We fell deeper and deeper into what felt like a bottomless abyss.

The hole was much deeper, and also much better lit, than I'd imagined. The walls were made of regular stone for the most part, but some of them shone with a brown glow.

"It's better lit than I thought it would be," Youko commented. "Are all of these magic stones?"

"Yes. The old man commands the earth. These magic stones developed naturally under the influence of his powers," Levia explained. "They glow so brightly because of the high mana concentration inside them."

"Then Jörmungandr must be close."

"There's no doubt about that," Levia said before frowning. "Nemea, can't you do something about your fur? My nose feels itchy and I—*ACHOO*!"

"I-I'm sorry... But there's really nothing I can do..."

Levia was carrying Nemea in her arms and she seemed to be having a hard time handling the proximity. *He's not shaving his fur right now, so suck it up, Levia.*

"I was positive the garuda would attack us," I said. We'd been expecting people to attack us during our fall, but so far nothing had happened.

"It is strange. We're free falling, so we should be an easy target," Levia agreed. "No enemies in sight, Masaki?"

"My map won't show me what's below us," I said, "so I can't tell. Stay on your guard. Youko, be ready to summon Exmizer at any time."

"Got it," she answered, sending Dullahan away and taking out the talisman she'd need to call forth Exmizer. She needed to start pouring mana into the talisman ahead of time if she wanted to summon the giant robot immediately.

We continued to fall for a while longer before we finally saw the bottom. I activated Wing and slowed my descent. When we finally came to a stop, Akiha's chest bounced and hit my cheek. A most welcome attack, as far as I was

concerned.

Fen, who'd seen it all happen, reflexively brought her hands to her own chest. *You'll grow up eventually, so don't worry about it, Fen.*

Adel could fly without any issues, and Levia, although she couldn't fly for long stretches of time because of the magic storm, could manage for a few moments, just like me.

We'd reached the mysterious area I couldn't observe on my map. I tried opening it once again to see if it'd be different now that we'd arrived, but it was still blank.

I could think of two potential reasons. In Britalia Online, the waiting room for event bosses appeared blank on your map while you were in it. After all, there was no point in designing a map for a small waiting area.

The other possibility...would be more tricky to handle, to say the least. I didn't even want to think about it, but, if an area fell under the jurisdiction of the administrators, it'd also be blank.

The jail was one such place. Players would be sent there for stealing others' mobs, killing other players outside of designated PvP areas, selling game items for real-life money, interfering with events, sexual harassment, stalking, and other such breaches of the terms of service.

In either case, I wouldn't be able to rely on my map as usual.

After reaching the bottom, we all looked around us. This place seemed to be divided into two tiers and we were currently on the upper level. There was a precipice in a corner of the room, showing us that we could still go lower.

"Masaki! Look at that!" Alice screamed next to my ear, jumping and pointing at something.

I looked that way and saw several people's heads poking out from the ground. Their bodies had been buried.

"Are you all right?!" Levia exclaimed.

"Urgh... Who are you?" one man said painfully.

"Levia. I'm...one of Leviathan's familiars."

“You serve Lord Leviathan... I see...” the priest answered. “Then...I have a request for you. Please save Lord Jörmungandr... His presence is turning ominous... Please hurry down...”

“He’s right, Big Brother Masaki...” Fen said. “I... I also feel it! Lord Ouroboros said that...if we don’t hurry...Lord Jörmungandr won’t be himself anymore!”

Fen seemed to have received another revelation from Ouroboros.

This was turning into a race against time, but I didn’t want to leave these people like this. Some of them had already passed away and most others only had a handful of HP left. If we hurried to Jörmungandr and postponed helping them, there was a good chance they’d all be dead by the time we returned.

“You can...go ahead...Big Brother Masaki... I’ll take care...of them,” Fen said.

She ran up to the priest who’d just talked. Fen’s body was still glowing with a silver light. Her white fur looked even more beautiful like this.

Fen suddenly howled like a wolf, and a wave of silver light traveled from one corner of the room to the opposite, warming us up when it passed through us. It felt kind of nice.

I didn’t know how Fen had done that, but the wave of light had canceled out the effects of the magic storm.

The priest gasped. “Impossible... Are you...a descendant of the fenrir tribe?”

If my memory served me right, the first Beast King was from the fenrir tribe. I’d heard they’d long become extinct, though. Could Fen truly be a fenrir?!

“I...don’t know much...about myself,” she answered. “But if my powers...can help others...then I’ll gladly use them. This should last...for a while... I wish I could have...gotten you out of the ground entirely, but...”

“You can leave that part to me!” Youko said with a smile.

She took out a talisman from between her breasts and stuck it to the ground.

“Exmizer and Dullahan are the standouts, but the small ones also have their uses sometimes,” she said.

Her mana coursed through the talisman and into the ground and ten small

golems rose. They only reached up to my knee.

“Dig them out,” Youko ordered.

They raised one hand, as if to accept the command, and immediately got to work. They all dug in such perfect synchronization that I could almost hear them shout “heave ho” in rhythm.

“What do you think, Fen? They should do the trick, right?”

“Yes... Thank you, Big Sister Youko...”

“Anything for you, my little Fen. We’re family,” Youko said, crouching to hug Fen, “so you can lean on me, all right?” She caressed her hair gently.

Alice snuck out of my hood and hopped onto Fen’s shoulder.

“I’ll stay here too, Masaki! We’ll all worry if Fen is alone with the golems, so one of us should stay to keep her safe.”

“True. Thanks, Alice. Take care of Fen.”

“Will do!”

“Thank you...Alice!” Fen said. “Erm...Big Brother Masaki... Please...save Lord Jörmungandr.”

“Don’t worry, Fen. You take good care of these people, okay?”

“Yes!” she said firmly, nodding.

With Alice and Fen staying behind together, there was nothing for us to worry about, so we jumped down the precipice. Adel, Youko, Nemea, Levia, and I were finally in the lowest part of the sanctuary.

The air here was heavy—oppressive, even. Somehow, I felt like we were in a whole other world.

Someone was standing in front of us. The hooded individual looked as though they were the master of this world. It was No Face, the evil mastermind who’d thrown the empire, and now the Beastmen Kingdom, into chaos.

“You came here faster than expected,” they said.

“No need for small talk. Is this your doing?” I asked.

No Face looked at us and opened their arms theatrically.

“That’s right. I believe this is our first time meeting, outsiders. Since you work with Shou, you must be aware of this already, but I’m No Face, a member of Pavaria. I’m afraid our conversation will be short-lived. I shall be sending you to the underworld without delay.”

No Face was talking at length, but I didn’t feel like I owed them an introduction. We all got into fighting stances.

“What did you do to Jörmungandr?” I asked.

“Nothing much. I simply put him to sleep. I wanted to get my hands on a certain something and his powers were getting in my way, you see.”

No Face extended a vine toward a sword that was embedded into a rock... *No, wait, not a rock—a bone?!*

“That’s no use,” Levia said. “The Seven Pillars were sealed time and time again. You won’t even be able to touch it.”

“I wonder. The times have changed, Leviathan.”

“What?!” Levia snapped.

“Countless new powers have drifted into this world from far, far away worlds. This is but the culmination of a tedious process,” No Face said.

I realized they were holding a cubic object. As soon as I laid my eyes upon it, it flashed red. *The game master system was recognizing this cube as a cheat code?!*

“Come forth, great ghosts! Defile this world for me!” No Face exclaimed.

“Akiha! Shoot it!” I screamed.

Akiha flashed beside me, swinging her rifle out to take aim. At this distance, she didn’t need to worry about using a scope—she’d be accurate even if she fired fast.

The gunshot echoed around us and the bullet flew straight toward the cube. Right before it could hit, though, No Face crushed the cube with their hands. A red light flashed and an overwhelming pressure filled the space around us. It

felt just like that time when the Five Bloody Sutras had been used in the Phantom Blau.

Did they copy that item?!

The cursed red light filled the entire room, accompanied by a strange howling noise.

“Urgh!” I groaned.

It felt as though a sandstorm had been recorded and was currently being played on a megaphone next to my ears. I stopped myself from dropping my weapon. If this kept up, my eardrums would rupture.

Thankfully, the dreadful noise quickly stopped. Just as I was calming down, a message I’d heard several times—the one message we game masters dreaded the most—started playing in my head.

——Emergency! Hack detected in the area. Unauthorized access detected. The hacker has taken over an administrator profile. The nearest administrator is to—shhhh... Shhh——

While the announcement was playing in my head, No Face had grabbed the sword they’d been vying for.

“Finally... One of the Seven Pillars is in my hands! Lævateinn, the key to this world is mine! I control this world’s order now!”

The key to this world? Does that mean... Damn!

This world was practically a game, which meant some sort of system was operating it.

This bastard...hacked this world!

Chapter 8

“How?! How are you able to wield this blade?! No one but the Chosen One should be able to lay a finger on it, let alone wield it!” Levia shouted.

“I suppose that would make *me* the Chosen One, then. Let me show you something interesting to celebrate,” No Face said, spreading their arms dramatically. “Meet Jörmungandr, my servant.”

The ground shook violently, and pebbles rolled off the side of the precipice. Some also came raining down from the ceiling.

A gigantic shadow slithered behind No Face before raising its head. *A dragon*, I immediately understood thanks to the light cast by the magic stones. The dragon’s head was as large as Leviathan’s in her true form. *This must be Jörmungandr*.

“Old man...” Levia whimpered.

I’d thought the same when I’d faced Leviathan for the first time, but dragons truly were humongous. Most of the earth dragon’s body was buried in the ground, so I couldn’t tell exactly how large it was, but his head and neck alone were five meters tall. Although this cavern was enormous, Jörmungandr’s presence made it feel cramped and oppressive.

Vines had twined themselves around Jörmungandr’s body and made his scales bulge away from his flesh. Some scales regularly cracked free, leaving bloody wounds in their wake.

No Face had one of the three dragons in their grasp.

They chuckled. “Lævateinn truly is a wonderful weapon. It can easily command a powerful being such as Jörmungandr!” they boasted. “Well, go on, Jörmungandr! Use your might to do my bidding!”

Jörmungandr roared. I could hear the madness in his voice as he charged at us. *How can he be so fast despite his size?!*

The ground split around him as he approached.

Levia let out a piercing war cry.

As for Youko, she grasped her talisman and poured her mana into it.

“Exmizer!”

A large magic circle appeared in front of her and she jumped into it. She disappeared, only to be replaced by Exmizer a split second later.

“Boost!!!” she screamed from inside the cockpit.

Whoa. When did she become so cool?

Exmizer sprung forward and grabbed Jörmungandr’s head. Youko slowed the dragon with great difficulty, only managing to stop it right before Exmizer was slammed into the wall.

“Urgh...” she groaned. “This is tough! Exmizer won’t be able to hold him off for long...”

“Youko!” Levia exclaimed. “I can feel the same ominous energy that once controlled me inside Jörmungand’s body! Another power is at play, but if we get rid of the corruption, the old man might come back to his senses! I can sense the source of the corruption, so try to hold on while I undo it!”

“All right! We got this, Exmizer!”

Youko expertly manoeuvered Exmizer and tried to punch Jörmungandr in the face. She showed no hesitation at all, most likely because she knew just how durable the body of a dragon was—or so I hoped. *She didn’t just punch him because she got pissed, right?*

Regardless of Youko’s intention, a wall of stone formed right in front of Jörmungandr’s face. Exmizer was no pushover, though. It was a product of science, not magic, and a stone wall couldn’t stop its powerful arm. Its fist crushed the stone and connected with Jörmungandr’s face, sending him flying backward.

The ground shattered under Jörmungandr’s weight and we scurried out of the way. No Face also jumped back effortlessly.

Jörmungandr roared once again and over a hundred brown magic circles appeared all around us. If I’d been impressed by Zand’s mastery earlier, I

couldn’t help but think he paled in comparison to the earth dragon now.

Dark metallic bullets came flying out of the magic circles at Jörmungandr’s command.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Levia said. “The structure is so sloppy! The old man would never create such crude magic circles!”

Six dragon wings appeared on her back. Levia could materialize up to six wings depending on the amount of power she wished to unleash. She usually fought without bothering to materialize wings at all, but when she got a bit serious, two would appear. Four meant she was truly getting into the fight, while six meant she intended to use her full potential.

Over the course of our training sessions, I’d managed to get her to materialize four wings but never six. She obviously understood that she couldn’t afford to be complacent when faced with Jörmungandr, even if he wasn’t himself.

“Dragon Howl! Here I go!!!” Levia roared.

She started flapping her wings repeatedly, creating vibrations that pulverized Jörmungandr’s stone bullets. The earth dragon didn’t relent, though, and continued firing more and more bullets. Eventually, some of them penetrated Levia’s defense and flew toward her and Exmizer.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Gunshots echoed and the stone bullets shattered mid-air, before they could reach our allies.

“I have your backs!” Akiha exclaimed.

She’d been hiding in the rear but was now using her anti-materiel rifle to shoot the bullets while running.

But Jörmungandr wasn’t the only one we had to worry about.

“Wonderful,” No Face said joyfully. “I never would have thought I could assemble such an army in mere seconds.”

They’d used their newly gained administrator rights to create countless monsters of all kinds. Crazed beasts, lesser dragons, goblin lords, and many others now filled the room, all of which wasted no time attacking us.

None of them were strong enough to pose a serious threat to us on their own, but their numbers made them difficult to deal with. If we didn't stop them here, they'd escape the sanctuary and overrun the city. Satoshi and the knights were still fighting outside, but they wouldn't be able to deal with that many monsters at once. If they got out, the Beastman Kingdom would fall.

I slayed a dragon and immediately cut off a damask lizard's head. A goblin lord tried to sneak up on me while I was occupied, but I kicked him away. *Out of my way!*

Adel and Nemea were also killing monsters.

No Face looked like a kid on Christmas. They seemed to be having the time of their life summoning monsters left and right, but there was no telling when they'd decide to join the fight themself.

"I'll open up a path for you, Masaki. You and Adel take No Face down!"

"Nemea... Understood, we're counting on you."

"Let's go!" Nemea roared. "Holy Iron-Cutting Kick!!!"

Nemea's attack cut through the monster wave, clearing a direct path that led to No Face.

"Adel!" I exclaimed as I started running.

"Coming!" she answered. "Be careful, Nemea!"

"I can't guarantee I won't take any risks, but I'll do what I can—so don't worry," he said softly, before turning to face the monsters. "I'll take you on! *Come at me*!" he roared.

A fierce aura formed around Nemea, drawing the monsters to him. They paid no mind to Adel and me even as we ran through their midst. *He must have used a taunt ability to get aggro.*

I did not look back, but I checked my map. A wave of monsters had come crashing down on Nemea like a swarm of locusts descending upon a wheat field. Nemea was fighting back, but every time he killed the monsters in his immediate vicinity, more poured in to take their place.

Not wanting to waste the precious opportunity he'd given us, Adel and I ran

at full speed toward No Face while taking down the monsters and crazed beasts around us.

No Face hadn't noticed us. They were still laughing as they created more and more monsters when, suddenly, their hood fell off.

I immediately understood why they were called No Face. Beneath their hood, there was no flesh; instead, thorny, entwined vines writhed together, creating the illusion of facial expressions.

So, that's what No Face looks like... They can't be human... But they're not a monster either, are they?

When No Face noticed us, they stopped bringing forth more monsters and assumed a fighting stance.

"Oh my. You left your friends behind to die? How mean-spirited."

"We did no such thing. I have faith in them. I know they'll pull through," I answered.

No Face let out a wicked laugh. "Well, it's no matter. Whatever you try, it's all useless in the face of this power! I'll do you the honor of killing you with this legendary blade! You should be thankful and welcome your death, for nothing else will come out of your meaningless struggle!"

No Face raised their sword and magma started pouring out of nowhere. While it was most likely some sort of magic spell, I couldn't believe they'd been able to cast it that fast!

If I tried to hide what I could truly do any longer, we'd be done for. I'd have to use all of my cards.

Thanks to Fen having gotten rid of the magic storm, I could use magic normally again.

"Gravity Wall! Impregnable Domain!"

Impregnable Domain was a knight skill that allowed me to cancel out all melee attacks for ten seconds. Using it alongside the spell Gravity Wall, which protected me from ranged attacks, gave me an inviolable line of defense.

I had an inkling No Face's spell would do more than dump some magma on

the ground, so I'd used both of these defensive abilities at once to be absolutely certain we'd be safe. Just as I'd expected, the magma exploded immediately after touching my Gravity Wall, and a rain of magma descended upon us.

As soon as the drops of magma hit the floor, they transformed into red snakes and slithered toward us. Impregnable Domain protected us and the fiery snakes vanished.

We charged at No Face through the hail of magma rain. My skills protected us, but I could feel the burning heat of the magma against my skin.

Vines came flying out of No Face's arm, coiling around their sword until it looked like the blade was part of their arm.

I initially wanted to knock the sword out of their hand, but it seemed pretty much impossible now. It didn't matter: we'd just have to blow off their entire arm!

"Crimson Blade!"

"Overtachi!"

Adel and I attacked from each side, Adel with her crimson blade, and me with my glowing tachi, in perfect unison.

Adel and I knew each other so well that a single look had been enough to get the timing right. We'd been together for a long time, after all.

Our timing was so good that there was no room for No Face to dodge or parry.

"How futile. I suggest you don't underestimate the might of the Seven Pillars," No Face said, swinging Lævateinn as playfully as a child would swing a twig.

And yet, that small motion was enough. The second my Lost Dominion and Adel's Dracul connected with Lævateinn, our blades started melting.

What the hell?!

We were both using artifacts, and artifacts were supposed to be indestructible! How could No Face destroy them just like that?!

Adel was so shocked that she went still for a second.

No! If she stops moving, she'll—

My body moved before I could even finish the thought. I threw myself at Adel and pushed her out of the way right before No Face brought their sword down. Lævateinn hit my shoulder and the world flashed red as a raging inferno engulfed me.

The flames coming out of No Face's sword melted down my Cloak of the Azure Dragon just like it had our swords. My accessories also dissolved on the spot. Leviathan's Bracelet, which I had received from Levia a while back, had been destroyed as well.

It looked like Lævateinn could burn through everything. My Invincibility had protected my body so far, but the heat around me was making it hard to breathe.

I almost gave in to despair—death just seemed so close, close enough to claim me... I forced myself to snap out of it. The heat was painful, but when I looked at my arm, I could see my skin was still unmarred—I was fine. Lævateinn's flames couldn't burn me.

If even one of the Seven Pillars couldn't break through my Invincibility, I had nothing to fear. *Time to put out this fire!*

I raised my arm, ready to do something about the flames, when I suddenly noticed something. Curiously, there was something else that wasn't burning. *I see... I get it now... Then, all I have to do is—*

I stood in the burning inferno and took out a sword.

"Masaki?!" Adel screamed.

"Did you sacrifice yourself to protect this filthy vampire?" I heard No Face ask. "How foolish of you."

"No! Masaki!"

"Rest assured, vampire. The flames of Hell will catch up to you and you will be joining your lover in the afterlife soon enough.

Adel's screams and No Face's triumphant voice echoed.

"I'm not sure I can go along with your plan," I said. "There are tons of things I

want to do with Adel in this life.”

“Masaki?!”

I swung my blade through the flames as I jumped in front of Adel, blocking Lævateinn.

No Face’s blade of flames and my blade of light collided. The shock wave was so strong that we both took a step back. I immediately embraced Adel and jumped back, putting some distance between us and No Face.

I threw down the battered remains of my Cloak of the Azure Dragon. It disappeared as soon as it hit the ground, emitting a pale azure glow.

“I’m sorry, Adel. I made you worry again,” I said.

“It’s fine... I don’t care... I’m just glad you’re all right...”

I tenderly stroked her shoulder while pointing my sword at No Face.



No Face's expression shifted. It looked like their eyes were wide open in shock.

"How?! How are you still alive after being engulfed by Lævateinn's flames?! And what in the world is this light?!"

"Masaki... Why are you glowing?" Adel asked as well.

They were both astonished.

Figures.

Now that the Cloak of the Azure Dragon had disappeared, there was nothing to conceal my *actual* set of armor—one that shone with a divine light.

While I was standing in the flames, most of my equipment had burned to a crisp—except, of course, for my GM-exclusive garments.

Apparently, Lævateinn's flames were powerless against GM-exclusive equipment. The sword I'd used to block it was also an item only GMs could use: Britannia. I'd kept this peculiar sword in my inventory this entire time.

The most interesting feature of this sword was that it did not have a physical body. Instead, a beam of light came out of the hilt. This meant there was no way for No Face to touch it, let alone destroy or melt it.

There was, however, a reason why I'd never used it before. Britannia's base attack was zero—just like the wooden sword we'd used when training with Prince Leon. It was one of the worst possible weapons you could find when it came to offensive power.

GMs didn't usually need to fight. We had good defensive equipment to make sure we never ran into issues; however, since we had no business attacking players, our weapons were pretty but useless in terms of offensive potential. This was also a way to convey to the players that we came in peace.

While it was one of the weakest weapons ever, it was also my only shot at defeating No Face. Besides, I really didn't want to pull out Seven Arthur and have it destroyed after everything I'd gone through to obtain it.

"How about you use your brain?" I told No Face. "Can't think of any reason why your administrator authority might not work on me?"

“Impossible... You... Are you saying that you hold the powers of an administrator?! No matter... Your last blow was pathetic. Even if you somehow have the powers of an administrator, they mean nothing when you’re that weak! You still have no hope of defeating me!”

“True. This sword is pretty damn weak. But you’re still going to lose that pathetic sword. You’ve already handed me a path to victory, after all.”

“What?! What do you mean?”

I’d been thinking about all this for a while now.

I could hear the system’s voice and my map allowed me to look at this world as if I was inside a game. I could look at people’s past with Log Analysis and I’d even received a new ability—Skill Fusion—when I needed it the most.

There was no way all of these things were unrelated. The existence of Skill Fusion, in particular, was proof enough that some sort of system was ordering this world. The world itself had approved of that skill and given it to me.

As far as I could tell, No Face had tampered with that system. They’d forcefully modified it and created a bug.

This meant that, at the moment, the system wasn’t as secure and stable as it usually was, and there was a good chance I’d be able to do things I usually couldn’t—like use my administrator rights, for example.

Previously, I had to submit an application and receive permission. In my old world, the authority to grant administrator rights was in the hands of my superiors. Here, however, it was in the hands of the system itself.

In this case...I’ll request permission to use my administrator rights!

“Administrator ID: 19879. I, Toudou Masaki, request permission to exercise my administrator rights!” I exclaimed.

——Request Accepted. Administrator Toudou Masaki will temporarily be granted administrator rights.——

The system obviously had no intention to let me tamper with things indefinitely.

No Face most definitely couldn't see what I was currently looking at: an administrator window that was slightly different from the one I always used—one that could only be used by veteran GMs that were put in charge of managing events.

Time to turn this battle around!

"Activate GM Command! Apply Transcendence to all neutral and ally units! Execute!"

——The command has been executed.——

Right as I heard the voice inside my head, a pale light started spreading around me.

◆◇◆

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Heavy gunfire filled the Great Earth Sanctuary, vibrating the air.

Sieg was using a rail shotgun, a firearm powered by electromagnetic force, to continuously launch high-velocity bullets at Zand. They could not hit the great fae, who was blocking the bullets by flinging rubble into the air around him.

"It's no use!" Zand exclaimed, whirling more rubble into the air with a flick of his wrist to block the next barrage of Sieg's bullets.

The great fae, effortlessly manipulating the wind, sent the rubble flying at Sieg, Shou, and Colona.

Sieg clicked his tongue. "This wind is a pain! Shou, isn't there anything you can do?"

"Nope. His wind is wrecking my magic cards and my traps. I'm starting to get annoyed, too."

"If you have nothing useful to say, stop talking and focus," Colona said. "Large stones are falling on us. Please dodge."

"Huh?!"

Sieg and Shou had apparently failed to notice that part of the ceiling was collapsing until Colona spoke up. They each jumped to the side in a hurry. Even as they moved, they kept their eyes on Zand the entire time and continued to attack him.

Sieg had traded his rail shotgun for a nitro-magnum, favoring penetrability over sheer power. Shou and Colona were coordinating their attacks with Sieg's and trying to fight Zand at close range.

So far, they'd had no luck. Zand used his peerless control over wind to block Shou's cursed sword and Colona's blade.

Zand created another tornado, sending Shou and Colona flying back.

"You insects! You're starting to get on my nerves!" Zand groaned.

Zand kept the tornado swirling around him, refusing to give Shou and Colona a chance to approach. The smallest pieces of rubble were swallowed by the wind and pulverized until only fine powder remained.

Zand could utilize his wind for offense and defense and Masaki's allies were struggling to fight him, but Shou didn't seem fazed. He wore the same carefree expression he always did.

"Have you noticed too, my lord?" Colona asked.

"Yeah. He's getting weaker. I guess that's why he's so irritated."

Just as Shou had pointed out, Zand was slowly running out of strength. It was no wonder. Zand was suffering from an incurable illness and, while he'd grown much stronger, he didn't have much longer to live.

Zand's obsession with restoring the great fae's power was born out of his fear of death. Zand thought that if he reclaimed his true nature, he wouldn't succumb to his illness. Little did he know, this particular ailment only affected great faes. He'd foolishly listened to No Face's sweet promises but, even though he'd shed his disguise and become a great fae again, Zand was still ill.

His new powers couldn't save him, and it was only a matter of time before his body gave out. Zand was getting increasingly anxious.

But although he was slowly growing weaker, Zand was still tremendously

powerful at the moment. If Colona and Shou were careless, they'd end up just like the pieces of rubble the winds had crushed into powder.

Shou was pondering over what to do when Sieg called out to him from behind.

"Hey, Shou! I need your help."

"What for?" Shou asked.

Shou and Sieg, after dodging the wind blades Zand had unleashed, ran toward one of the last standing pillars. It was thick enough to provide coverage against the blades of rushing air. Naturally, Zand wasn't about to leave them alone. He sent more and more wind blades crashing into the pillar, hoping to destroy it. He would soon succeed, but that didn't matter. For now, Shou and Sieg made use of the little time they had to discuss their plan.

"It might be a bit...drastic, but I have an idea," Sieg said. "Look up."

"Up?"

Shou had kept his eyes on Zand the entire time, so he hadn't noticed, but the gaping hole in the ceiling had widened when part of it collapsed on them earlier.

"He's unleashed five tornadoes so far," Sieg continued, "and I've noticed that as his wind ascends, it gets weaker."

Colona dodged the compressed wind blades and joined them. Zand had destroyed most of the room and there was barely any cover left.

"Lord Sieg is right," Colona said. "His tornadoes are strongest at the base. The wind is less dense and thus less powerful the higher it rises."

"I get your point, but what are you suggesting we do?" Shou asked.

"First, I'd need to gain some altitude. I can't do it alone, though."

Shou burst out laughing. "Are you for real? That's crazy, man! Are you sure you wanna go through with that?"

"I am. Who do you think I am?"

"The most ridiculous man I've ever met," Shou said with a smile. "I'll play

along, though. I've got the perfect cards for you."

Shou whispered something into Sieg's ear and both men exchanged a look, grinning.

Colona watched them without a word. *Men are idiots*, she thought. *How can they smile so happily on the battlefield?* She felt like sighing, but she forced herself to stay focused. The situation was dire.



“My lord, this pillar will give out soon. Please hurry.”

“Got it. Well then, Sieg, I’ll leave our fate in your hands.”

Sieg nodded. “I’ve got this.”

“I’LL CRUSH YOU *AND* THIS DAMNED PILLAR!” Zand screamed, releasing more wind blades.

The large pillar, which had supported the Great Earth Sanctuary for years, finally reached its breaking point. It began crumbling, showering Shou, Colona, and Sieg with a hail of rubble. They blocked the pebbles as they all bolted toward Zand.Until that moment, Colona and Shou had always formed the vanguard while Sieg covered them from behind. This time, the three of them rushed the great fae together.

A brutal smile appeared on Zand’s face. “Three insects aren’t any more dangerous than two! I’ll blow you all away with my wind!”

He raised both hands and created a tornado, propelling it toward Shou and the others.

Shou took out one card and threw it in front of himself.

“Magic Mirage!”

An identical tornado came out of the card.

Magic Mirage was a magic card that allowed the user to copy one of their enemy’s spells. There were some restrictions—only offensive spells could be targeted, and you couldn’t copy it until after the opponent activated it—but if you were willing to risk it, you could take your enemy down with you.

“You impudent insect! Do you think you can defeat me with my own wind?!”

Zand poured more mana into his spell, increasing the destructive power of his tornado so much so that it engulfed Shou’s tornado when the two collided.

“That was never the plan!” Shou exclaimed, throwing another card. “Magic Jammer!”

The card shone and the tornado vanished before it could reach Shou. Just as its name suggested, Magic Jammer could cancel one spell. It was one of Shou’s

most treasured cards, as it could undo practically any spell. It was fairly rare and difficult to obtain.

Zand was surprised to see his tornado disappear right in front of his eyes, but he quickly followed up with another attack. He created wind claws in both of his hands and slashed at Shou and Colona, releasing small wind blades with each of his attacks that flew straight at them. Shou and Colona dodged while closing in on Zand, but they couldn't evade them all and suffered a few cuts.

Shou let out a battle cry and he and Colona lunged at Zand in perfect unison. They kept the blows coming, attacking from every angle. Zand was frantically swinging his claws, blocking all of their attempts deftly.

His body had deteriorated, but Zand was still one of the four Grand Dukes. He wouldn't give in. However, Shou and Colona did not relent. They weren't giving him any room to breathe.

Shou and Colona were only capable of such a feat because of one of Shou's cards: Berserker Spirit. For each unit from your hand you destroyed, you'd be able to attack once, and Shou had destroyed half of the iron beasts he'd pulled up until now.

He'd obviously kept the cards he often used as well as his trump cards, but it was still a spell Shou was reluctant to use. As far as he was concerned, each and every one of his cards was livingand he absolutely loathed the thought of treating them as expendable.

Shou and Colona were overly aware of the weight behind each of their blows —of the lives they were sacrificing. Eventually, their efforts paid off. Zand panicked and he missed the proper timing to parry. Shou's blade cut through his right shoulder while Colona's cut off his left leg.

The great fae groaned in pain.

Shou and Colona continued to swing their blades, hoping to inflict more damage, when Zand used every ounce of strength he had left to summon violent winds.

Shou and Colona both gasped. The wind hit them with full force and they were sent flying. Zand concentrated mana on his back and soared, preparing to

run away. He was terrified of losing his newly gained great fae powers after everything he'd gone through to obtain them. He'd sacrificed his wealth, his position, and even his brethren to fulfill his goal.

I can't die here! I need to live on, he thought. *As long as I'm alive, I can find a cure!*

Zand kept an eye on Shou and Colona as he flew straight toward the hole in the ceiling.

That's when he noticed something was off. Where was the third human?

Shou smirked. He looked like a turbulent, yet innocent child who'd successfully pulled a prank on someone. When Zand saw his smile, a chill ran down his spine.

A shadow fell over him. Zand looked up, only to find himself staring into the barrel of a gun.

"TAKE THIS!!!" Sieg screamed.

He thrust the muzzle of his gun into Zand's chest as if it were a spear, then pulled the trigger.

Just as Sieg had asked, Shou had helped him soar. Sieg's body was robust but, had he let himself be carried upward by the tornado, he would have been heavily wounded. And so, Shou had used four cards.

The first one was Magic Mirage, the card he'd used to replicate the tornado. Magic Mirage had served two purposes—to attract Zand's attention and send a certain *something* high into the sky.

That something was Shou's second card: Flying Rock—a very light iron beast shaped just like a rock. This iron beast couldn't attack, but had a pretty high defense. Its particularity was that it could float in the sky. The updraft created by the tornado had allowed Shou to send the Flying Rock through the gaping hole and let it hover above them.

Shou had then used Berserker Spirit so that he and Colona could keep up with Zand, and, last but not least, the last card he'd used was Cross Change, a magic card that could substitute the position of two targets.

When Zand had fled, overcome by his and Colona's successive attacks, Shou had sneakily activated Cross Change to make Sieg take the Flying Rock's place.

That was how Sieg had found himself above Zand, where he was currently unloading bullet after bullet directly into Zand's chest.

"You went too far," the German said. "I'll send you straight to the other world so you can apologize to the people you've wronged."

"AAAAARGH!!!" Zand screamed.

Sieg placed his feet on the great fae's shoulders to make sure he wouldn't be able to get away and pulled the trigger a few more times. Zand let out screams of agony with every bullet.

The ground was approaching and Sieg pulled out another weapon. He used his rail shotgun to slam Zand against the ground. The great fae gasped, the wind knocked out of him.

He spat up a handful of blood as he struggled to breathe. Zand opened his eyes wide and was greeted by the sight of Sieg leaning over him with a roaring chainsaw in hand.

"Here comes the *finale*!" Sieg exclaimed, plunging his chainsaw into Zand's chest.

He dragged it from one side to the other, tearing apart the great fae's torso as blood splattered everywhere.

Sieg calmly wiped off his blood-drenched face with his sleeve and looked down at Zand's face. He'd died with an expression of sheer terror. Sieg sighed.

Shou dragged his aching body to come stand next to Sieg.

"Who would have thought I'd witness something like that one day? This was right out of a movie. Although seeing it in real life is something else entirely," Shou said.

"I figured that if I could do that in-game, there was no reason why I couldn't do it here. Besides, I've always wanted to try something flashy in battle."

"It sure was."

Sieg had killed Zand in the exact same way the main character of Saturn War finished off the final boss. Shou had also played Saturn War—on the Japanese server, which was why he'd been so quick to figure out what Sieg wanted to do.

Shou looked at Sieg and finally noticed that something was strange.

"By the way, Sieg, how come you aren't hurt? That was one hell of a fall."

"I'm not sure. I expected to end up with a few broken bones at the very least, like in the game."

Sieg moved his limbs to show he was perfectly fine.

Colona was the one to give the two men an answer.

"I believe Lord Sieg wasn't hurt because a buff strengthened his body. I do not know who cast it, however. We were also buffed while we were attacking our enemy earlier," she said.

"I was so engrossed in the fight that I didn't notice at all," Shou said. "I guess this might be what allowed us to drive him to the wall."

"And it's definitely what saved me," Sieg added.

The buff the three of them had received was Transcendence—the most powerful buff of all. It increased the offense, defense, durability, and magic abilities of the target far above their usual parameters and allowed people to overcome their limits. This buff could only be used during specific events and it had no drawbacks whatsoever. Transcendence's boons were colossal.

The buff not only affected Shou and the others, but it also affected the soldiers of the Beastmen Kingdom. Those who'd been struggling to fight damask lizards could now pierce through their scales with low-quality iron swords. They were also able to stop a mithrilosaurus' charge alone when, under normal circumstances, not even a hundred men could withstand it.

The soldiers of the Beastmen Kingdom could now turn the tide of the battle...and they weren't the only ones. In the basement, the tide of another battle was beginning to turn.

Levia, Youko, and Akiha were currently facing Jörmungandr, who'd been corrupted by No Face, but the fight was one-sided.

"Whoa?!" Youko yelped, hitting the boost button. She dodged the earth dragon's attack by a hair's breadth. "That was close!"

Akiha took great care to stay as far away from the battle as she could, anticipating Jörmungandr's movements and retreating each time.

Jörmungandr had been in No Face's grasp for far too long and his body had suffered. If No Face hadn't forced him to attack, he would barely have been able to move at all.

Levia and the others were painfully aware of that fact and were scared of retaliating. At this point, any injury could prove fatal. Pushing him away was fine, but using powerful techniques was out of the question. This greatly limited Levia's options.

Still, remaining on the defensive and dodging continuously was taking a toll on Youko and Akiha. Youko's Exmizer had remarkable mobility, but moving it required mana. Needless to say, Youko's was slowly running out. Besides, Exmizer couldn't regenerate itself. If it took on the brunt of Jörmungandr's attacks, it'd eventually be out of commission.

Akiha was in an even more precarious situation. She was tiring herself out running around, but what she'd lose if she was hit wasn't a robot—it was her life. The ground was uneven because of the earlier events, and she had to be mindful of the rubble that continuously rolled down the walls or fell from the ceiling. All of this made dodging Jörmungandr's spells far more difficult.

Akiha stopped, trying her hardest to steady her breathing, when Levia was sent flying. She crashed into the ground, creating yet another indent.

"Levia! Are you okay?!" Akiha exclaimed.

"Ouch... The old man really isn't pulling his punches..." she groaned. "I'm fine, though. This much won't kill me."

Levia put on a strong front, but she had scratches all over. The blue dress she always wore was torn so badly that even her buttocks were in plain view. The

dragon had been put in charge of the most dangerous job: finding the source of Jörmungandr's corruption.

Levia, having experienced it firsthand in the past, knew the only way to rid Jörmungandr of No Face's control was to find and destroy whatever was poisoning him. Thus, she was forced to put her body on the line to get close enough to Jörmungandr. She could only focus on her search for a few instants before she was blown away by her old friend.

"Still... All of this dirt is ruining your pretty face," Akiha said. "Come here, I'll wipe it off for you."

"It's fineee," Levia whined. "It doesn't matter right now, does it? Besides, I won't have to roll in the dirt much longer."

"Huh? Wait! Did you—"

"I found it," she answered, nodding.

After being blown away countless times, beat up, and almost squashed to death by Jörmungandr, Levia had finally succeeded.

She didn't look any happier, though.

"The issue," she continued, "is *where* I found it."

"What do you mean?"

"It's right there," she said, pointing at the back of her neck—or rather, at her cervical vertebrae, to be accurate, the place through which the body's most important nerves traveled.

"No way..."

"I have to be extremely careful. If I mess up, he could be paralyzed forever... I'd need to destroy the core of the corruption with perfect accuracy..."

"Is that even...possible?"

Levia didn't answer. She was watching Jörmungandr attack Exmizer, a pained expression on her face. Youko was still dodging expertfully, but it was only a matter of time before she ran out of mana.

If she continued to hesitate, they'd be the ones to fall. But if she ended up

killing Jörmungandr, the monsters and crazed beasts he kept in check would wreak havoc on the entire continent. In fact, they might even escape beyond the borders of Arth.

“Levia! Youko is—”

“Damn!”

Exmizer had finally taken a direct hit.

Youko’s scream echoed through the basement. Exmizer had been sent flying. It scraped along the floor, coming to a stop only when it hit a wall. The force of the blow had exposed some of the robot’s wires and internal framework.

“Urgh... That was...one hell of a hit...” Youko panted.

Jörmungandr didn’t intend to stop there. He dashed toward Exmizer, ready to deliver the coup de grâce.

A flash of resignation passed through Youko’s eyes. However, she quickly snapped out of it.

No, she thought. *I can’t give up! Not now! I haven’t even gotten to celebrate my marriage to Masaki!*

A fire burned in Youko’s eyes as she mustered all of her remaining mana to make Exmizer stand up.

Every part of her body hurt and she’d even cut one of her prized fox ears. Blood trickled down her ear, staining her fur and her face red. And yet, Youko had no intention of throwing in the towel.

Strangely enough, a mere second after she’d made up her mind to fight to the bitter end, Youko felt a surge of energy course through her body.

That was Transcendence.

“I-I can’t believe it! My mana’s back?! And my body feels so warm... Did Masaki—” She stopped herself mid-sentence. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll think about this later... Let’s go!” she exclaimed, pouring more mana into Exmizer.

The robot’s backpack opened up and a pair of mechanical wings unfolded themselves.

“Exmizer!” she yelled. “Activate Burst Mode!”

Exmizer let out a high-pitched noise to answer Youko, and a dazzling aura of light burst from its joints, illuminating the basement.

Not even Iiyama Tadashi—the otherworlder people referred to as Chogokin, Exmizer’s former master—had been able to unleash Exmizer’s Burst Mode.

This form, which brought out the robot’s true potential, greatly improved its mobility, durability, and attack power, making it strong enough to overturn the most challenging odds. In theory, at least. No *Armored Sentinel* player had ever managed to activate Burst Mode.

To put it in a nutshell, Burst Mode was meant to be *overwhelmingly powerful*.

Exmizer grabbed the charging dragon with both hands. It was pushed back somewhat, but soon managed to overpower him.

Levia was flabbergasted. “S-She stopped the old man!”

“Levia! Tell me where the source of the corruption is! I’ll destroy it!” Akiha exclaimed.

“Can you do it?! It’s as big as my hand.”

“Trust me.”

Levia considered her options carefully.

“All right,” she finally said, convinced by her friend’s confidence. “Keep your eyes open and don’t panic. I’ll show you where it is.”

“Okay, go ahead,” Akiha said, pulling out her sniper rifle and lying face down on the ground. “I’m ready, do it!”

Levia rested her palm on Akiha’s back, and the otherworlder’s vision was tainted by a dark green veil.

Akiha looked at Exmizer and Jörmungandr. While most of her field of vision was dark, the former looked bright—pure white. *It must be because of the aura it’s exuding*, Akiha assumed.

Jörmungandr also appeared white. Akiha felt like she was looking at the world through some sort of peculiar infrared camera.

“You can see the red spot, Akiha, right?”

“Yes... I see it.”

The base of the earth dragon’s neck shone red. The source of the corruption was located right under his scales, Akiha noticed. Red filaments—they looked almost like roots—emerged from that spot and stretched into his bone marrow.

“This thing stole the old man’s freedom. As you can see, it’s located millimeters away from his...spinal cord or whatever that thing is called... Either way, don’t hit it.”

Levia had learned about anatomy from Masaki. She knew that the spine was a very sensitive place with important nerves going through. In fact, a single hit to the spine was enough to render a crazed beast powerless.

In the past, Levia wouldn’t have hesitated much. She would have grabbed the source of the corruption and dragged it out of Jörmungandr’s body without a care in the world—without realizing that she risked killing him in the process.

Levia knew her own limits. She was aware that controlling her strength wasn’t her forte. That was why she’d decided to entrust this to Akiha.

The sniper was currently emptying her mind. She’d stopped breathing to make sure it wouldn’t disrupt her aim. All of her attention was focused on the tip of her fingers and her eyes.

Exmizer was doing a great job of containing Jörmungandr, but that didn’t mean the dragon was perfectly still—far from it.

Akiha’s target was constantly moving, but that didn’t faze her. She simply had to do what she always did. She’d hit running soldiers, all kinds of monsters, and even the pilots of fighter aircraft mid-air.

The Sniper Princess focused every nerve in her body. She had one shot.

Her vision suddenly shifted. The world appeared to be in slow motion. Akiha gazed at the entire scene in front of her eyes. She took in Exmizer and Jörmungandr, she considered the speed of her bullet and the distance, and then took the shot, trusting the instincts she’d spent years honing.

The sniper bucked in Akiha’s hands, sending a bullet flying straight toward the

back of Jörmungandr's neck.

The earth dragon, all of his attention on Exmizer, hadn't noticed the bullet. It moved its neck forward at the last minute in an effort to push the robot away.

The position of the core of the corruption shifted slightly...and Akiha's bullet pierced right through the dragon's robust scales and punched into the kernel of corruption.

Akiha had perfectly avoided Jörmungandr's spinal cord. She'd once again proved that her aim was unmatched.

Jörmungandr's behavior changed in the blink of an eye. While he'd been fighting fiercely until now, he suddenly came to a stop, and a vine creeped out of the hole Akiha had opened up in his neck. Several more followed it, crawling along the dragon's skin, until eventually, Akiha and the others were able to see a bulb.

Green liquid spilled freely from the hole that Akiha's bullet had punched into the bulb. This, then, was the thing that had been corrupting Jörmungandr.

Naturally, Youko immediately noticed the vines and the bulb.

"There!" she exclaimed.

Her intuition told her that they were dangerous and she grabbed the bulb carefully with two of Exmizer's fingers. She then booted up a special program she'd yet to use.

"Vanishing Mode!"

Light gathered in Exmizer's right hand. Heat shimmered as the temperature rose. Before long, a flame formed in the robot's hand.

"VANISH!!!" Youko exclaimed.

The bulb let out a high-pitched shriek.

"This is the end!" Youko said.

She looked incredibly cool—although Akiha would have said she was acting like she was suffering from a terrible case of chuunibyou—as she created a pillar of white flames that engulfed the bulb. When the inferno subsided, not

even ashes remained.

“Old man!” Levia shouted, running to Jörmungandr, who’d just collapsed. “Hang in there! Old man! Old man?!”

“You’re so noisy... I’ve finally come back to my senses and all I hear is your screams. Quiet, Leviathan.”

“That voice is—” Youko started.

“Jörmungandr’s?!” Akiha let out, surprised.

As for Levia, she fell to her knees, relieved. “If you were awake all along, you should have just answered me!” she complained, punching Jörmungandr on the nose.

“Ouch!” the earth dragon whined. “Be kind to your elders!”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, old man. You only ever act like an elder when it suits you!”

“That’s a privilege you earn with age,” Jörmungandr said with a little laugh. “Nevertheless, you sure brought interesting people along, Leviathan. Three otherworlders, a vampire, a half-beastwoman from Yamato, a fairy, a battle leo, and even a fenrir girl! Not to mention one of your otherworlders is an administrator.”

“I needed to enlist some help,” Levia answered. “I was surprised to find out Masaki was an administrator, though.”

Levia had noticed that Masaki was an administrator a while ago. There were too many things that didn’t make sense otherwise, such as his Invincibility or his strangely accurate map.

Still, she hadn’t breathed a word about it. If that information had fallen into the wrong ears, Masaki could have been in serious trouble. She’d only answered Jörmungandr so casually because she’d confirmed that only Youko and Akiha were within earshot and she knew that the two of them had Masaki’s best interests at heart.

While Youko simply looked confused, something seemed to click in Akiha’s brain. She’d often thought that Masaki’s powers were very much like those of a

game master. Hearing that she'd been right made her happy. Even though Masaki's abilities were practically unlimited, he'd still decided to rely on her.

Masaki-san being a game master doesn't change anything. He's still the same old Masaki-san—a bit of a busybody and a workaholic who loves to unwind in a hot spring. Besides, he's only one person. He can't do everything alone. I'll stay by his side and support him, along with Youko and Adel.

"You don't have any more time to waste here," Jörmungandr said. "*They* still have an ace up their sleeve and, even though your otherworlder is an administrator, his powers aren't all-encompassing. He'll need your help."

Levia seemed reluctant to leave Jörmungandr's side, but she eventually nodded. "You're right... Rest up, old man. I'll see you later."

"Indeed, I shall rest for a moment," the earth dragon said, closing his eyes.

"Akiha! Youko! You heard what the old man just said! We ended up pretty far away from Masaki while fighting the old man, so we'll have to hurry! Are you ready?"

"Of course!" Youko exclaimed.

"Yes!" Akiha added.

Akiha and Levia climbed onto Exmizer's palm and Youko dashed forward. The underground space they were in was Jörmungandr's lair. It was tremendously big and, over the course of their fight with Jörmungandr, they'd ended up straying quite far from Masaki and the others.

If they tried to catch up to Masaki, Adel, and No Face on foot, it would take them way too long, so they'd opted to rely on Exmizer.

The robot moved at full speed, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Jörmungandr opened his eyes and looked at the robot speeding in the distance.

"I'll leave the fate of this world in your hands, young heroes," he whispered, before closing his eyes once more.

His battered body needed rest, and the old dragon swiftly fell asleep.

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“I can feel my strength and my mana recover... What’s going on, Masaki?”

“This is all thanks to Transcendence,” I said. “It won’t last very long, but it should be more than enough to take care of them.”

Transcendence tremendously increased people’s HP and MP recovery rates. It was a comprehensive buff that also boosted offense, defense, and durability. With this, I’d be able to deal some serious damage, even with Britannia.

“No Face, you’ve sinned too much. Suspending your account would be too lenient. I’ll have to delete you altogether!”

“You impudent fool!” the double voice screamed. “I still have Lævateinn in my grasp! I don’t care if you’re an administrator, I’ll burn you to a crisp!”

I could hear each voice—one feminine and one masculine—very distinctively. No Face was obviously shaken. That would work in my favor. A hasty opponent was always easier to face.

“Can you cover me, Adel?”

“Of course. Focus on fighting them. I’ve got you!”

There wasn’t a hint of hesitation in her voice. *How reliable*.

I raised Britannia and took a big step forward. No Face also approached. Rather than run, they slithered across the ground on the countless vines that were coming out of their legs. They then swung Lævateinn as though the sword were weightless. I still had trouble believing they could be so fast.

Their blade hit my shoulder, but No Face was the one to let out a surprised yelp. The vines that made up their face rearranged themselves in an expression of shock.

Ta-da. Surprised, are we?

I’d dodged or blocked all of their attacks until now, but I had no need for that anymore. The best offensive...was to forgo defense altogether.

I wouldn’t take damage thanks to Invincibility, and my Immune Status had been improved further. As a GM with full administratorrights, I couldn’t be

pushed away or sent flying.

I'd only been granted these rights temporarily, but while I had them, I'd be unstoppable. I was free to focus solely on attacking.

No Face was so surprised that they stopped moving for a second.

First, I'll get back the authority you stole!

I brought my sword down, slicing a neat arc through the air, and cut off No Face's right arm, their fingers still clutched tightly around Lævateinn's pommel.

"AAAAARGH!!! MY ARM! NO! I WON'T LET YOU HAVE LÆVATEINN! NEVER!" No Face's screamed.

I once again heard two very distinct voices speak in unison.

No Face extended vines toward their flying right arm. They were trying to reclaim Lævateinn, but we weren't about to let them do that. Before their vines could reach the sword, blood-red spears destroyed them.

"This isn't happening!" Adel exclaimed. "Masaki!"

"I'm on it!"

I once again made use of my newly gained authority.

"Activate GM Command! Data Transfer:Lævateinn! Execute!"

The sword disaggregated itself into tiny particles before reappearing in my hand.

"L-Lævateinn?! How?!" No Face yelled before composing themselves. "This sword won't obey anyone but its rightful master! Its fire will consume you! Ha ha ha! You'll regret this, administrator!"

No Face was elated. Sadly for them, they'd gotten it all wrong.

I used Lævateinn to slash at the air. A blade of fire appeared out of nowhere and flew at No Face.

No Face screeched. "WHY?! Why didn't you burn?! Even I couldn't handle this sword without precautions!"

"It's not that complicated, really," I answered. "Examining it for five seconds

was enough for me to figure out how to wield it. Besides, I satisfied the requirement from the start."

"What?!"

Lævateinn was an item, which meant that, like every other item, I could use Appraisal on it. *And what kind of idiot wouldn't when given the chance?*

With my current abilities, I could appraise items even from a distance. That was how I'd discovered that the requirement to wield Lævateinn was to have the blessing of the god of fire.

It didn't specify which god of fire—there were dozens of them—so I figured that Surt should qualify. As it so happened, I was currently wearing the Pride of the Surt and the sword had accepted that as proof without any issue.

Well then, should I have some fun with this sword?

I dashed forward and slashed the air once again. This time I used both Britannia and Lævateinn.

No Face was enraged. They screamed and created two spears out of their vines, which they hurled at me.

A blade of air and a blade of fire appeared, tearing the first spear into pieces when they collided. The other one came straight for my legs, but I took a step forward and used a nearby red crystal to vault all the way to where No Face stood.

Adel had helped me out once more.

"You!" No Face groaned.

Realizing they were at a disadvantage, they tried to retreat, but a huge wall rose from the ground, blocking their path.

Adel had helped me jump further and obstructed No Face's retreat at the same time. No Face was cornered and I used both of my swords to attack them. Lævateinn's fire engulfed them until they burned blue.

"No! My powers! My might! My authority! I can't accept this! NOOOOOOOO!!!"

This time, I heard four distinct voices screaming in unison.

Suddenly, No Face used some of their last remaining vines to stab themselves.

What in the world are they doing? Are they trying to commit suicide to escape the pain?! No, they'd never do something like this... But why?

No Face pulled out five cubes, ripping their robes to shreds in the process.

More copies of the Five Bloody Sutras?!

"If I'm to disappear here...I'll drag you down with me! I won't die alone! HA HA! HA HA HA HA! MWA HA HA HA HA HA!!!"

No Face's hysterical laugh echoed around us as the vines manipulated the copies of the Five Bloody Sutras. This heinous curse was already powerful enough to lead an entire country to its doom, but No Face's vines were corrupting it further. The cubes and vines were dyed black.

No Face's body rose in the air amidst a cloud of black smoke, their vines cocooning them.

When the black smoke touched the ground, the earth started decaying as if the smoke contained a powerful poison.

That bastard left us the worst parting gift I can imagine!

They'd used five copies of the Five Bloody Sutras. Before long, countless vengeful ghosts would emerge from the smoke—far more than we'd fought on the Phantom Blau.

I needed to do something about them as soon as possible!

"Overtachi!!!"

I held both of my swords close together and a single blade of light appeared. I brought it down on the cocoon, but it passed through the material as if it were goo.

Are physical attacks ineffective against this thing? In that case...

I concentrated mana into Lævateinn and unleashed another blow. Fire flew at the cocoon, but it soon disappeared. I couldn't tell if it had done some damage or not at all. Either way, it hadn't been very effective.

I thought about using my GM-exclusive rights to do something about it, but the condensed cursed energy was so strong that the system was bugging. I couldn't even select it.

Had I done all this only to fail when it mattered the most?

I was grinding my teeth in frustration and staring at the black sphere when I felt a soft hand on my shoulder—*Adel*.

She tugged at my shoulder to make me turn around. Then she kissed me.

I gasped. I hadn't expected her to do something like that now. She pulled away and smiled warmly at me. A slight blush colored her cheeks.

"Did that help you calm down, Masaki?"

"I... Erm... Yeah."

The feeling of her lips against mine had stirred me up in a different kind of way, but it wasn't the time—nor the place—for that.

"Good. Why do you always try to do everything on your own? I told you I'd support you! If you don't have enough strength on your own, you can borrow ours. Right, guys?"

I'd been so focused on my No Face that I'd failed to notice that Youko, Akiha, Levia, Fen, Alice, Nemea, Shou, Colona, and Sieg were all standing behind me.

"Geez!" Youko sighed. "I know you're strong and there are lots of things you can do on your own, but you should still rely on us, Masaki! We're here for you!"

"Yes," Akiha agreed. "Don't try to bear this burden all on your own. Let us help."

"I suppose this is what the old man was worried about," Levia said, looking at the cursed energy. "It's fine, though. We'll fix this. What could you possibly be worried about when you have *me* here? I'll lend you my strength."

"Big Brother Masaki... I also...want to help you," Fen said. "We're family..."

"Since I'm here, I might as well help you out too," Alice said. "My bestie is going to help, so I have to participate too, right Fen?"

“Without you, I would still be a slave on the Phantom Blau. I’m thankful to you for giving me a bright future. My strength is yours, Masaki,” Nemea said.

“I’ve had to rely on you way too many times before,” Shou said. “It’s about time I paid back my debt, don’t you think? I’m not one to let my tab pile up.”

“Lord Masaki, thank you for being my lord’s friend,” Colona said. “I’ve never seen him get along so well with another man and I hope that you’ll remain good friends with him in the future too. For this reason, I’m willing to lend you all of my power.”

“What are you waiting for? Just borrow our powers and kick their ass. Easy, right?” Sieg added.

That’s right... I’m not alone. I have comrades I can rely upon. Even if my administrative rights aren’t enough to defeat No Face and their curses, as long as they’re here with me, I can do it.

All of my comrades raised their palms toward Adel. She started taking mana from them. She adjusted their mana’s wavelength until it matched mine before transferring it to me.

A warm wave of energy coursed through my entire body. Their mana merged with mine, becoming part of me.

The black sphere, which had been floating until now, started rising as it tried to escape through the hole in the ceiling. Corrupt mana was consistently spilling out and falling on us, but Fen’s barrier blocked it.

I steadied my sword in my hand and pointed it at what No Face had become —an ominous cluster of cursed energy.

“You’re done! Overtachi!!!” I exclaimed, pouring the tremendous amount of mana I’d received from my friends into this final attack.

The mana Adel had refined for me dyed the blade of light pink. So much was condensed into a single attack that the large blade soon became a whirlpool of pink mana that swallowed up the dark sphere.

The vengeful ghosts’ horrifying screeches filled the chamber.

The pink whirlpool swallowed everything as it rose toward the sky. The perils

that hung over this continent were no more. No Face was gone, and so were the hateful ghosts they'd summoned.

The whirlpool had grown so much that it was thicker than the gigantic tree that supported the royal castle of the Beast King. It effortlessly blew away the upper floors of the Great Earth Sanctuary.

Eventually, a crackling sound echoed in the air above us—like fireworks.

"Whoa..."

A gigantic cherry blossom blossomed in the sky over the Beastmen Kingdom. We all looked at the beautiful form our mana had taken in silence, watching the particles of mana descend around us.

The view was marvelous.

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"Well, do you want to keep fighting?" Satoshi asked, looking at the sky. Blood ran down the side of his face.

Although his eyes were on the flower that decorated the sky, his full attention was still on the man in front of him, Kokuu.

Satoshi often looked like his guard was full of gaps, but Kokuu had learned the hard way that this wasn't the case. Satoshi's defense was tough to penetrate and he'd himself suffered plenty of injuries. His black suit had been scorched and torn so badly that he only had one sleeve left.

"No, I'm done," Kokuu said. "The plan has failed. There's no point in my staying here."

"I'm glad you see things that way. It's almost tea time. I'd hate to miss it."

"Tell Masaki this is only the beginning. We'll destroy this world no matter what it takes."

Satoshi didn't seem to mind Kokuu's outrageous provocation in the slightest. He answered with a smile: "Got it. I'll let him know."

Kokuu clicked his tongue before vanishing.

Satoshi, who'd been left alone, stretched as he looked at the sky.

“Destroying the world, huh? Masaki sure got himself tangled with some troublesome rascals. I suppose I can’t leave everything in the hands of the youngsters anymore. This old man is going to have to get serious too,” he whispered before walking away.

For the time being, he had some tea to drink.

Chapter 9

I was fidgeting in my dressing room when I heard Shou sigh.

“Hey, Masaki,” he said. “Why are you fidgeting already? The ceremony hasn’t even started. This isn’t like you. Are you that nervous?”

“Why wouldn’t he be? I’d be a nervous wreck if I were him,” Tatsuma, who was leaning on the wall next to the door, said. “Though I have a feeling you wouldn’t even be fazed.”

True. I couldn’t picture Shou getting stressed.

“Hey, that was mean. I do get anxious from time to time.”

“Oh? When, for example?”

“Let me think... When I bring a virgin to my bed, I guess?”

“I shouldn’t have asked. Forget it,” Tatsuma sighed.

Why are the two of you blabbering here of all places? I’m already so stressed I can feel myself getting all sweaty.

Shou, Tatsuma, and I were currently waiting in one of the dressing rooms of a party hall in Atami.

After the final battle in the Great Earth Sanctuary, we’d checked on Jörmungandr before heading home. I’d fulfilled my contract with Levia and I was afraid we’d get tangled in the politics of the Beastmen Kingdom if we stayed any longer.

Between the coup d’état, the destruction of the Great Earth Sanctuary, and the appearance of a peculiar flower in the sky, the capital was a mess. Considering how many bodies were in the sanctuary, we would surely have been detained for at least a month. Plenty of soldiers had seen us and would surely have vouched for us, but investigations took time. Besides, there was no telling what would happen if they reached the wrong conclusions. I was a foreign noble—what if they assumed that the Sentdrag Kingdom had a part in this?

Everyone had agreed that going home at once was a much safer, hassle-free option.

Jörmungandr's condition was fairly bad, but he was still alive. Honestly, I didn't think anything other than a dragon could have gone through everything he had and survived. According to Levia, he'd be fine after a month of rest, though.

We left Jörmungandr in the care of Zarandi, the priest we'd met in the sanctuary. He told us he'd deal with the aftermath of the battle, so we left using underground pathways created by the garuda years ago. After making it back to the surface, Alice led us to a Fairy Path and we went back to Atami while Sieg went to Saunshade so he could report to Lydea. I wish he could have tagged along, but he had a duty to report to his lord. Besides, I was pretty sure he wasn't comfortable leaving James and Dan unattended for too long.

Someone unexpectedly replaced Sieg in our party, though. I was surprised to find Satoshi waiting for us by the underground pathways' entrance. As it turned out, he'd made preparations so he could leave the country at any point, and he announced he'd come to Atami with us.

His battle with Kokuu must have been difficult because he was injured when he joined us. He accompanied us to Atami so he could rest and recover *and* enjoy our renowned hot spring resort. Apparently, Satoshi was a hot spring aficionado, just like me.

When we found him, he was busy drinking from an elegant cup of tea with his maid, Rina. We asked him how he'd found the entrance to the underground pathways. As it turned out, he'd simply followed Nemea's presence before assuming we'd most likely pick this path to go home. Only a Martial Artist as skilled as him was capable of such a feat.

Alice had also decided to tag along.

"If I go back to my village, I'll be bored to death every day! I've finally learned how vast the outside world is. I want to see more of it!" the little fairy said, brimming with curiosity.

I could only commend her enthusiasm. Alice and Fen were very good friends and I hoped they'd stay in touch. It would do them both a lot of good.

Prince Leon, Ludwig, and Jimmy had taken good care of my territory in my stead and we were pleased to find Atami just as we'd left it—a beautiful city bustling with activity. After making it back to my mansion, I immediately took over my official duties again. I was tired from our adventures in the Beastmen Kingdom, but there was no time to rest: there were always tons of things to do. In fact, I'd been forced to rely on Prince Leon, Jirou, and Count Alan so I could get some time off to prepare for today—the most important day of my life.

Shou and Tatsuma were both wearing black suits. The formal wear fit them like a glove and I suspected they'd worn such clothes quite a few times in the past.

I, on the other hand, had decided on a hakama—a traditional Japanese outfit—decorated with the crest of my house. It was one of my favorite costumes as well as one of the most expensive outfits I owned.

"I still can't believe you're doing this now. We've only just come back," Shou said. "You look good all dressed up, though."

"Thanks, man," I answered. "I know we all have a lot on our plates at the moment, but I believe days like today are important too. Besides...I don't want to make them wait forever."

"True..."

"Yeah..."

Shou and Tatsuma smiled awkwardly. My words had obviously made them consider their own situations.

"By the way, Masaki," Shou said after a pause. "Can you still use that crazy power you used at the end of our fight?"

He was most likely referring to my administrative rights.

"No, not anymore. It was a one-time thing I could only manage because of the circumstances."

After No Face and the cursed energy of the Five Bloody Sutras disappeared for good, my administrative rights were revoked. I'd never expected to keep them. In fact, I would never have been able to use them in the first place. They'd only

been granted to me because of the security breach caused by No Face.

I was back to having my usual GM powers and that was more than enough. I'd also gained a new weapon: Lævateinn. It was one of the keys that could help me access my administrative rights in times of need, so I decided to keep it tucked away in my inventory.

"Still, you're way too overpowered. Now that I know what your power is, I don't see how I could beat you," Shou grumbled.

"You know I have to be careful to keep it under wraps, so I'd appreciate it if you—"

"Yes, yes, I know. I won't breathe a word about it. I'd probably be targeted for associating with you if I ever said anything, so don't worry. I don't wanna live my life as a fugitive."

"I won't say a thing either," Tatsuma said. "I don't care what powers you have. You've helped me, so I'll help you. The rest is none of my concern."

"You're always so formal, Tatsuma," Shou said.

"Shut up. That's just how I am."

"You need to let loose sometimes, man."

"And you need to take your responsibilities seriously every now and then."

I laughed. Seeing Shou and Tatsuma bicker like children somehow helped me relax. I felt like an idiot for being so anxious. They both knew that I was a GM, but they were still treating me just like they had before. I truly appreciated that. To be honest, I'd hesitated a lot about whether or not I should tell Tatsuma about it too. Since everyone else knew and he was in charge of security, however, I ultimately decided to open up to him. I didn't want him to feel left out. He was surprised at first, but accepted it almost immediately, saying it made a lot of sense.

Shou was still messing with Tatsuma and the latter's scowl was gradually deepening.

I truly felt comfortable here. Having male friends was nice, truly.

My nerves had finally settled and I took a gulp out of my lukewarm glass of

water when someone knocked at the door. Tatsuma opened the door. Fen entered, bowing awkwardly to greet us.

“B-Big Brother Masaki... They told me to let you know...they’re ready.”

“Sounds like you’re on Masaki! Off you go, come on,” Shou said, all but pushing me out of the door.

“O-Okay,” I stuttered.

I followed Fen to the dressing room where Adel, Youko, and Akiha would be waiting for me. Today, Fen had traded her usual maid outfit for Miko clothes I’d given her. Akiha, Youko, and I were fond of this traditional Japanese style, so we’d insisted on it.

I was a little worried that Fen would find her new outfit difficult to walk in, but, thankfully, she didn’t seem to be having any issues.

We reached the dressing room and Fen knocked on the door. A voice came, telling her it was okay to come in. Fen opened it.

Immediately, I was at a loss for words.

Inside, Adel was wearing an intricate white wedding gown. The design was somewhat old-fashioned, but it was graceful and refined. This dress was a replica of the one her mother had worn on her wedding day. The pure coral hair ornament I’d bought for her in the capital decorated her beautiful locks.

On her right stood Youko. She wore an immaculate wedding kimono and seemed almost reserved—the epitome of pure, feminine Japanese beauty. I could see her tails restlessly shifting behind her and knew that, while she was doing her best to remain graceful, her lively personality was threatening to burst free.

On Adel’s left was Akiha, wearing a white modern wedding dress. Haruka was standing behind her, a radiant smile on her face.



As you may have guessed, the reason why I was so fidgety this entire time was because today was the day I married Adel, Youko, and Akiha.

Everything that had happened with Akiha gave me the final nudge I needed. I'd always intended to marry my fiancées, of course, but we had never decided on a date. It was always something meant to happen someday in the future. However, the courage it took Akiha to confess her feelings had spurred me on. As a man, I couldn't stay put after seeing a girl do that.

I'd decided there and then that I would marry my fiancées when we came back from the Beastmen Kingdom. As soon as we arrived in Atami, I crafted our wedding rings and asked them to marry me once more. They wept tears of happiness and immediately accepted.

They were all so beautiful. Their make-up was pretty light, but it still was a big change from their usual looks. Now that I took in their dresses—their wedding dresses—it all hit me: we were really getting married.

"Masaki-san? Don't you have something to say to them?" Haruka said in her usual carefree tone.

"I helped them get ready too!" Alice exclaimed, flying around the three brides-to-be. "Aren't they pretty?"

"Are you a man or not? Tell them what you think," Levia added, pulling on my arm and dragging me inside the room.

R-Right. I couldn't stare at them in silence for the entire day.

"Erm... Well... You... The three of you are breathtaking," I finally said. I laughed awkwardly. "I'm so happy that my brain froze. I don't know what to say."

"This is more than enough," Adel said.

"Exactly. If you're happy, I'm happy. I don't need anything else," Youko added.

"This is just like you, Masaki-san. I'd rather hear a few honest words than empty flattery," Akiha said. "Hee hee, I still can't believe we'll be husband and wife after today..."

The three of them were all different, but they each made me happy in their own way.

Akiha had told me she wouldn't have minded being some sort of mistress, but I could never have done that to her—especially not in this world, where it was perfectly acceptable to have several wives. I wanted her to be one of my legal wives.

When I'd told Haruka I intended to marry her sister, she happily clapped before jumping on her little sister and hugging her tightly.

"Please take good care of my little Akiha. You have to make her happy. If she ever cries because of you...I'll be mad! Very, *very* mad," she'd said with a smile.

I had every intention to make Akiha happy, but even so, Haruka's bright smile had chilled me to my bones.

"Big Brother Masaki... It's time..." Fen said, looking up at me as she pulled on my sleeve.

I patted her head gently before holding out my hands for my brides-to-be to take. "Let's go, Adel, Youko, Akiha."

They all nodded.

We walked to the ceremonial hall with Haruka, Fen, Alice, and Levia in tow.

There, Barbarossa and his crew, Prince Leon, Count Alan, Shou, Colona, Tatsuma, Hayato, Jirou, Satoshi, the head of the Dark Guild, Miss Aura, and the rest of the alraunes, as well as Lydea, Sieg and Queen Gardenia, all three of whom had made the trip especially for our wedding, were waiting for us.

They weren't the only ones, though. All of the people I'd come to know in this world were in attendance.

Nemea stood in front of the altar wearing a brand-new priest gown. He smiled warmly at us as we approached. As a battle priest, he was perfectly qualified to oversee this sort of ceremony. He'd apparently done so plenty of times in the past. Even though he and the people of his faith were shunned by most of their communities, he still officiated for them to make enough money

to make ends meet. *He must have had it hard, but I have to admit I'm thankful he can do this for us.*

Nemea started giving us his blessing and celebrating our union. As I listened to him, I thought of the moment when I first arrived in this world. I had felt so utterly lost. All I wanted to do was escape, and after getting out of my cell, I was forced to fight time and time again. On the way, though, I had met some incredible people—people I'd come to love.

I still didn't know why I'd received these powers, but I knew what I'd use them for. I'd protect my loved ones and our future together. Besides my brides, there were plenty of people I wanted to protect.

This wasn't all. Countless players had been torn from their lives and pulled into this world. Satoshi had also passed along Kokuu's message. He was still intent on destroying this world. I didn't know why or how he and his associates would proceed, but I'd stop them. I'd protect this world, my loved ones, and the players who'd been dragged into this mess against their will.

I was painfully aware of how grand my goals were. However, I wasn't alone. I knew I could count on my friends' help.

Nemea's speech ended and I kissed Adel, Youko, and Akiha.

"Let's welcome every new day together," I said. "All four of us."

The three of them embraced me at the same time, calling out my name, as our guests cheered.

If I wanted to be happy, the first step was to make the people around me happy. From now on, I'd continue to move forward, one step at a time, so that I could bring them happiness.

Now that I'd logged into this world, I'd fulfill my role as a GM. I was perfectly happy with the game I was living in and I'd do anything to protect our lives.

I hoped that all of the other players could live in peace in this world from now on. I only had one wish for all of them:

May this brand-new world treat you well.

—Fin—

Afterword

—Akatsuki has logged in—

Hello everyone, Akatsuki here.

The print edition of *The Game Master Has Logged In to Another World* ends with volume 4, which means its conclusion is quite different from the one of the web novel. Still, I feel like I've been able to share everything I wanted to share.

While it was a lot of work, I had a lot of fun doing it, and I'm pleased with what I've accomplished. I poured a lot of time into rewriting this story, too much at times, in fact. I've made things difficult for my editor and I would like to apologize for that.

This fourth book focused on the Beastmen Kingdom storyline, as well as on Akiha. She was finally given her chance to be in the spotlight and become one of the main heroines. I never would have thought *that* scene would be illustrated when I first wrote it, but here it is!

At the time, I was thinking of what it would take for Masaki to truly flip out and it dawned on me. If Akiha, one of his precious comrades who also happens to have a crush on him, was assaulted, he'd definitely lose it. That's how this scene came to be.

Traveling to sketchy areas without a guide is dangerous, guys! I do respect free-spirited people who aren't afraid to travel, though. I love Japan and I'm not the adventurous type, so it's not something I could do. I'd consider going abroad...if I was sure I could communicate with the locals...and enjoy hot springs! Actually, I think I'd enjoy Rome. The thermae speak to me! (I have a weakness for hot springs).

Shou was also quite active in volume 4! He's an all-rounder who can fill many different roles from intelligence gathering to combat. He even transported characters across the country.

While he's quite powerful now, Shou has also come a long way. He has

terrible gacha luck—one could even say he's cursed. He's had to use *a lot* of resources to gather all of the useful cards he has now. To be honest, his card budget is probably equivalent to the military budget of a small nation. Still, even though there are hundreds of incredible cards in Shou's collection, his one and only partner is Colona. I'm sure they'll continue to travel the world together for years to come.

Shou is a new character I created especially for the print edition and I must say I've taken a liking to him. In fact, I like him so much that I hope I get the chance to write about a similar character in the future.

There are still plenty of things I wish I could have written about, but, sadly, there is a limit to how long a book can be. I would have loved to tell you more about Fen's cuteness or Sieg's humanity and wisdom. Satoshi, in particular, only made a very brief appearance. There is so much to say about this character, but I was forced to omit them.

I ended the book with the long-awaited wedding of Adel, Youko, Akiha, and Masaki. I've had this ending in mind for the longest time. I didn't want Masaki to date them indefinitely, but instead to properly marry them. Levia also had an interesting dynamic with Masaki, but I'd decided from the start I wouldn't give him more than three wives, so the two of them won't ever get together. In the end, they're simply close friends who like to tease each other.

This story stops here, but there are still many mysteries for Masaki and his friends to solve. Not much has been revealed about the secret organization, Pavaria, so I'm sure the protagonists' adventures will continue.

It is now time for me to say goodbye. If we ever meet again in the future, please support me once more.

—Akatsuki has logged out—