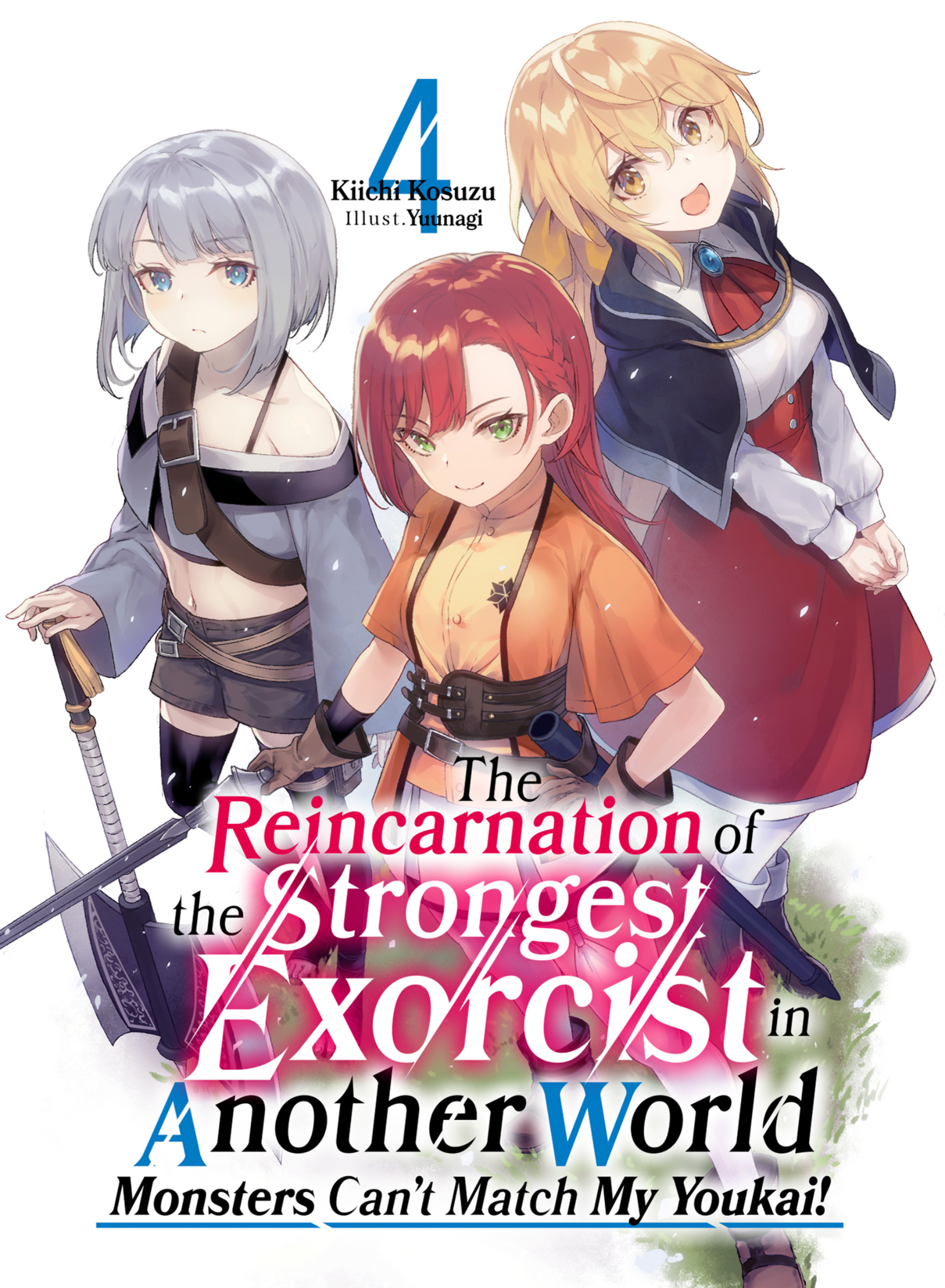
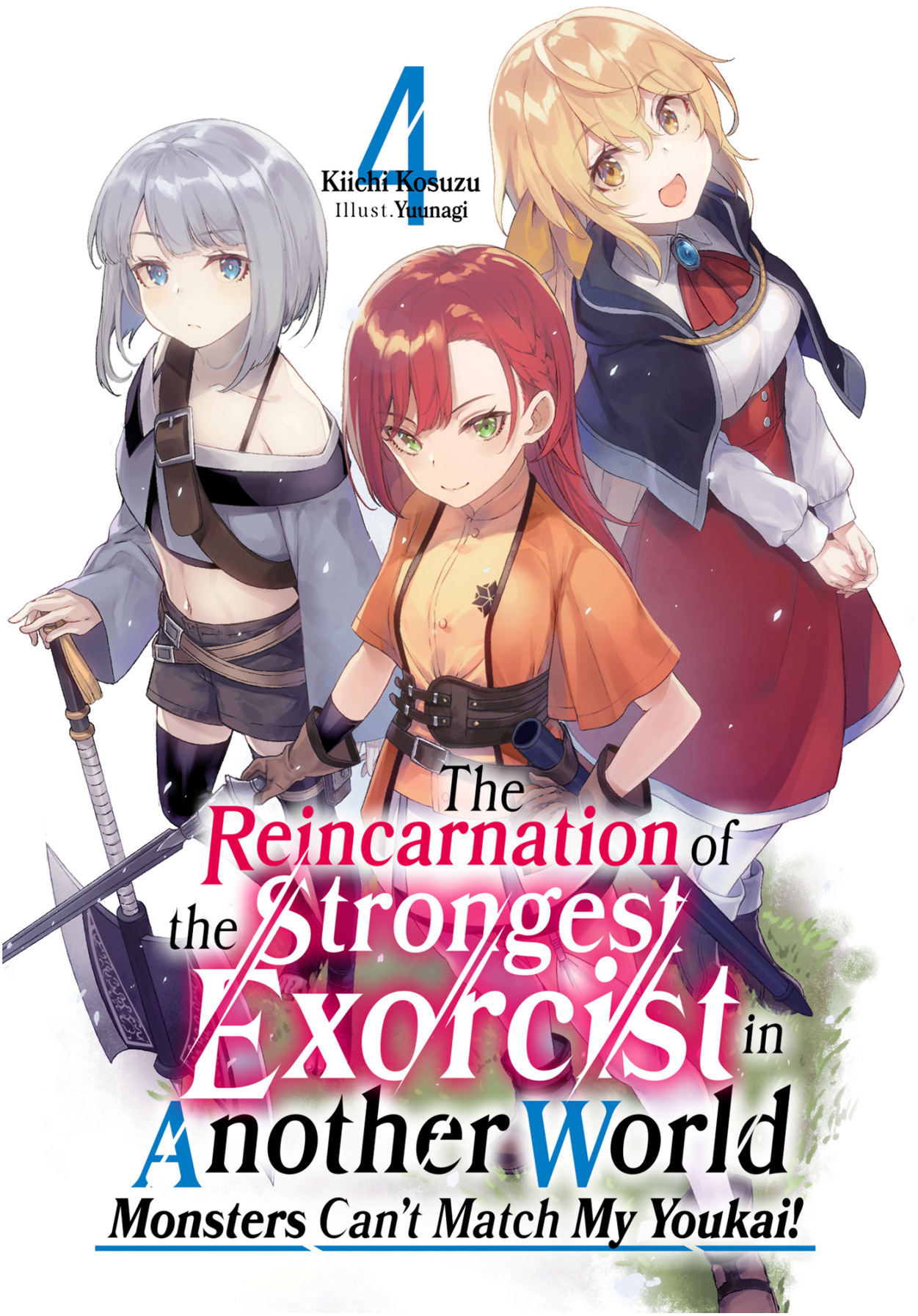

4
Kiichi Kosuzu
Illust. Yuunagi
The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World
Monsters Can't Match My Youkai!



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4
Kiichi Kosuzu
Illust. Yunagi


Mabel Crane
Heavy Warrior
Yifa
Mage
"Get out."
"Wh-Why are you so calm right now?!"
"S-S-Seika?!"
Amyu
Magic Swordsman


Summoning—
Mizuchi.
Seika Lamprogue
Exorcist

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Chapter 1

Act 1

On a clear spring morning, Amyu and I rode in a carriage headed northeast along an imperial highway. I was the one sitting in the driver's seat, the reins in my hands as I enjoyed the cool breeze brushing against my cheeks. Even the horse seemed to be in high spirits.

"Hey, Seika," Amyu called out to me from the back of the carriage. "Wanna swap soon?"

"Huh? No, it's fine. I'm not tired yet."

"You say that, but you've been sitting up there forever," Amyu said, sounding slightly exasperated. "You totally love carriages now."

Amyu was right. After learning the basics of driving a carriage, I'd spent most of my time in the driver's seat.

"It's pretty fun," I answered honestly. "And for some reason, I don't feel sick when I'm the one driving."

"You've even started paying extra attention to the horse's care."

"I've always liked horses. I also cared for cows in the past— Uh, never mind."

"Cows? Did your family have any cows?" Amyu asked suspiciously.

They most certainly did not, as it was my past life to which I was referring. I'd ridden ox carriages frequently back when I'd been in Japan. Though not particularly fast, they made up for it in comfort. Traveling via spells or ayakashi was significantly faster, but unfortunately, neither of those options was suited to visiting people, and they lacked a certain elegance.

Of course, I couldn't say all that, so I simply let the conversation die and the carriage fell silent. Yet the silence wasn't uncomfortable—perhaps I felt that way because I could now be a little more honest with Amyu.

“What do you think’s going on at the academy?” Amyu mumbled.

Keeping my gaze straight ahead, I pondered how to answer. Just a few days ago, I had attacked the imperial palace to rescue Amyu after she’d been abducted. At the end of my rampage, I had succeeded in escaping with her, but we couldn’t really go back to the academy anymore. Although I figured it was impossible for Amyu to avoid getting caught up in political strife that might result in her death, the fact remained that the situation had grown serious. Who knew what might have happened had Fiona not smoothed things over for us?

After thinking it over, I gave a half-hearted answer, intending to just move the conversation along. “The new semester should be starting right about now.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I mean since we aren’t there anymore. Like, how’s Yifa doing and stuff.”

That was certainly a concern. Most of the student body knew that Amyu had been taken by a marquess’s knights during the entrance ceremony. They would have noticed that I was missing too. With my good grades and election to class rep, surely I was just as famous as Amyu—if not more so.

I wonder what kind of rumors are spreading. We’re probably fine for now, but eventually, we’ll be expelled. Not that it really matters since we’ve already left.

Yifa was the bigger issue. She was a slave, and I wasn’t sure how she’d be treated without her master around. Even if I remembered the empire’s laws and the academy’s rules, I wouldn’t be able to make sense of them.

In the worst-case scenario, she might be returned to the Lamprogue estate. That’d be a shame. Her grades were excellent. I lost my cool and stormed the palace without really thinking about what would happen afterward. I’m a lousy master.

In truth, I didn’t think it would be that bad. The headmistress wasn’t the type to handle everything by the book, and without me around, Yifa would be the top student. I couldn’t imagine she would be inclined to let Yifa go for trivial reasons like regulations or money.

Then there was Fiona. The scheming Holy Princess seemed to have a reasonable grasp of my abilities through her future sight.

Given everything that had just occurred, I doubted she would carelessly overlook something that might upset me again. She wouldn't want to risk Lodonea being destroyed this time.

No, I shouldn't be like that. That's not the reason. I'd seen how friendly she'd been with everyone. I wanted to believe in her, even if only a little.

"I'm sure she's fine," I said after a lengthy silence.

This time Amyu was the one to fall silent, before opening her mouth a short while later. "Hey, Seika."

"Hmm?"

"Can I finally ask you something?" With a hint of tension, I started to ask a question in return, then closed my mouth. Unfazed, Amyu continued. "Why are you so strong? You were the one who destroyed the palace's walls, right? And then you returned them to normal. How the heck did you do that? You beat all the guards and made it to me unharmed. Fiona even said her holy knights weren't a match for you. Who are you, really?"

"When I was little, I was told I didn't have any magical power after a magic measuring ritual," I answered after a brief pause. "But I didn't wanna give up on magic. The manor had a library, so I spent all my time studying there and learned about talismans that weren't common in the empire. I still can't use ordinary magic, but they're more than enough to make up for my shortcomings. As for how I became so strong, I was mostly just desperate back in those days. Is that not enough of an explanation?"

"I've heard all that before. Stop lying."

I let out a small sigh and closed my eyes. She was exceptionally observant and had a keen intuition when it came to people's emotions. I might have been able to get away with it when we were just classmates, but she wasn't going to believe such a sloppy excuse anymore. I needed to be honest with her.

Finding my resolve, I opened my mouth to speak. "Apparently, I'm what you might call a prodigy."

"Huh?" Amyu sounded fed up, but I just continued with a somber expression.

"I said I was just desperate, but looking back, I've always been more skilled than other people. The first spell I ever used was one I barely understood, yet it was still a great success. I was able to learn new spells right away, and my memory was good, so

studying came easily to me. Once I'd been at it for a while, I realized I had a gift. The idea of using talismans to cast spells was developed by intelligent people before me and systemized through the combined efforts of many, but to tell you the truth, around half of the spells I use are actually my own creations. I combined my studies with my knowledge of natural sciences, and somewhere along the way, I started to enjoy it. By that point, I wasn't really desperate anymore, and before I knew it, I ended up the way I am."

"Are you bragging?" Amyu asked with a dumbfounded look after I finished my explanation. "Were you always so full of yourself?"

"You're the one who asked. I don't know how else to explain it."

"What the heck?"

"Does it sound like I'm lying?"

"No..." After a brief moment, Amyu sighed. "Is that really it? It's kind of a letdown. I almost wish I hadn't asked. I was bracing myself for some kind of huge secret."

"That's a harsh way to put it. I didn't wanna talk about it either, you know." It was actually my first time ever putting it into words. Even in my past life, I'd never spoken about it with anyone. It was a little embarrassing—I was feeling self-conscious now.

Everything I had said was true. I had been honest with her as she'd wanted. Of course, there were a few things I'd left out, like the fact I was an ayakashi-wielding exorcist in a past life or that said life had been in another world. I certainly did have huge secrets. However, I had no intention of answering questions she hadn't asked. The reason for my strength was exactly as I'd explained. It had nothing to do with my reincarnation.

"Maybe that's all strength is at the end of the day," Amyu mumbled. "I mean, I probably wouldn't be this good with swords or magic if I wasn't the Hero. Come to think of it, how'd you know I was the Hero?"

"Remember how I told you I went to look for the one who summoned the daimons during our second-year entrance festival? Well, I actually found him. That's who I heard it from. You were the real target of that attack."

"Figures they'd be after the Hero. So, did you take the summoner down?"

“Yeah. I didn’t tell anyone, though.”

“I see… It’s two years late, but I’ll say this both for back then and just recently. Thank you, Seika,” Amyu said behind me, a hint of embarrassment in her voice. “I feel like you’re always saving me.”

“You’re welcome,” I answered, still facing forward and feeling slightly guilty. I had one more secret.

At the start, I was just trying to use you, Amyu. Just like what happened the other day, I wanted you to be the one the politicians had their eyes on—the one in their sights. I wanted you to take my place as the strongest. And now that I’ve ruined that, I’m not sure what to do.

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Around sunset, I stopped the carriage in the shadow of a large boulder on the side of the road.

“Guess we’ve gotta camp here today.” I had wanted to make it to Rakana by the end of the day, but we’d taken a little too long to depart the previous town, so things hadn’t gone as planned. Rakana was still a few hours out, and there were mountains and forests ahead that I didn’t want to traverse at night.

“Probably a good idea,” Amyu said, jumping down from the carriage. “We should make it to Rakana tomorrow at least.”

“Yeah… It’s not what I was hoping for, but at least we should get there while it’s still bright out tomorrow. At least that’ll give us time to look for an inn; we’d probably get ripped off if we rushed in at sunset.” Truth be told, I was concerned about our current funds. The money Fiona had prepared for us was sufficient to cover our travel costs, but naturally, it wasn’t enough to live off. We needed to save as much as we could. If I had known things would turn out like this, I would have brought the money I’d left in my dorm before heading to the palace.

“Right.” Amyu nodded, aware of our situation. “Still, Rakana’s a town of adventurers. There should be plenty of cheap inns.”

“Cheap, huh? Camping is better than a low-quality inn in a lot of ways.”

“You make it sound like you have experience. Have you done that much traveling? I’ve heard the same thing, though,” Amyu said with a grin. “You can sleep tonight. I’ll keep watch.”

“Huh? But…”

“You’re driving, aren’t you? Can’t have you dozing off. Besides, you always go to bed later than me and wake up earlier. I doubt you’re getting enough rest. Take it easy tonight, got it?”

“All right, I’ll take you up on that,” I said with an awkward smile after mulling it over a moment.

“Then it’s settled. Now, let’s eat. There was a river over there, so you go get some water. I’ll light a fire.”

“Sure, sure.” I looked up at the red sky as I walked off. This unexpected journey wasn’t so bad.

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“She’s asleep…” I mumbled the next morning, looking down at Amyu who was fast asleep, hugging her knees by the fire. *Oh well. I figured this would happen.* She’d said something about losing her edge and had ended up practicing with her blade in the middle of the night. Naturally, it had tired her out.

Falling asleep while on watch was quite dangerous. Though we were in a location that seemed safe, bandits, wild animals, and monsters still posed a threat. She likely would have been punished if she were in the army. That said, I wasn’t going to criticize her. After everything that had happened, there was no way she’d be able to relax. I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t been getting a good night’s sleep.

Judging from the state of the fire, she hadn’t fallen asleep that long ago. She’d done a good job. My shikigami would alert me if anything happened, so it wasn’t a big deal. I grabbed a blanket from the carriage and draped it over her, then looked up at the dawn sky. The horse seemed to be awake already, but it was still too early to set out.

Guess I’ll take a walk around the area. Leaving a shikigami by Amyu, I headed to the stream I had drawn water from the night before. “Yuki.” I felt the ayakashi stir atop my head. She hadn’t said a word since the day I departed the academy riding Mizuchi. “Yuki,” I called out to her again.

“What is it, Master Seika?” she responded plainly, poking her head out of my hair.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

“What are you apologizing for?”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I didn’t know what I was apologizing for myself. “I should have listened to you.”

“Then will you abandon the girl next time? Or are you going to give up on hiding and start relying on the strength you gained in your past life? I’m sure there are things you can’t give up, even if it isn’t the wise choice.” Yuki continued apologetically as I remained silent. “I’m the one who shouldn’t have made that pointless suggestion. I knew you would never listen.”

“That’s not true. As you said, I originally intended to sacrifice her. I was the one who came up with the idea.”

“No, I’m certain you never would have listened. I know you.” Yuki retreated back into my hair.

I let out a small sigh, then mumbled as though talking to myself. “Things don’t always go how you want them to. I wonder what I should do now. How should I live my life?”

“You’ll have to figure that out for yourself,” Yuki said sharply.

I reached into my hair and pet her slender body.

“I hope you don’t think petting me is enough,” she said indignantly.

“Then is there something you want?”

“I hope you don’t think giving me something is enough.” I silently pulled my hand back, and then Yuki continued speaking a moment later. “I want dried figs. And then I want you to pet me a whole bunch.”

“Sure. Once we get to Rakana,” I said with an awkward smile. *Yuki’s still giving me the silent treatment, but I think things’ll be okay now.*

Suddenly I came to a stop. There was a forest on the other side of the stream, and a figure that appeared from between the trees caught my eye. It was a large monster that resembled a deer. Its fur was a mix of gray and brown and its antlers were made of interlocking cubic crystals. The rainbow-colored gems could be seen on its back and legs as well—they seemed to be magic stones.

It had probably come to drink from the stream. Around twice the size of an ordinary deer, it stopped in front of the water and looked at me. Though I didn’t know what it was called, it had an almost divine aura.

I silently directed my shikigami toward it. The deer monster reacted instantly and tried to run back to the forest, but it was too late. My shikigami trapped it in a pentagram, sealing its movements. *Perfect.*

"Master Seika?" Yuki asked quizzically from atop my head. "Why are you sealing it? It didn't seem like it was going to attack. This world's spirits can't survive in the other plane, so you can't make it your servant."

"That's fine. I'm going to sell it," I answered, a grin on my face. "Rakana is a city of adventurers. It should have plenty of places to convert monster corpses into currency. I have a feeling this one will be worth a lot." That being the case, I made a hand sign and chanted a mantra.

At that moment, the deer glared at me, the magic stones in its horns glowing. However, it was sucked into a spatial distortion before anything could happen. After that, only the hitogata forming the gate remained.

Sorry. You seemed pretty strong, but I need you to die for me.

"Hmm... I kinda feel like you just did something sacrilegious."

"Wouldn't be the first time. How many gods do you think I sealed in my past life?" I turned around and started walking back to the carriage where Amyu was waiting. *I truly am fortunate in this life. I don't think we'll have money troubles for long. Though I do kinda get where Yuki was coming from.*

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After returning to the carriage as though nothing had happened, I loaded the still-sleepy Amyu into the back and set off. We traveled down a mountain path for a few hours, and just before the sun reached its peak, the walls of a city appeared in the distance.

"Is that it?" It was the free city of Rakana. A city of adventurers, built from wealth provided by dungeons. I'd heard of such cities, but it was my first time ever visiting one. "The walls are pretty high," I said, voicing my first impression.

Its walls were even higher than the capital, to say nothing of Lodonea. In addition, the gate, upper walkway, and towers all made it seem imposing and well fortified against external threats.

It was odd—the city wasn't in any sort of strategic location. While the land was abundant with resources, they all came from dungeons. It wasn't the sort of place that could simply be occupied like a mine or port. I couldn't imagine the city needed to be that vigilant of attacks by demons or enemy armies.

"They're probably to protect against stampedes," Amyu answered from the back, having woken up a little bit ago.

I glanced briefly over my shoulder. "What does that mean?"

"Monster stampedes. They're when monsters form a big group and attack villages and cities. They don't happen too often, but in an area full of forests and dungeons like this, it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Huh. That's new to me." It was the first I'd ever heard of such a thing. In my previous world, ayakashi would gather in the middle of the night in what was known as the Parade of One Hundred Demons, but they didn't tend to attack settlements. At worst, they would just devour unfortunate humans they came across. It was a similar concept, but the actual content was quite different.

"What causes stampedes?" I asked.

"Who knows? Sometimes a whole bunch of one kind of monster appears and other strong monsters run away, but usually the reason isn't clear. Whatever the case, a bunch of different monsters appear at once, and they say it happens more often near big dungeons or forests."

"Hmm." *A bunch of different monsters appearing at once.* I had an idea as to what the reason might be. If dungeons were capable of creating monsters, there was no reason they wouldn't be able to create them in large quantities given proper conditions. The flow energy I sensed in the land here—something I hadn't felt since my reincarnation—made it easy to guess what those conditions might be. *That said, there's no reason to worry about it right now.*

With those thoughts occupying my mind, I continued driving the carriage toward Rakana.

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As we passed through the gate, what we saw was a city that could best be described as chaotic. The buildings were modest, and few of them were more than a couple stories tall. Compared

to Lodonea and the imperial capital, it lacked any ostensible refinement. On the other hand, there were all sorts of people everywhere you looked. There were people with unusual hair and skin colors, as well as demihumans. And naturally, many of them were carrying weapons. It truly felt like a city of adventurers.

After entering the city, the first thing Amyu and I did was sell the carriage. I had been hesitant since it had been given to us by Fiona, but we didn't have the means to maintain it. If she asked us to return it, we would have to compensate her anyway. Though it came with a sense of guilt, we managed to obtain some financial leeway. Tucking the pouch of gold coins away, I walked through the bustling city with Amyu.

"So, what now?" she asked next to me. "We should probably find a place to stay."

"Actually, I think we should meet the city's leader first."

"Why is that?"

"Fiona said she'd tell him about us, so I figure it'd be a good idea to drop by."

And ideally, I'd like to find out what he intends to do with us—is he going to be our enemy? Though Fiona said he was a collaborator of hers, at the end of the day, he's his own man. It's possible he'll sell us out if he decides it'll benefit him. And beyond that, I'm still not sure what Fiona intends for us either. I don't expect to see through him during our first meeting, but if I have my shikigami monitor him, he'll slip up eventually. We'll tell him the Hero is here and see how he reacts. We need to determine if this city is going to be safe.

"And besides," I continued. "I'm sure he'll be able to tell us about some good inns."

"Oh, good point. Asking a local's not a bad idea." Amyu readily accepted after I added that last part.

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Rakana's government buildings were at the heart of the city. After walking through the streets for a bit, the city hall came into view, overlooking a large plaza. It was a grand building—more so than even trading firms and churches in the area.

As I pondered how to approach the meeting, I noticed a small crowd forming in front of the city hall. There seemed to be an

argument going on, judging from the shouting I heard.

“Fighting in a place like this? Guess this town isn’t the safest,” I said.

“That’s just how adventurers are,” Amyu replied.

As we walked around to avoid getting involved, someone came flying out of the middle of the crowd.

“Whoa!” I panicked and jumped back. A man had fallen onto his back and seemed to be out cold. Then I heard voices from the now parted crowd of people.

“You’re in for it now, kid!”

“What are you gonna do? Do you wanna get sent flying too?”

One was a voice I knew well. After I unfroze, I got closer and peered into the crowd. There were three people in the center—one was a gangly man who appeared to be an adventurer, his face warped with anger. Facing off against him was a short girl with gray hair, carrying a battle-axe on her back. Behind her, an unassuming girl with soft, blonde hair stood helplessly.

Uhh…

“M-Mabel? And Yifa? What are you two doing here?!” Amyu shouted in surprise next to me. The two girls looked at us.

“Ah.”

“Amyu… Seika…”

Their eyes went wide, then Yifa came running over and hugged us.



“Hold on!” I cried out.

“Y-Yifa? You…” Amyu’s voice trailed off, interrupted by Yifa’s sobs.

“Waaaaaah!” Yifa burst into tears, her arms around both of our necks. Amyu and I fell silent. Mabel came walking over as I stroked the back of Yifa’s head.

“Amyu, Seika… I’m glad we found you,” she said.

“What are you doing here, Mabel?” Amyu asked.

“We followed you.”

“Huuuh?!”

“U-Uhh, how long have you been in Rakana?” I felt the need to ask.

“Since yesterday.”

“Yesterday?! How did you get here before us— No, wait, that makes sense.” It hadn’t even taken twenty hours to reach the capital from Lodonea on Mizuchi. If Fiona had sent out a pigeon the next morning, it would have informed them of the situation before the day was out. Even taking a day to prepare and depart, they would have had plenty of time to get ahead of us. Still… “Why did you come here?”

“Are you seriously asking that?” Mabel seemed a little angry.

“What?”

“Amyu got taken away, and then you disappeared too,” Yifa said, letting go of us and rubbing her red eyes. “Then we heard what happened. There’s no way we could’ve stayed at the academy.”

“Uhh… So you know everything that happened?” I asked. “Like, at the palace…”

“Yeah. The headmistress told us.” Yifa nodded.

I guess that figures. I didn’t expect to be able to keep it hidden.

Amyu looked at Mabel apologetically. “Still, you guys shouldn’t get involved. We can’t go back to the academy anymore. I know you came all this way, but…”

“Shouldn’t get involved?” Mabel asked incredulously. “I’ve known who you are from the start.”

“Huh?!”

“You’re the whole reason I was adopted by a noble family and enrolled at the academy. It’s the same thing you were abducted over. It’s too late not to be involved. We’re in this together until the

end, all right?”

Amyu was at a loss for words in response to Mabel’s blunt declaration and hung her head.

“Sorry for worrying the two of you,” I said with a powerless smile.

“Hold it!” I looked over, noticing that the gangly adventurer from before was absolutely fuming.

Oh, right. He’s still here.

“Why’re you acting like this is over?! How are you gonna make it up to me, kid?!” he shouted.

“Mabel, who’s this guy?” I asked.

Mabel shot the man an uninterested glance, then began explaining. “When we tried to enter the city hall, he and the guy on the ground over there called out to us.”

“The unconscious one, huh? What did they say?”

“They asked if Yifa was a slave.”

“Why— Oh, I get it.” I could guess what they were after. They probably thought Yifa was a runaway slave and wanted to turn her in for a reward. Due to the nature of the city, people from all over gathered in Rakana. That included no small number of slaves who had escaped their masters. Some runaway slaves had high bounties placed on them, and their wanted posters were distributed across various regions by merchant companies and the Adventurers Guild.

The two of them are children, and girls at that. It’s definitely unusual for them to turn up in a city like this. With her attitude and the battle-axe on her back, Mabel could probably pass for an adventurer, but not Yifa. Her striking appearance only makes her more suspicious.

“So, how did you answer?” I asked.

“Yifa immediately said that she was,” Mabel replied.

“Why did you answer honestly?”

“I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking,” Yifa said bashfully.

“Then what?”

“They wouldn’t accept that she wasn’t a runaway slave and tried to capture her.” Mabel then pointed at the man who was sprawled out. “So I sent one flying.”

“I see.” I had a grasp of the situation now.

“I’m sorry, Mabel,” said Yifa.

“It’s fine. Just stop doing things that make people look down on you. It’s dangerous. This is the fourth time since we left Lodonea.”

Yifa slumped her shoulders.

No wonder. She may not actually be weak, but you sure wouldn’t guess it from looking at her. Anyway, that’s not important right now. I turned to face the adventurer. “Sorry, but I’m her master. We were just traveling separately for a bit. I didn’t know about it, but it seems as though she was planning on meeting me here. I apologize for the confusion.”

“Huh? You’re a noble?” The man looked doubtful. “I wanna see some proof!”

“Like what?”

“The key to her collar or a brand or something! If you don’t have that, then cough up some documentation!”

Annoyed at his ridiculous demands, my mind raced. *Come to think of it, I left her documents in my dorm room. That’s not good. W-Well, I’m sure the headmistress is holding on to them for me. For now, I’ll just give him a reasonable argument.*

“I don’t carry that stuff around with me everywhere,” I said.

“Then I don’t buy that she’s yours! Hand her over!”

“Why should I?”

“I’m gonna make sure she’s not on any of the guild wanted posters, obviously. I’ll believe you and give her back if she’s not there. That said, I’m not sure I feel like checking today. How about you lend her to me for the night?” The man gave Yifa a slimy look and she shrunk back in fear. “And if that’s a problem, well, you know what’ll happen, right? We were just trying to do the right thing, and you even injured one of us! What are you gonna do about the money he was supposed to make today? Huh, rich boy?”

I get it. He’s saying I won’t get out of here for free. What a greedy guy. Actually, I also don’t have a weapon on me, so he’s probably not taking me seriously. I doubt I look like an adventurer either. I thought to myself as I watched more people crowd around us.

Then the corners of my lips curled into a smile. “No.”

“What was that?”

“I said no. I’m not paying you any money, and I’m not giving you Yifa. There’s no reason for me to go along with your demands.”

“Y-You think that’s gonna fly?”

“What are you gonna do about it?”

“You little…” The man looked like he was about to draw his sword at any moment.

“H-Hey, Seika!” Amyu pulled on my arm.

“Hmm?”

“Why are you provoking him?!”

“He’s clearly picking a fight. Isn’t it normal for newcomers to prove themselves in cities like these?”

“Still, I dunno about your idea of proving yourself…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll hold back.” I looked at the man I was arguing with and gave a carefree smile.

“Ha! Getting lectured by your little servant girl? How pathetic!”

“I’ve had enough of this. Come at me already, lanky.”

“Don’t call me lanky!” Raising his sword over his head, the adventurer charged at me. I made a hand sign with one hand.

Phase of earth and water: White Moon Tower.

“Gwaaaaaah!” A thick pillar of plaster suddenly rose up beneath his feet, carrying him high into the sky. “Ahh!” The man screamed and flailed around at the top, but he had been immobilized by the plaster encasing his lower body.

Quit struggling so much. Your arms are so thin they might snap off.

“Wh-Why are you using such a flashy spell?! What happened to holding back?!” Amyu asked in a panic.

“I did. He’s unharmed.”

“He’s slumped over!”

“Oh. You’re right.” I looked up around eighteen meters in the air and saw that the man seemed to have passed out. “I guess he was afraid of heights. That explains the screaming.”

Amyu sighed. “All right, as long as that’s all it is. You still managed to cause a scene, though.” I heard cheers from the people around us. One person even whistled.

This is quite the spectacle. I mean, that is *why I chose this spell.*

“Did you forget that we’re on the run?”

“Being too afraid will get used against us. It’s better to show some confidence. Besides…” I said a line I’d grown quite familiar with at this point. “This hardly even counts as standing out. Do you disagree?”

“Hmm… I guess by your standards. It doesn’t compare to destroying the imperial palace.”

“Hey! What are you doing over there?! Disperse, disperse!”

Several guards came running over from the city hall. They cleared away the onlookers, looked up at the plaster tower in awe, then walked over to me. “Is this your doing?”

“Yes.”

The guard sighed. “Fighting is prohibited here, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“Huh?” *It is?* I looked around in a panic and saw Amyu shaking her head in exasperation. Mabel and Yifa had awkward looks on their faces. *That’s not good.* Although I hadn’t really thought about it in Lodonea, obviously fighting would be prohibited. Formal duels were one thing, but a city couldn’t maintain order if they let people brawl in the streets. Flustered, I tried to make an excuse. “But he’s the one who started it—”

“Fighting is prohibited. No exceptions. Are those girls with you? Then I’m going to need you all to come with me to the guard station. You’re not gonna claim to be broke, are you?”

“I-If you’re asking me to bribe you, then I’m going to need to think it over…”

“No. You’re being fined.”

Crap… Now’s not a good time to be getting fined. Just as I was desperately trying to think of a way out, a deep voice echoed through the plaza.

“Knock it off!” Everyone, including the guards, looked in the direction of the voice. A large man was walking out of the city hall. He had a rugged, bearded face and tanned skin. He wore an expensive-looking shirt and jacket that were unbuttoned, exposing his chest, and had a cigar in his mouth. “Leave ’em alone. I don’t want this place gettin’ wrecked. They’re my guests, so I’ll deal with ’em myself. You lot take care of the one lyin’ over there,” he said to the guards, waving them off.

“Y-Yes, sir!” The guards immediately turned and carried away the man Mabel had knocked out.

The large man came to a stop in front of me, then a big grin appeared on his face. “Hey, kid. Consider this a loan.”

“I guess that’s fair. But I only owe you what the fine would cost.”

“Hmph. In that case, I’ll go ahead and collect right now.” The large man looked up at the adventurer who was unconscious in the plaster pillar. “Pretty sure he’s afraid of heights. Mind lettin’ him down, Seika Lamprogue?”

White Moon Tower
A spell that creates a pillar made of plaster. When water is added to calcium sulfate hemihydrate, it quickly solidifies, becoming hard, white plaster. The pillar created by the spell is nearly twenty meters in length, but even naturally occurring crystals have been documented at over ten meters.

Act 2

On the top floor of the city hall, a large bearded man sat on a three-person couch in front of us. “Man, you guys really are just kids.”

“We may not look it, but we’ll be adults this year,” I replied with a frown.

“Hmph, turnin’ fifteen doesn’t mean you’re not a kid. You’d just be an errand boy in a real party.”

“I suppose it must seem that way from your perspective, Council Chairman Cyrus.”

This time it was Cyrus’s turn to frown. Rakana was a free city, meaning it had no lord. It had grown out of an encampment for adventurers looking to challenge nearby dungeons. Between that background and the disposition of its inhabitants—ruffians capable of hunting monsters—it had long remained free from the feudal system. The city was managed by a group known as the Rakana City Council, and Cyrus served as both chairman of the council and as the head of the city’s government. In other words, the bearded man before me was the collaborator Fiona had spoken of.

“Don’t call me ‘Chairman.’ That title’s too pretentious for me. Only the councillors themselves are allowed to call me that.”

“Then what should I call you?”

“I don’t care, long as it ain’t ‘Chairman.’ ‘Boss,’ ‘sir,’ ‘Mayor’—whatever makes you happy. Though technically we don’t have that last position.”

“Then ‘Mayor’ it is.” That was probably what most people called him.

Cyrus snorted. “So, is it true? You made a mess of the imperial capital and fled the country here?”

Amyu went stiff from nervousness next to me. Fiona seemed to have told him about us without hiding anything, perhaps even before Amyu had been abducted.

I gave a small sigh. “Of course not. I only made a mess of the palace. And I put it back the way I found it before we escaped.”

“Ha ha ha!” Cyrus suddenly burst into laughter, his mouth open wide. “You’re a funny kid! That princess sure did send someone crazy my way. Maybe I oughta hand you over to the military before somethin’ happens to Rakana! The Hero girl over there too.”

Amyu turned her face toward the ground.

“I don’t recommend that,” I said quietly. “At least, if you don’t want Rakana to become a city people only hear about in history books.”

“Ha ha! You talk big, kid!”

“And please refrain from making such tasteless jokes. You’re going to worry my companion here.”

“Your companion? You sure ya don’t mean yourself?” Cyrus asked as though he saw right through me.

I let out a sigh. I was no good at this sort of back-and-forth. “Fair enough. Then let me ask you directly—are you truly in Fiona’s camp? Are you going to shelter us?”

“Hmph, not a chance,” Cyrus said, taking a puff of his cigar. “First of all, neither I nor Rakana belong to anyone’s camp. This is a city of freedom lovin’ adventurers. We decide everything for ourselves and don’t let anyone’s schemes sway us. My relationship with the princess is only ’cause it’s mutually beneficial. You get what I mean by that, kid?”

“I wish you’d stop trying to test me. I have no way of knowing your situation. But if I had to guess, I’d say the Holy Princess is the only one who isn’t after Rakana. Is that the idea?”

“Ha ha, you got it! You’re a smart one, kid,” Cyrus said, wearing a big smile. “The imperial princes are all droolin’ over this city. Without a war to let ’em obtain new land, they don’t have a way to reward their supporters, but they gotta promise those supporters somethin’ for helpin’ ’em take the throne or their faction’ll fall apart. Rakana doesn’t belong to anyone, so it makes the perfect reward. Wouldn’t surprise me if all the princes promised their backers they’ll take the city. And of course, there’s the wealth produced by the dungeons too. But the princess is different. To put it simply, she’s got money—she ain’t worried about compensation.”

That figures, I thought to myself. With her future sight, she would never make a poor investment, and money had probably been a crucial part in her rising up without any support. Although

I hadn't heard any talk about it circulating among the public, I could imagine she had considerable assets at her disposal. On top of that, given that she valued the people's power above all else, she was probably opposed to feudalism altogether. She had little reason to want to control Rakana.

"That bein' the case, we cooperate here and there, but that's all. She's got relationships with distant merchant companies that let us sell our dungeon resources at a high price. Then if the companies she's affiliated with make a profit, she makes a return on her investment. It's good for both of us. That said, if it stops bein' beneficial, we could turn on each other at any time."

"I see." It was a more utilitarian arrangement than I'd expected. However, that could be for the better. Had Cyrus been devoted to Fiona's cause, it would have been nearly impossible for me to discern his true intentions. Politics often involved things like love, hatred, and honor. That had been the case in the conflict over succession I'd gotten wrapped up in during my past life. While emotional matters were beyond me, if it was nothing more than a relationship based on mutual profit, then I'd be able to see signs of trouble coming.

"So, what do ya think, kid?" Cyrus asked with a wide smile. "That answer honest enough for ya?"

"Yes, though we'll have to see how honest it ends up being." I decided I'd try to fight back a little. "However, that answer doesn't do much to ease our concern. I might sleep more soundly at night if I got rid of you, threatened the council, and took control of this city for myself."

"Ha ha ha!" Cyrus spit out his cigar and leaned forward at me. "Try it, kid. This city ain't gonna be as easy as ya think."

No good, huh? He doesn't seem like the type to be rattled by threats. True statesmen sometimes disregarded their own lives. He was probably one of those strange individuals. That put me at a disadvantage negotiating with him.

As I remained silent, Cyrus sat back up like nothing had happened and rested his back against the couch once more. "And I doubt ya wanna make an enemy of the princess. Addin' her holy knights to your pursuers would probably be tough, even for you."

"You really— No, you're right." My eyes went wide for a moment, then I gave a brief reply. *I see. He thinks I'm that weak. I*

can't blame him, really. Who would believe that a child could reduce this city to rubble overnight? It's convenient for me if he thinks the holy knights are enough to keep me in check. I don't want him to fear me.

"I certainly don't want to antagonize Princess Fiona," I said with a nod. "I promise to behave myself. So, how would you have us spend our time in this city?"

"Hmph, do whatever you want. You don't gotta behave yourself either," Cyrus said, putting his cigar back in his mouth. "I'm not offerin' you any special protection, but this city doesn't turn anybody away. Of course, criminals are a different story. If your pursuers cause trouble here, they'll be rounded up like anyone else, have their valuables confiscated, and get tossed outside the walls. If they really go too far, they'll end up enslaved. So you're all welcome to live here like anyone else. We won't let anybody take that freedom from you."

Seems like he really is collaborating with Fiona. Maybe he's just saying it in this roundabout way to maintain his dignity as the city's leader. He doesn't want it to look like he's going out of his way to help someone from the empire.

Putting that aside, I figured I might as well ask something. "Umm, I was hoping you'd be able to help a little with our living expenses."

"You spoiled brat! What, you can't look after yourselves?! The princess didn't ask me for nothin' like that. Well, there mighta been an unspoken expectation, but that ain't my problem. If ya need money, beg the princess yourself. If you're not gonna do that, then you'll have to earn it. Work as a merchant's errand runner, a blacksmith's apprentice, an adventurer—I don't care."

Yeah, I didn't expect things to be that convenient. Supporting us probably wouldn't be too difficult for him, but maybe he can't bring himself to do anything that seems like sucking up to a noble. In a sense, this is more or less according to plan.

I exhaled a short breath. "Then I guess we'll just have to become adventures."

"That's more like it," Cyrus said with a big smile. "I thought you'd say that. Someone strong enough to destroy the imperial palace oughta be able to support three girls."

"Don't look down on us," Mabel suddenly said, staring straight at Cyrus. "We can support ourselves."

“Yeah?” Cyrus looked at Mabel, seemingly impressed. “I like that look in your eyes, girl. Guess that battle-axe isn’t just for show. Come to think of it, you’ve got the Hero with you too. So, what about you—can ya fight?”

“I killed my first monster when I was ten,” Amyu said, raising her head and glaring at Cyrus with her bright green eyes. “I can’t even count how many dungeons and forests I’ve been to. I’ve defeated a lesser daimon and a black naga dungeon boss. I was an adventurer long before I ever came to this city.”

“Ha ha, well said!” Cyrus laughed. “You guys’ll fit right in! Work hard and earn a whole bunch! This city flourishes on desire and violence!” Then Cyrus’s tone softened. “You probably don’t know anything about the dungeons around here, and on top of that, I’ve heard some of them have been increasing in difficulty lately. I doubt it’ll happen, but I can’t have ya dyin’ too soon, so I’ll offer you a little help to start off.”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure I called him…” Just then, there was a knock on the door. “Perfect timin’! Come on in!” The door opened and a tall, somewhat intellectual-looking man entered the room. “Hey there, Lloyd. I’ve been waitin’ for ya.”

The adventurer named Lloyd gave an apologetic look. “Sorry for running late, Mayor. So, is the business you mentioned—”

“Them,” Cyrus said, patting me on the shoulder with enough force to rock my entire body. “Through some of my connections, these kids are gonna be living in the city startin’ today. They say they wanna become adventurers, so teach ’em the basics on the guild and dungeons.”

“This is pretty sudden.”

“Got a problem?”

“No, not at all. If they’re acquaintances of yours, would it be all right to invite them into my party?”

“That’s up to you.”

“Then we’d be happy to have you.” Lloyd held his hand out to me. “My name is Lloyd. I’m the leader of the Grove Alliance. Uh…”

“Seika Lamprogue. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” I shook his hand.

“Lamprogue… That’s the name of some distant count’s family?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“I won’t pry. Limiting one’s questions is considered common courtesy in this city. You should remember that when you meet other adventurers,” Lloyd said with a kind smile. It wasn’t the sort of smile I expected from an adventurer.

“Seika Lamprogue,” Cyrus said loudly. “If you wanna live here, the most important thing is being accepted by the city.”

“You mean follow the local customs?”

“No, not like that. You’re welcome to change the city. Rakana’s made it this far by adapting. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll understand eventually. Anything else you wanna know, ask Lloyd. He’d be happy to teach you whatever—how to take apart monsters, how to leave pickpockets half dead, even where the best brothels are! Ha ha!”

“Please don’t ever make that joke in front of my wife,” said Lloyd.

“Then there’s one thing I’d like to ask right away,” I said, giving a small sigh as I watched the two of them. I might as well ask while I was here. “Do you know any good inns?”

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After leaving the city hall, the four of us wandered around town. Though the end of the day was drawing ever nearer, there were still plenty of shops open and the streets were bustling with people. Perhaps due to the temperament of the Rakana’s residents, the way people spoke here was noticeably rougher than Lodonea or the capital.

“Phew! I’m glad we made it through! That adventurer seems like a nice guy too,” Yifa said with a spring in her step.

“Hmph. I could’ve told you about dungeons. I know about the guild too—my mom’s a manager at one of its branches! We didn’t need him to tell us anything!” Amyu shouted.

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable learning from you,” said Mabel.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amyu pouted.

In three days, the adventurer Lloyd would guide us to a dungeon. It was a useful development. We were still unfamiliar with the city, so I was grateful to have a local I could ask anything I wanted to know. He didn’t seem likely to betray us—at least, for now.

We were the ones who had asked him to wait three days. We'd wanted time to get used to the city and purchase some necessities. Fortunately, we had enough funds on hand to manage that much. In addition, there was one more thing I wanted to settle.

"Yifa, Mabel." I stopped and called out to the two of them in front of me. Yifa and Mabel turned their heads quizzically, as did Amyu, who was walking next to them. "You two should go back to Lodonea."

"Huh?"

"Why is that, Seika?"

Yifa seemed confused, while Mabel shot me a glare.

"There's no reason for the two of you to be here with us," I said, voicing what I'd been thinking this whole time. This city wasn't safe—you could tell just from looking at it. It was filled with adventurers who were just scraping by. It was the kind of city where people who couldn't live anywhere else came to die. The final destination of those with nowhere else to go. Young people had no future here. "Go back to the academy. You'll live a much better life there. I'm sure Fiona and the headmistress will accommodate you. You shouldn't get wrapped up in my and Amyu's situation."

"No," Mabel said flatly. "Did you forget your promise?"

"Promise?" I asked.

"You promised me you'd protect me from the company's assassins."

"I don't think you need to worry about that anymore."

"Well, I haven't forgotten. So I'm staying with you. I expect you to take responsibility for saving me."

"Mabel..."

"And also," Mabel added one more thing. "I haven't paid you back yet."

After a brief silence, I let out a small sigh. "Fine. But Yifa, you should still go back. You have good grades, and if you graduate from the academy, you can do anything you want. I'll become your guardian in the fall and set you free. Don't waste your life by forcing yourself to stay with me."

"Hey, Seika. Do you remember?" Yifa suddenly said with a slight smile after listening silently all this time. "I think it was around a

year before we went to the academy. The day I found an injured carbuncle in the manor's garden and you gave me those fire spirits. You asked me if I wanted to leave, and I said yes. I said I wanted to visit all sorts of places and see all sorts of things."

"Yeah, I remember." How could I have forgotten? To someone as long-lived as me, it was still quite recent. Her answer was why I'd decided to take her with me. Of course, I'd also wanted allies, but I had been certain she would become someone capable of great things, just like my old disciples.

"Once I left your family's territory, I realized how blessed I had been. My work wasn't too hard, I never went hungry, and I had a warm room. But even if I had known that at the time, I think I still would have given you the same answer. Although it might end up being more difficult than life at the manor, I wanted to choose how I lived. I always wanted to be free. I like this city. It's a little scary, but everyone seems so liberated. That's why I wanna become an adventurer too."

"Living here isn't going to be as nice as you imagine. These people aren't as free as they seem. They drifted here because there was no other place for them—no other option but to scrape by in this world of violence. Going back to the academy would let you actually be free."

"No, that's not true." Yifa shook her head. "Umm, you probably don't know about this, but my mom and dad used to be adventurers alongside the master. The three of them were a party."

"Huh?!" I was genuinely surprised. I'd never heard that before. "R-Really?"

"Yeah, my dad told me a long time ago. My dad was a frontline swordsman, while my mom and the master were the back line."

"Blaise—uh, my father was a mage, I'm sure. What was your mom?"

"She was an archer."

"No way..." I couldn't even imagine it. I had known Yifa's mother before she'd passed away from illness, and she had been a beautiful, gentle woman—not the kind of person who seemed like she'd wielded a bow. I could just barely see Eddis being an adventure, but it was impossible for me to envision Blaise doing something so brutish.

“Apparently, it was only for a short time. The master had fled his estate and run into my parents. My father was trying to evade slavers, while my mother was being tracked by kidnappers. It was just a brief period while they returned to the master’s manor together, but mom seemed really happy when she was talking about it. Seika, when I said I wanted to see the world that day, I meant I wanted to go on an adventure like this.”

“Yifa…”

“Also, I think you’re forgetting something,” Yifa said with a bashful smile. “I’m your servant! Staying by your side is my job.”

As I stood there silently, Amyu finally chimed in too. “Seika, it might not be my place to say this, but the truth is you could go back to the academy too.”

“What are you talking about? Of course I can’t.”

“You can. Fiona’s hiding your involvement. The only one people are after is me—the Hero. Isn’t that right? You can go back to the academy and live as a normal student. Though I’m sure you’ll choose to stay here no matter what I say.”

“Obviously. I’m going to take responsibility for my actions.”

“Then it sounds like we’re all in this together,” Amyu said, trying to persuade me. “Relying on you alone doesn’t sit right with me anyway. It’s not fair. Having the two of them around is reassuring.”

“That’s right, Seika,” said Yifa. “We’re in this together.”

“Seika,” said Mabel.

With all three of them staring at me, I closed my eyes and exhaled. “All right,” I replied. I could hardly stop them after all that. Yet despite their joy, I still found it necessary to caution them. “But don’t do anything reckless.”

“We know!” said Amyu, slapping me on the shoulder.

To be honest, I was apprehensive, but seeing her carefree smile for the first time in so long made me think it might not be so bad.

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Although the inn we were recommended was a little on the expensive side, it was pretty comfortable. While there was a bit of a squabble over the rooms, in the end, I got a small room to myself while the girls shared a slightly larger room.

Given our budget, Mabel and Yifa suggested that we either all

stay in one large room or stay two apiece in two small rooms, but I rejected those ideas. I had Yuki with me, I had work I didn't want them to see, and above all, I didn't want to have to constantly be considerate of everyone.

As time passed, we made our rounds of the city and purchased everything we needed, and three days passed in no time at all.

"This is a dungeon known as the Wandering Forest," Lloyd explained as he walked next to me. We'd been advancing through the forest with Lloyd's party since the early morning. It was a party of four with two front liners and two back liners, and now with Amyu and Mabel joining the front line and Yifa and I joining the back line, we were a group of eight. Lloyd was a healer, so he was walking next to me in the back. Apparently, he was an all-rounder magic swordsman who could help up front or in the back.

While the forest was well-suited to new adventurers, Lloyd accompanied us to ensure nothing happened as he showed us the ropes. I looked to my side and asked him a question.

"I thought dungeons were only underground?"

"They are, for the most part. However, most adventurers call forests that monsters appear in dungeons too. It's to differentiate them from ordinary forests with no monsters and no profits to be made," Lloyd said cheerfully. "The Wandering Forest is classified as a dungeon belonging to the southern mountains. It's close to the city and isn't overly treacherous, which makes it good for beginners, but there aren't many monsters, so you won't make too much money here."

"What do you mean when you say it belongs to the southern mountains?"

"The dungeons around Rakana are divided into three regions—the northern, southern, and eastern mountains. At the center of each of those mountain ranges are underground dungeons and forests where monsters appear."

"Interesting."

"I imagine you'll be visiting those dungeons in the future, so you'd do well to remember that. They're all slightly different. Oh, but you should stay away from dungeons in the northern mountains for now."

"Why is that? Are they really difficult?"

"No, the opposite, actually. Around ten days ago, monsters

completely stopped appearing there," Lloyd said, sounding defeated. "This is the first time anything like it has ever happened. Nobody knows what's going on, so it's off-limits except to high-ranking parties. The dungeons in the northern mountains weren't particularly efficient for making money, so it shouldn't eat into our profits too much, but it's still a problem."

"I see. Come to think of it, Cyrus did mention that some dungeons had become more difficult lately."

"Yeah. In exchange, the type and number of monsters that appear in the dungeons in the southern and eastern mountains have changed for some reason. The guild issued a warning to all adventurers."

"Is that right?" Truth be told, there were a few things that immediately came to mind, but mentioning them right now wouldn't do any good so I held my tongue and continued walking.

"Getting back on topic, the monsters that appear in this forest are mostly types of living mails. Living mails are—basically, that right there." Lloyd pointed into the trees where there were two figures moving. They looked like aged, worn-out suits of armor. The shine of the metal long gone, their armor clattered as they walked through the trees with an unsteady gait. It was immediately obvious that they weren't human, as one was missing a helmet and there was no head inside. "They're also called wandering armor. That's how this dungeon got its name."

The two living mails seemed to notice us. Despite their faltering strides, they approached with surprising speed. It was a wonder they didn't trip and fall.

Lloyd continued his explanation, his expression unchanged. "Living mails are as solid as they look. That means swords are a particularly bad match against them. However..."

The two front liners in Lloyd's party rushed forward. The muscular warrior brought her hammer down on one of the living mails, smashing it into the earth. The other raised its sword, only for it to be shattered by the monk's kick. The kick flowed smoothly into a palm strike that sent the suit of armor flying into a tree, knocking it apart and scattering its pieces.

"They're weak to blunt attacks, as you just saw. As far as magic goes, earth is the most effective," Lloyd said calmly. The two front liners chatted with each other casually. Given their apparent

strength, these warriors didn't seem like they'd normally bother with entering such a low-level dungeon.

"I see," I mumbled to myself. "Monsters have other weaknesses besides certain elements of magic." When I thought about it, it made sense. In fact, I had used poison on monsters myself. "Still, it's odd to have two people who use blunt attacks as your front line. Or is that normal among adventurers?"

"No, it's pretty unusual," Lloyd said with a smile. "A lot of adventurers use swords. There are also some monsters that blunt attacks aren't very effective against, so it's better to be balanced. But since I thought we should go to a forest full of living mails first, I invited them for today."

"For today?" I tilted my head. "This isn't your usual party?"

"Hmm, how do I put it..." Lloyd carefully considered his explanation. "They're all my party members, make no mistake. This is just our first time with this party composition. Especially since I don't do much dungeon diving anymore. I'm normally buried in odd jobs, though to be honest, I prefer getting to move my body."

An adventurer doing odd jobs? It seemed a little questionable to me, but Lloyd quickly shifted his attention upward.

"Ah, right. This forest has monsters besides living mails as well. There are slimes, mandrakes, and..."

At that moment, the archer standing next to Lloyd fired. The arrow pierced an apelike monster in the treetops, shooting it to the ground. It must have been a powerful bow, as the arrowhead had pierced right through the green ape's back.

"Killer apes like this one. There aren't many of them, but their intelligence makes them dangerous. Watch out for them in other forests too."

The archer looked bored and didn't brag about his feat, nor did Lloyd offer him any praise. I had found it impressive, but to them, it was probably completely ordinary. Lloyd then pulled out a pair of leather gloves and a knife.

"Killer ape pelts and claws make useful resources, but honestly, they aren't worth a whole lot. We're just gonna take their magic stones," Lloyd said, cutting open the green ape's belly. He tore out a red stone near its heart with his leather gloves, and the corpse suddenly withered away. Wiping off the bloodstained stone, he showed it to me. "This is a magic stone. Certain monsters have

them inside their bodies. They're usually found in beast-types—you don't see them too often in astral or skeletal monsters. Even among killer apes, some might not have a magic stone, or it might be really small."

"Are they different from the magic stones you find as ores?"

"Technically, yes, they're different things, but they're both used as materials in magic items and as catalysts in rituals. Since they're used more or less the same way, people lump them together. That said, I'm sure if you asked a specialist they'd be able to tell you some minute differences."

"Interesting." *I guess I should think of them as something like pearls from clams or ambergris from whales.* Though we had touched on it a little in lectures at the academy, this was my first time seeing a magic stone get extracted in person.

"All right, you guys in the back help carry the spoils," Lloyd said, standing up and stowing the killer ape's magic stone in his pack.

Following Lloyd's gaze, I noticed the monk and the heavy warrior disassembling the armor of the now motionless living mails and tying it together with rope. Mabel listened intently to their explanation, but Amyu seemed uninterested, so it must have been something basic.

"Living mail armor is used to make all sorts of metal fittings. The monsters in this forest are low-level so the quality isn't that good, but it's still worth more than killer ape claws. Think you can carry it?" The warrior gave Yifa and me the armor she was holding. I was stronger than I looked thanks to my qigong techniques, and Yifa had been cleaning the estate and doing laundry since she was little, so neither of us had any issues. "Looks like you'll be fine. I'm sure the frontline girls are stronger, but I don't wanna weigh them down."

"But these two suits of armor are the most the two of us can carry. Is this enough to even make the trip profitable?" I asked.

"It should be just enough to cover a day's food for a party of four," Lloyd replied. I was disappointed to hear that. Adding the inn and other miscellaneous expenses, we were totally in the red. "That's why you need to get creative, like gathering magic stones first, or starting early in the morning and making several trips. If you have the funds, the best option is to hire a porter with an item box. That's what most well-off parties do when hunting living

mails.”

“Item box? And what’s a porter?”

“As the name suggests, porters are adventurers who specialize in carrying materials. Most of them are freelance rather than belonging to a specific party. As for item boxes, to put it simply, they’re a type of magic that allows you to store things in an alternate space. It requires a special talent unlike normal magic, but porters with the ability can carry far more items than an ordinary party. However, they tend not to be all that useful in combat.”

“Well, now.” I was somewhat intrigued. Perhaps this world had magic to access other planes as well. Most systems of sorcery in my previous world had such a technique, but I hadn’t heard anything similar since coming to this world, nor was it taught at the academy. Yet from how he described it, I couldn’t think of anything else it could be. I was curious as to what he meant by special talent.

Unfortunately, just then, two more living mails appeared before our vanguard.

“Perfect. You two in the front line wanna give it a try?” Lloyd asked.

“You heard him. Mabel, Amyu?”

“All right.”

“Ugh.”

Unlike Mabel, who nodded obediently, Amyu gave an annoyed sigh.

“An axe and a sword isn’t a great matchup, but they’re slow, so you should be fine,” said Lloyd.

“I’m not worried,” I replied.

A loud slam echoed through the forest, sending all the birds flying from their perches. Mabel had swung her battle-axe down, cleaving a living mail in two. “It wasn’t that sturdy,” Mabel said, shouldering her axe and tilting her head. Lloyd’s party looked on, dumbfounded.

“Cutting it in half is gonna lower the value,” Amyu said, clearly exasperated. “You’ve gotta bring it down more cleanly.”

“Hrm... Then you try it,” Mabel replied.

Amyu silently stepped forward. With a flash, her mithril spellblade slipped into a gap in the living mail’s chest, and the

monster fell to pieces as though the string holding it had been cut. Amyu waved her spellblade, which glowed faintly. “Despite how they look, they’re still undead. They’re easy to beat with light element buffs.”

“I can’t use light magic.”

“You know some martial arts moves, so why don’t you just try punching them next time?”

Lloyd watched them go back and forth in amazement. “Wow, you two are impressive. Were you adventurers in another city before?”

“Amyu was, yeah. Mabel was, well, something similar, I guess,” I answered. I suddenly looked up at the trees above us. Another green ape like the previous one had emerged from the foliage. “By the way, there’s another killer ape. Can we take it down too?”

“If you think you can, then go for it. We’ll help you if it looks rough.”

“Yifa, you’re up.”

“O-Okay.” Yifa looked to her left and right as though there was something floating there. Then a boulder large enough to fill my arms was launched out of midair. The stone slammed into the killer ape, sending it crashing through several thick branches and hurtling into the sky. A few moments later, the sound of a rock falling through trees in the distance could be heard. “Ah! S-Sorry. We can’t get the materials now, can we? I thought fire would be too dangerous. I’ll use water or wind next time.”

“Was that elven elemental magic?” Lloyd asked in astonishment as the rest of his party fell silent. “You don’t look like a half elf…” It seemed like Lloyd was familiar with elven magic. Perhaps it was because of all the demihumans in Rakana. Explaining would be too much of a hassle, so I just offered the bewildered group a superficial smile.

“Well, she’s got her own situation. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t pry too much. That’s common courtesy in Rakana, right?”

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Our party continued on through the forest for a while, but once the sun rose high overhead, Lloyd came to a stop.

“We should probably head back soon,” he said.

“Already?” I asked. I didn’t feel like we’d taken down any serious monsters yet. That sentiment must have shown on my face, as Lloyd gave me an awkward smile.

“Believe it or not, we’ve taken down more than I originally planned to. Besides, the return is part of the adventure. If you aren’t going to camp, you need to head back while you still have energy to spare.”

Is that right? I suppose it makes sense. I guess these are the kinds of things you only learn by asking an expert.

“Hey, Seika. What’s that?” Yifa suddenly asked, her attention focused deeper into the forest.

“Hm?” Following her gaze, I saw a giant, swollen, mushy-looking fruit. It wasn’t connected to a tree or any sort of normal plant. The fruit dangled from a single vine, devoid of any leaves, that was growing from the ground. It was clearly something out of the ordinary.

“Oh, that’s a calling trap,” Lloyd said from behind us, overhearing our conversation.

“What’s a calling trap?” I asked.

“It’s a type of dungeon trap that attracts all the monsters nearby. In underground dungeons, they look like fake chests and make a loud noise when you open them, and in forests, they look like that.”

“So it’s not really a fruit, then? What happens if you touch it?”

“It’ll burst and scatter a smelly fluid that draws in monsters. It won’t pop from just a light touch, though.”

Bleh, gross.

“Wanna give it a try?”

“Huh?” Lloyd had just asked me a ridiculous question. “No, if we do that—”

“No need to worry. There aren’t too many monsters in this forest to begin with. It isn’t all that dangerous. It’d be bad if you panicked the first time you trigger a trap by accident, so I think it’d be a good idea to gain some experience and get used to it.”

“Hmm…” Still apprehensive, I glanced over at Amyu.

“It’s fine. This is a low-level dungeon, and we have eight people here,” she said, picking up on my concern.

“All right, then, let’s do it.”

“Great. We’ll help you exterminate all the monsters, of course.

Get ready, everyone.” At Lloyd’s direction, the warrior, monk, and archer all quickly spread out in combat formation. “I’d rather not get the smell on us, so I guess we should pop it with an arrow.”

“Let me handle it,” I said. Before the archer could nock an arrow, I floated a hitogata over to the fruit and attached it. *Phase of yang: Faint Lightning.* A small-scale lightning bolt created by yang ki flowed through the hitogata. With a crackle and burst of sparks, the bizarre fruit ruptured, scattering its juices over the grass around it.

“Bleh.” I reflexively held my nose. It was a powerful stench, and it didn’t take long for it to show its effect.

A living mail emerged from the trees, then another from the shade of a thicket. They gathered one after another, and we were quickly surrounded by shambling suits of armor. It was enough to make one wonder where they had all been hiding.

“Isn’t this a bit much?” Amyu asked, a hint of worry sneaking into her voice.

“That’s odd. Why are there so many?” Lloyd mumbled, his voice tinged with nervousness as well. “Oh well. Everyone, get in formation. You guys should put down what you’re carrying too. Be ready to run if we need to—”

“Oh, no, that isn’t necessary. I can handle this many.”

“Wh-Wha—?”

Ignoring the dumbfounded Lloyd, I floated my hitogata in the air. *It seems like he didn’t anticipate this either. I knew cursed objects like this weren’t to be taken lightly.* I positioned my hitogata in every direction. *Come to think of it, this is my first time using this spell in real combat. I probably don’t need to make it that strong.* I put my hands together and made a hand sign.

Phase of wood, fire, and earth: Quaking Snow. A moment later, a boom thundered through the forest. Dense white smoke filled the air, hiding our surroundings entirely.

“M-My ears!” I heard shouting and coughing all around me. Coughing myself, I panicked and cleared away the smoke with my hitogata.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Amyu shouted.

“S-Sorry, sorry,” I apologized genuinely. *I think I used a little too much black powder. The noise and smoke from this spell are pretty rough, huh?* When the smoke cleared, a grand spectacle was left

over.

“The living mails!”

All the living mails that had gathered had collapsed, turning into ordinary suits of armor. They were filled with holes, attesting to the strength of the spell.

When sulfur, charcoal, and saltpeter were combined in a proper amount, a violent explosion would occur. Quaking Snow produced a substance called black powder that I had learned about in the Song dynasty. Although it was a simple spell that merely flung stones, it was devastatingly powerful. The fact that black powder could be used even without a spell was terrifying. Nonetheless, it would need to be improved if it were to be used in war. It produced too much noise and smoke, it was ineffective when wet, and the range was short. Because it was so difficult to use without a spell, it still needed a lot of work.

I looked around at the forest and called out to Lloyd, who was still standing there in amazement. “I don’t think any more monsters are coming. I’m not sure if it’s because the calling trap’s effect wore off or because of the loud explosion and smell of smoke, but either way, it seems to be over.”

“Y-Yeah, it looks that way. You can relax— No, wait, hold on!” Lloyd suddenly came to his senses. “D-Did you cause that just now?”

“Yes. I overdid it a little, though,” I admitted.

“A-A little? Was that magic?”

“It was.”

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. What kind of magic was it? Who are you—” Seeing my evasive smile, Lloyd held his tongue and took a deep breath. “I won’t pry. I said so myself, right?”

“I appreciate that.”

“All right, we’ll call it here for today. Unfortunately, I don’t think we’ll be able to carry all this armor back with us.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t make up for what I did, but I can carry it all.” I sent out my hitogata, and with a brief mantra, opened up a gateway to an empty plane. Then the hitogata moved and engulfed the suits of armor in the spatial distortion. “Keep quiet about this, but I actually have an item box,” I explained with a beaming smile as everyone’s jaws dropped.

“Th-That’s not an item box!”

“Huh?” Caught off guard by Lloyd’s sudden exclamation, my surprise slipped out.

“At least, the porters I know who have item boxes have to touch the items to store them away. I’ve never seen them get sucked into space like that,” Lloyd said while holding his head.

“I-I use talismans, so it works a little differently.”

“I don’t really think that’s the issue… Also, what’s the capacity of your item box?”

“C-Capacity?” I was panicking. I hadn’t thought about that. Alternate planes didn’t contain any information—they were empty worlds, so to speak. In theory, they did have a storage limit, but even storing a planet inside wouldn’t come close to reaching it, so I never paid it any mind. “I can fit as much inside as I want,” I answered, still confused.

“No way. Have you ever measured the limit?” Lloyd asked.

“No.”

“What’s the most amount of stuff you’ve ever stored inside?”

“Uhh…” I thought deeply for a moment. It would have to have been in my past life. “Enough water to fill a small lake, probably.” I wasn’t confident that description would get the point across, but it didn’t seem to be a problem.

“Wha… Y-You really have an unlimited item box?”

“I can’t believe that actually exists…”

Lloyd’s party members mumbled among themselves. Lloyd himself appeared to be at a loss for words.

I guess item boxes aren’t what I imagined they were.

“So that’s another trick you have up your sleeve, huh?” Amyu said in exasperation. “Nothing you do surprises me anymore.”

“That’s just Seika,” Yifa agreed.

“I’m used to it,” said Mabel.

Hearing the way the girls put it, I couldn’t help but let out a dry chuckle. *Maybe avoiding standing out was never possible for me.*

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Several hours later, we safely returned to Rakana. Our spoils could be traded in at the Adventurers Guild, and Lloyd’s party gave us the gist of how it was done. Selling all the living mails I had stored netted us a decent sum of money. I offered to give Lloyd

half of it, but he shook his head.

“Keep it. You guys need the money more than we do, I’m sure. Besides,” he said with a chuckle. “Mooching off newbie adventurers would make us look bad.”

That being the case, I gratefully accepted it all. Truth be told, we really did need it.

“So, as for what you guys are gonna do after this,” Lloyd said with a serious expression. “How about joining my party? Only if you want to, of course.”

I wasn’t particularly surprised by his proposal. Back when we had been talking with Cyrus, he’d said it was okay for Lloyd to invite us to his party. However, before I decided whether to accept or not, there was one thing I needed to confirm.

“Just how many people are in your party exactly?” Amyu asked the question I was thinking before I could get the words out.

“As of recently, over a hundred,” Lloyd answered, not paying any mind to her cheeky tone.

“Why? What’s the point in getting so many members?”

“I don’t know much about adventurers, but I do know that normal parties are usually four to six people. Before we answer, could you explain what exactly your Grove Alliance is?” I asked.

“Of course.” Lloyd nodded.

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Since standing around and talking wasn’t ideal, we made our way to a tavern inside the Adventurers Guild. We were being treated to an early dinner, so we weren’t about to complain. Lloyd started speaking before our food even arrived.

“How did you guys picture adventurers when you were little?” he asked.

Everyone held their tongues. In my case, I’d had memories of my past life, so I had looked at them the same way I’d viewed wandering martial artists—that is to say, as a good-for-nothing occupation.

“I always thought they were really free and that people look up to them.” Yifa gave the most common answer, and Lloyd nodded.

“Yeah, so did I as a kid. But as you now know, being an adventurer isn’t that glamorous.” Our food arrived, and Lloyd

continued as we waited for it to be placed on the table. “Freedom means you aren’t protected. Nobody is gonna come save you. Nobody is gonna conveniently tell you everything you need to know to survive. If you get hurt and can’t provide for yourself, you’ll end up on the street. That’s a fact, even for the most elite adventurers.” Lloyd looked down at his food and gave a feeble smile. “I’m the only one from my first party who’s still alive.”

I bet that’s a common story. You could say it’s fortunate that anyone survived at all.

“I’m not asking for sympathy—that’s just life for adventurers. But I wanted to do something about it, so I thought real hard and had the idea to create a large-scale party. That’s the Grove Alliance. Even adventurers who have no one else will still help out their comrades in arms. I wanted to expand that circle.”

“So in short, your party is just a big group of adventurers who cooperate with each other?”

“No, not quite.” Lloyd shook his head. “Our bond isn’t that shallow. When I say we’re a party, I mean it. Newcomers are assigned a mentor of the same profession to show them the ropes and teach them skills. We share information regarding dangerous locations and any incident that might’ve brought another party to its breaking point. That’s why even with improvised groups, everyone can perform to the full extent of their abilities. Today was my first time working with this specific party, but I think we could have cleared a dungeon filled with adamant or mithril mails without issue.”

“I see.” I thought for a moment. “By structuring the entire party like an army, you increase the success rate and survivability.”

“Adventuring is fundamentally done in small groups, and choice of members is left to personal discretion, but sure, you can think of it that way.”

“So your ultimate goal is to homogenize everyone’s abilities as much as possible, regardless of the individual?”

Lloyd’s eyes went wide for a moment as though he hadn’t expected me to point that out. “The main priority is to increase the survival rate, though I suppose that occurs as a result.”

“Right.” In armies or any other large organization, something as vague and ambiguous as the individual couldn’t be relied upon. Personnel needed to be given uniform training and follow uniform

rules to achieve the desired results. I asked a follow-up question. “As your party grows, it’ll soon reach the point where you alone can’t manage everything. What will you do then?”

“I’m planning on splitting the party up into groups and having trustworthy subordinates manage them. I’m actually already working on that.”

“Excellent. A textbook model of organizational management,” I said completely seriously.

Lloyd gave something of a forced smile. “I’m honored to hear that from a noble. All that studying paid off. So, how about it? My Grove Alliance is rated as a junior rank one party by the guild,” Lloyd continued. “We’re the number two party here in Rakana. I doubt there are many parties above us, even across the entire empire. We offer plenty of support, such as providing members with equipment and sharing information. If you’re injured, we can offer loans and even recommend you to other jobs if need be. We won’t force you to join up with anyone either. If you want to enter dungeons alone, you’re more than welcome to. We may ask for your cooperation with regard to combat strength or finances at times, but I assure you the benefits outweigh the costs. Will you join our party?”

“I’m going to have to decline.”

Lloyd didn’t seem particularly surprised by my immediate response.

“Very well. May I ask why?” he said, his expression unchanged.

“As you can probably imagine, we have some unique circumstances.” We were potentially being pursued, for one. Us joining a party wouldn’t benefit either side. It was smarter for us to keep our distance from those who were uninvolved.

“There aren’t many people in this town who don’t,” Lloyd replied calmly. “I’d tell you it’s nothing to worry about, but I don’t imagine that would change your mind.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“Then let me ask you one more thing—if it weren’t for your complicated situation, would you join?”

I closed my eyes for a moment, then shook my head. “No.”

“I figured. I guess the Grove Alliance doesn’t have much to offer to those who’re already strong.”

“Compared to beginners, maybe not, but that isn’t the reason. I

simply don’t agree with your ideals,” I said bluntly. “People are all different. Not everyone grows the same way under the same instruction. Educating adventurers who all have their own quirks and peculiarities isn’t going to be that simple. I’m sure there are going to be a lot of people who don’t align with your policies.”

I’d had all sorts of children as my disciples. Despite receiving the same instruction, some were skilled at divination, while others were skilled at sorcery. Others still found their calling in mathematics, debate, or swordplay. Teaching something to others was harder than one might expect. Even after pondering it for decades, I never truly understood that until my final moments.

“That’s true, I guess,” Lloyd said, seemingly taken aback. “But it’s still better than nothing, right? For example: How many novices do you think have died because they missed a telltale warning that most veterans could clock in an instant?”

“You’re absolutely right. This is just me being picky.”

“In that case—”

“But for this city, I’m not sure it’ll end as a matter of preference,” I said, interrupting Lloyd. “When people get used to their environment, they lose that sense of urgency. As your party grows, the adventurers, and by extension, the city, will be weakened.” Of my disciples, the ones who had rivals grew the most. They would read books and devise new spells without being taught. An environment without competition dulled a person’s drive.

“You think so too, huh?” Lloyd muttered unhappily. Someone else must have pointed out the same thing to him before. “You can only say that because you’re already strong. You can get whatever you want. Put yourself in the shoes of people who can’t. Thrown into a dungeon you can’t make heads or tails of and forced into a competition where failure means death. What part of that is good? Think about how you’d feel if someone close to you was suddenly thrust into that position.”

“Of course, it’d be ideal for people to live in peace without any conflict. But I don’t think this world is ready for that.”

“I disagree. Dungeons provide plenty of wealth. I’m certain I can achieve something close to my dream.” Lloyd stood up from his seat. “I think we should get going. Sorry for taking up your time. I’ll go ahead and pay, so you guys can take it easy.”

“All right. Thank you for treating us, and I apologize if I came

across as stuck up.”

Lloyd chuckled and shook his head. “It’s fine. I appreciate your opinion. You’re far from the first person who’s turned me down. But be careful if you guys are gonna head into dungeons by yourselves,” Lloyd said, his expression hardening. “Like I said in the forest, the types and number of monsters that appear in the dungeons have changed lately. That calling trap in the Wandering Forest attracted way more monsters than usual. Old information might not be useful anymore, so stay on your toes.”

“We will. Thanks for your concern.”

“See you later,” Lloyd said as he left.

After watching him go, I turned my attention to my plate and picked up some salty noodles with my fork. We’d been talking so much I’d barely touched my food. Lloyd didn’t seem to have eaten much either.

“That was kinda surprising,” Amyu said as she scooped up soup with her spoon. She had been silent the entire time. “I would’ve expected you to agree with him.”

“You would?”

“Yeah. You’re the type to help a person in need,” Yifa said, pausing her meal to give a resigned smile.

“Not really,” I answered, returning to my food. It didn’t matter to me how adventurers I’d never met had died. However, I did understand where Lloyd was coming from. I would certainly feel something if an acquaintance of mine died a pitiful death. His idea for a large-scale party was probably effective. The problem I’d brought up was fairly trivial.

Looking back, it was probably just my experience training disciples that made me want to find some fault with what he was saying. I don’t really have a good reason to oppose his idea. But even acknowledging that, I still wouldn’t have agreed to join him.

“Still, I’m glad we turned him down,” Mabel said, tearing into her bread. “I wouldn’t wanna cause problems for a nice guy like him.”

Indeed. At the end of the day, that was the real reason I wanted to keep Lloyd at arm’s length.

Faint Lightning

A spell that sends an electric current through a

hitogata using yang ki. While it is possible to discharge the current as well, it can’t be aimed like a raijuu’s lightning.

Quaking Snow
A spell that launches a projectile using gunpowder. An explosive powder can be created using 75% saltpeter, 15% charcoal, and 10% sulfur. Gunpowder is said to have been invented in China around the sixth century, under the Tang dynasty, but it wasn’t known in Japan until the Kamakura period. Seika learned of it by visiting the Song dynasty.

Act 3

Two days later, we stood at the entrance of a dungeon early in the morning.

“Heh heh heh! Our adventure finally begins,” Amyu said with her hands on her hips, cutting an imposing figure.

“Well, aren’t you excited,” I couldn’t help but point out.

“Huh? I’m totally normal!” However, from the way she averted her eyes, she seemed anything but. Even now, she had a faint grin on her face. She had been in high spirits when we’d gone shopping and decided on the dungeon to visit the day before as well.

Was she looking forward to it that much? I thought to myself as I peered inside the large cave that served as the dungeon’s entrance. Located at the base of the eastern mountains, the dungeon was named the Shallow Valley Cavern. The name’s origin was simply that it was a cavern in a shallow valley. There was nothing fancy to it. The monsters that appeared inside were unremarkable as well, making it perfectly ordinary and well suited to beginners.

I feel like this place would be boring to Amyu. She’s probably just happy to go dungeon diving with the four of us. I doubt she’s ever had the chance to go adventuring with only people her age before.

“Let’s go over things one last time,” Amyu said, her voice still brimming with enthusiasm. “Mabel and I are the front line, and Yifa and Seika are the back line. Don’t spread out too far, and speak up if the formation starts to fall apart.”

“We know, Amyu,” said Yifa.

“Do we really need to go over this again?” Mabel added.

“It’s important that we get it right!” Amyu said, raising her voice.

“No need to get so worked up. You could handle this dungeon alone, couldn’t you?” I asked.

“That goes for you too, doesn’t it? You could wipe out every monster in the dungeon without moving from this spot,” Amyu said, almost sounding like she was pouting.

“I won’t deny that,” I answered honestly. “Provided I don’t have

to collect their materials."

"That defeats the whole point of coming here."

I might be able to make a shikigami capable of doing so, but not without knowing how to harvest them.

"Guess we'll have to go inside!" Amyu declared.

"Why do you sound happy about that?"

"I-I'm totally normal!" Amyu cleared her throat. "Today's just a practice run. No party works well together right from the start, so you've gotta work out the details through real experience. Now, let's go!"

Amyu, Mabel, and finally Yifa all set foot into the dungeon with me following behind them.

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The dungeon was much more vast than the one beneath Lodonea. So far, we'd only run into common monsters like goblins and skeletons. They weren't particularly high-level, so we proceeded without issue.

"Y'know, I've been thinking," Amyu muttered. "You're pretty good at fighting monsters, Mabel."

"Yeah," Mabel replied as she cut off the head of a goblin she had held in place with her shadow magic. Then, in one fluid motion, she hurled a throwing knife at a bat-like monster, nailing it to the wall. As it struggled, she threw another knife that pierced its skull, ending its life. "I've done monster extermination training before. It was fun. We all had to work together," she said, pulling her two knives out of the monster's corpse.

"You could probably handle almost any dungeon with four people like you," Amyu said in an exasperated tone. "Most heavy warriors can't also use magic and throwing weapons."

"Hmm... You think I'm a heavy warrior?" Mabel asked.

"You use an axe, so yeah."

"I don't like the sound of that. I'd rather be an assassin."

"What kind of assassin uses such a noticeable weapon?"

The two bantered back and forth, but their skills were undeniable. They dealt with monsters as they appeared, and as a result, Yifa and I in the back barely had to do anything.

We probably should have picked a harder dungeon, I thought to

myself as we proceeded and suddenly stepped out into an open area. Sensing a current of energy, I illuminated the chamber with my hitogata. A moment later, a shadow swooped down on us from above.

Seemingly anticipating it, Amyu and Mabel easily dodged out of the way. The wind from the shadow's wings reached all the way to me, and I looked up at the creature flying around the wide chamber.

"That's...a murder bat, right?" The large, bat-like monster turned in midair and set its sights on us. *It's finally time for the back line to do something.* "All right, I'll handle this one."

Phase of wood: Impaling Stakes. Several wooden stakes pierced the large bat, and a bunch of icicles came flying at it a moment later. Then flames and blades of wind assailed the monster as it was on the verge of death. Charred black and riddled with holes, it no longer moved a muscle.

"Ah, sorry, Seika! I guess we had the same idea," Yifa said awkwardly. She had immediately sprung into action as well.

She's merciless...

"R-Rein it in a little. That was way overkill," Amyu said, sounding exasperated once again.

That's a fair point. If this keeps happening every time the back line gets involved, we won't be able to recover any materials. I should do something about that...

"Amyu, are you hurt?" Yifa suddenly noticed. Amyu did indeed have a trickle of blood running down her cheek. She must have gotten cut by something when dodging the bat. "That's not good! I'll heal you!"

"No, we don't want it to leave a scar. I'll do it," I said. "Give me a strand of your hair."

"I can heal it myself. It's not a big deal. Seriously, what kind of party has *three* healers?!" Amyu shouted, ruffling her hair in frustration. "This isn't exactly what I was expecting."

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"You guys can all do too much on your own."

We were being lectured by Amyu in the chamber where we had taken down the murder bat. Naturally, we had confirmed that

there weren't any other monsters around, but that wasn't the issue.

"First off, Mabel! Put your throwing knives away!"

"Why should I? Then I won't seem like an assassin at all," Mabel complained.

"Like I said, axe users are heavy warriors! Got it? You're a front liner, so stop wasting time with enemies that are far away. Let the back line handle enemies you can't beat without your throwing knives."

"But you use magic sometimes."

"I'm only targeting what the front line can handle. Also, your throwing knives cost money. The blades get damaged when you throw them enhanced with gravity magic, and sometimes you can't retrieve them at all. If the materials we recover aren't worth more than your throwing knives, we're running at a loss. Be mindful of the cost."

"You're sounding like a merchant all of a sudden."

"It's the same idea. It's just that instead of buying stock, we're buying weapons and armor. I'm not saying to never use them—but if someone else can handle an enemy, let them handle it. Understand?"

"All right." Mabel nodded obediently. I was impressed. Amyu had given this a lot of thought.

"Next! Yifa and Seika," Amyu said, looking at us this time. "One of you needs to stop attacking."

"H-Huh? Are you sure?" Yifa asked nervously.

"Like I said before, using the two of you together is massive overkill. Unless we're fighting a boss, one is more than enough. It's better for collecting materials too," Amyu explained.

"I see."

"So one of you should focus on healing. They say parties with dedicated healers have fewer accidents."

"In that case, I'll be the attacker and Yifa can be the healer," I said. I figured it would be safer to have me on offense.

Amyu narrowed her eyes and looked at me for a moment before speaking. "Hmm... No."

"Huh?"

"Yifa's the attacker. You're on healing duty."

"Hold on, why?" She had made it seem like it didn't matter who

did what just a second ago.

"Three reasons. First, your magic costs money."

"You mean my talismans? A piece of paper doesn't cost nearly as much as a throwing knife."

"Paper's more expensive here than in Lodonea. There aren't any paper manufacturers nearby. Metal, on the other hand, is everywhere. Throwing knives might actually be cheaper. We need to think about the future and preserve our resources as best we can. Now for reason number two—if you were the attacker, the rest of us would have nothing to do. You're just gonna go all out the moment things get dangerous."

"Maybe so, but what's wrong with that?" I asked.

"It'd mean our life as adventurers would just be relying on you for everything."

"I don't really mind."

"Well, *we* do. We don't want you doing everything for us. Besides, if we depend on you too much, what'll we do if something happens to you? I know you can do everything. You could probably clear every dungeon in the area all by yourself, but adventurers have managed just fine without being as strong as you are. So let us play a role too. Now, for the final reason," Amyu said with a slight smile. "It's reassuring knowing you have my back as a healer."

"I'll do my best, Seika," Yifa enthusiastically chimed in while I was at a loss for words.

"All right." I silently nodded, then a smile crept onto my lips. "I guess I'll just have to watch over my disciples as they gain experience."

"Why do you sound so full of yourself?" Amyu demanded.

"You sound like an old person," said Mabel.

"What are you even talking about?" Yifa asked.

I gave an awkward smile.

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We proceeded through the dungeon without issue. It was a beginner-oriented dungeon, so there was no reason we should have had any problems in the first place, and with Amyu's guidance, even the initial anxiety of the unfamiliar situation faded

away. We were able to face the monsters as calm and collected as ever.

I had been left with very little to do. Minor injuries were all transferred to improvised talismans I had created, so rather than healing, I mostly just provided light with my hitogata so we could see while gathering the materials to store in the other plane.

But that's fine. They said they wanted to do it themselves, and it's my duty as the eldest to watch over the youth. Of course, I'll help them out if there's any real danger.

Once we collected enough materials, we decided to head back. While there was likely still a good bit of daylight, we would need time to go to the guild and sell everything. All the more so since this was our first time.

We safely returned to Rakana and went straight to the Adventurers Guild.

"We'd like to trade in our materials," I said at the counter.

"Welcome back," the young woman at the reception desk said with a smile. "Please put them on the table over there."

I opened a gate to another plane, and all the materials within clattered onto the table beside the reception desk. There were magic stones, swords wielded by skeletons, and various other things. None of it was particularly valuable, but there was enough of it to pile up on the table.

The receptionist's eyes went wide. "My, you're a porter, huh? Is this everything you'd like to trade in?"

"Yes—actually, hold on a moment." I made the gate hitogata invisible again and pulled out a different hitogata. Amyu looked at it suspiciously.

"You've got more?" she asked.

"Yeah." I had one other thing to sell—the corpse of the deer monster I had captured before we'd arrived in Rakana. We'd been so busy that I'd completely forgotten about it, but it was sure to sell for a high price. With a short mantra, a gateway to another plane opened and the monster's corpse fell onto the floor with a heavy thud.

"Wha—?!"

"Eek!"

"Whoa!"

The receptionist and nearby adventurers all cried out in

surprise. As for me...

"Huh? What's this?" I stared at it in surprise. What was supposed to have been a monster's corpse had turned into a large, rainbow-colored ore. Although it had the vague silhouette of a deer, it was clearly not a corpse. It was nothing more than a cluster of cubic crystals. *Come to think of it, the magic stones its antlers were made of were the same color. Still, what happened? Is this what that monster becomes when it dies?*

I didn't have the slightest clue. I looked around at the adventurers and guild staff, hoping one of them might know.

"Is this a magic stone?"

"Doesn't this color mean it's high-quality?!"

"The whole thing?!"

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case.

"W-Wait just a moment," the receptionist said, still getting over her shock. She headed to the back, then returned a little while later with a staff member holding a hammer and chisel. "The appraisal is going to take some time," she said apologetically. "This magic stone seems like it will be worth a lot of money, so it may take a few days for us to pay you the full sum."

I sighed. "That's fine." I was more curious about what had happened. *Is there anybody who might know?*

A banging sound echoed through the room as a guild employee tried to break off part of the ore with his hammer and chisel. They probably couldn't appraise the entire thing together. Then a crack spread through the surface of the stone—and I suddenly felt an intense surge of energy.

"Um, you should stop that!" I shouted in a panic.

"Huh?" The guild employee looked at me blankly. Just as he did, the stone shattered entirely.

"Wah!"

"A-A monster?!"

Though the magic stones that made up its antlers were gone, there was no mistaking it—it was the deer monster I had sealed away. Standing up, it shook its head. Monsters from this world shouldn't have been able to endure being in another plane, yet it was nevertheless alive.

Before I could direct a shikigami at it, the deer kicked its hooves on the floor of the guild, destroying the floorboards and bursting

right out the door onto the street.

"It's so fast!" I ran outside to pursue it, but the deer was already a speck in the distance. From the hoofprints left in the ground, it seemed to have used its incredible jumping ability to cover the distance all in one go. It jumped again onto the roof of a tall building, then leaped over the city walls and disappeared. I stood there dumbfounded.

"I-I can't believe it was still alive. That was an incredible spirit, wasn't it, Master Seika?" Yuki whispered, poking her head out.

"Y-Yeah. This world is just as vast as our old one," I replied, timidly turning around. The guild's door had been completely destroyed. I slowly, silently went back inside.

The guild's interior had fallen completely silent as well. The adventurers and employees were too shocked to say anything. Amyu and the others seemed to be the same. Looking at the floor the deer had ruined, I went pale.

This is bad. Then I saw the magic stone shell the deer had left behind. It was hollow now because the deer had been inside, but there was still a lot left over.

"Umm..." I gave a sheepish smile and pointed at the shell. "Will that magic stone cover the damages?"

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In the end, it was enough to cover everything. More than enough, in fact. The deer's shell was indeed made entirely of high-quality magic stones. Even after deducting the costs of the floor and door repairs, we were left with a surprisingly large sum. As a result, our living situation suddenly became much more comfortable.

However, the guild staff were very upset. I was told not to put monsters inside my item box alive, and to especially not release them inside the guild. They were completely in the right, leaving me no choice but to humbly apologize.

In addition, nobody seemed to know what the monster was. Nonetheless, I could guess what had happened. The monster had likely covered itself in a magic stone shell to endure the harsh void of the other plane. It was likely unique in that respect, making it all the more intriguing. However, Amyu and the others had looked

fed up when I'd cheerfully explained all the mechanics behind its survival.

Our life as adventurers had begun with some trouble, but things went smoothly after that. We gradually expanded our range and found that we could handle mid-level dungeons comfortably, and those became our standard hunting grounds. The girls could probably handle even higher-level dungeons, but there was no need to be reckless.

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We were walking down the street around sunset one day after coming back from a dungeon, finally starting to grow accustomed to our new lives.

"What's the name of the restaurant we're going to again?" Amyu asked.

"Golden Thread Pavilion. Sounds expensive, huh?" I replied.

"I'm looking forward to it."

We'd finally gotten tired of the food at the guild's tavern and had decided to try a different restaurant today. It was nice to splurge every once in a while.

When we finally arrived at Golden Thread Pavilion, we found a building that, while old, had a dignified, high-class appearance. However, when we opened the doors, I immediately frowned.

"Gah ha ha ha! You got a face like an orc!"

"Then, after that dumbass died..."

The interior was full of adventurers. I had expected an expensive establishment to have a more refined clientele, but it seemed I had been foolish. In a town of adventurers, there were bound to be rowdy loudmouths who made plenty of money as well.

"Should we find another restaurant?" I muttered.

"P-Probably..."

"This place seems loud."

Yifa and Mabel agreed, but Amyu tilted her head in confusion.

"Huh? Why? It's a little crowded, but that's fine. It'd be a pain to go out and find another place now," Amyu said, walking inside as though nothing were out of the ordinary. The rest of us had no choice but to hurry after her.

As we looked for an open table, people glanced at us and started murmuring. Some people even whistled at us. I suspected around half of them probably knew who we were. As a party of four newcomers who had released a monster inside the guild and started challenging mid-level dungeons in no time at all, we had made a bit of a name for ourselves. The other half, however, likely just saw a group of attractive young women and wanted to hit on them.

"Hey! Red Hair over there!" A short, bald man shouted at us from a table by the wall. "Come over here and sit with us! We've got money!" he said with a vulgar chuckle.

In this world, women were by no means powerless. With proper training, they could increase their magical power and physical abilities, and depending on the circumstances, even a young girl could throw a grown man to the ground. That was why there was no shortage of female adventurers.

There was no way the man could have missed the spellblade at Amyu's hip from where he was sitting, so he must have been trying to make a joke to test her. That was why I had wanted to find a different restaurant, but Amyu just scoffed at his vulgar advances.

"Is that a talking goblin? It must be a superior variant. Oh, wait, you're just bald."

The restaurant exploded into laughter. His face contorted with anger, the man stood up from his chair. "You're gonna pay for that! You shouldn't have gone there!"

"I've always wanted to get into a bar fight!" Amyu said cheerfully.

"K-Knock it off," I cautioned. "You're gonna get us kicked out." *And if you break something, we're gonna have to pay for it again!*

"Lamprogue?" I suddenly heard a calm, familiar voice as I was trying to figure out how to stop Amyu. I turned and saw Lloyd sitting in a corner of the restaurant with his party members, raising a glass with a gentle smile. "Looks like you guys are doing well. How about having a drink with us?" The restaurant grew a little quieter after Lloyd spoke.

The bald man clicked his tongue and sat back down. Lloyd seemed like a peaceful guy, but as the leader of the second highest-ranking party in Rakana, he probably commanded a lot of

respect.

"W-We'd be happy to!" I replied, immediately accepting the lucky break. With a disappointed look on her face, Amyu withdrew and headed toward Lloyd's table. When the others crammed together, there was just enough room for the four of us.

"You're a lifesaver," I said as I sat down.

"No fighting in here, all right?" Lloyd said with an awkward smile. "I like this restaurant."

"I'm not the one you should be warning."

"What? He's the one who started it," Amyu said.

"I'm not saying not to fight at all. Just do it outside. That's also common courtesy in this city," Lloyd said calmly.

Can you really call that courtesy?

"It's been a while! Can you all drink?" the muscular woman sitting next to Amyu asked. She was the hammer-wielding heavy warrior who'd joined us in the Wandering Forest.

"Y-Yeah, for sure," Amyu said hesitantly.

"I've never drank alcohol before..." said Yifa.

"Me neither," Mabel added.

"Neither have I," I said, rounding out the group. *In this life, at least.*

"I recommend the hard liquor here," said a man in priest's garb with a shaved head. He was the monk who had fought alongside the heavy warrior. "It even rivals the alcohol from my hometown."

"What kind of dumbass recommends hard liquor for someone's first time drinking?! Have something fruity to start with. Everything here's good." The warrior woman placed an order, and four drinks were brought out shortly after.

I put it to my lips and my eyes went wide. "Huh..."

"Th-This is really good, Seika!" said Yifa.

"It's sweet," said Mabel.

I had expected grape wine, but it seemed to be raspberry or something similar. The sweet taste made it easy to down.

"Hmm..." Amyu downed the entire drink in one go. "Ah ha ha! This is great!" she said cheerfully. "Excuse me! Can I get another?"

"That's the spirit," the warrior said, patting Amyu on the back. "How'd it go today? Did you make a good profit?"

"It was all right! The dungeon we went to..."

Amyu answered excitedly, and the questions kept coming. We

had become something of the talk of the town, so everyone was curious about us. Yifa and Mabel happily joined the conversation, and I silently listened, occasionally offering a short affirmation.

"Hey, did you hear what happened in the imperial capital?" I overheard an interesting conversation at the table in our periphery. I strained my ears and tried to eavesdrop on the two adventurers.

"Apparently, a really strong demon attacked the palace all by itself."

"For real? That's crazy. Did the emperor finally get his ass killed? I doubt it, but that might start a huge war like the one hundreds of years ago."

"About that... The demon supposedly apologized and left without doing anything."

"Huh?"

"It restored all the walls it destroyed with magic. According to a traveling merchant, you can't even tell what part was broken."

"Did this actually happen?"

"The imperial court made an official statement. On top of that, a bunch of people in the capital saw the walls get destroyed last month."

"Sounds like bull to me. It was probably a setup. I bet the emperor is trying to start something again."

"Gah ha ha! Maybe so!"

The two adventurers laughed and switched over to another topic. Listening to their conversation made me want to run and hide.

I-I'm so sorry, Fiona... It seemed she had tried really hard to cover up my actions. Imagining how difficult it must have been to push that ridiculous explanation pained me. I would have to apologize to her again at some point.

"Hey, Seika! Are you listening?" Amyu demanded.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, totally." I responded to her drunken question in a panic, then placed another order. The other customers might have been loud, but the drinks were undeniably good. It was a good place for the girls to get their first drinking experience. We would likely face some hardship in the future, so I didn't mind enjoying ourselves while we could.

A few hours after I had that thought...

“I’m so weak!” Amyu was crying, head on the table, her face bright red.

I looked down at her in amazement. “You’re such a lightweight.”

“Tch! Shut up! Everyone’s weak compared to you! I was called a genius, you know! I have more experience as an adventurer than you guys! Now you’re probably thinking, ‘What kind of genius can’t beat an elder treant?’ aren’t you?! Waaah!” Amyu sobbed.

Next to Amyu, Mabel was hanging her head, not moving a muscle. She appeared to have fallen asleep.

I sighed. “I think it’s time to head back. Yifa, help me carry them… Yifa?” I didn’t get a response, so I looked over and saw Yifa staring back at me with a radiant smile.

“Huh? Eh heh heh heh heh heh!” She wouldn’t stop giggling.


Zz...

Maybe I should wait until they sober up a little. Sighing, I sat back down. I looked around at the others and noticed that Lloyd's companions seemed to be pretty drunk as well.

"You hold your alcohol well, Lamprogue," Lloyd said in surprise.

"I guess so," I replied, pouring the hard liquor I had decided to try. Due to my physical constitution in my previous life, I hadn't been able to get drunk no matter how much alcohol I drank. However, I didn't imagine that would hold true in this life. "You seem like you do too."

"I've only had water," Lloyd said with an awkward smile. "This might come as a surprise, but I don't drink."

"Oh, really? I figured all the big adventurers were heavy drinkers."

"That's a pretty biased view. Alcohol doesn't have anything to do with adventuring. I'm proof of that."

That's fair. It does sound pretty convincing coming from the leader of Rakana's second highest-ranking party. "I know it's late to be asking this, but what did you guys do today? You've got a lot of people with you."

"Uh, well..." Lloyd had a telling look on his face. "We've been planning a large-scale operation lately. We were meeting to discuss it."

"Large-scale, huh? What is it?"

"Defeating the eastern boss." Lloyd continued as I remained silent. "My party has gathered a number of elite adventurers now. We also have information on the boss's location and the surrounding terrain. I'm confident we can pull it off with the right preparation."

"I have a few questions. By eastern boss, do you mean the boss monster in the mountains east of Rakana?" I asked quietly.

"Yeah. As I told you before, there are three mountain ranges around Rakana, and each one is a massive dungeon. The northern, southern, and eastern mountains all have their own boss monster. The bosses in attached dungeons like the Wandering Forest are actually more like mid-bosses. The ones in the mountains are on an entirely different level in terms of strength, but they're not unbeatable."

"Doesn't defeating a boss monster cause a dungeon to lose its power? I would imagine beating the bosses would be forbidden in

a town that relies on dungeon resources."

"In cases where the boss monster serves as the dungeon's core, yes. However, the cores of the dungeons around here aren't the bosses."

"How do you know that?"

"It's simple—the boss monster has been beaten several times before. Granted, that was back when Rakana was still growing, but as you can see, the dungeon is still there, continuing to provide wealth. There's just a different monster lording over it as the boss now. The northern, southern, and eastern mountains are probably all the same. They have something else serving as their cores, though I couldn't tell you what that something is."

Chasing off the worry in the back of my mind, I asked a different question. "Then why go out of your way to beat the boss? What do you gain from taking that risk?"

"Fame. We'd been doing well until now, but the Grove Alliance has started to see a decline in new members. We need a big, decisive win that everyone will recognize. My organization will never reach its true potential if we remain the number two party in Rakana forever."

His expression hadn't changed, yet I could see the burning determination in his eyes. I opened my mouth to say something, then closed it again.

Lloyd gave me a slight smile. "You don't have to officially join our party, but we'd appreciate your help— No, never mind. I know you aren't the type of person to be baited by renown or rewards."

"Sorry," I replied, averting my eyes. This second proposal was even more difficult for me to accept than when he'd asked us to join his party. While I had no proof, I got the feeling that defeating the boss would lead to disaster. Nonetheless, I didn't have the right words to stop him. I reluctantly changed the topic. "Now that you mention it, what's the number one party in Rakana like?"

Lloyd gave a faintly bitter look upon hearing the question. "They're called the Crimson Wings. As for what kind of party they are—"

At that moment, the doors to the restaurant swung open. Five people walked in, their equipment clattering. From the looks of it, there was a heavy warrior, a swordsman, a thief, a mage, and a priest. They were standard occupations, with a standard

composition, but the quality of their equipment and their demeanor clearly set them apart from other adventurers. It was none other than the Crimson Wings—the top party in Rakana.

"Hey! Five beers! And bring out whatever food you got!" the hulking heavy warrior bellowed toward the back of the restaurant before plopping down in an open seat with his companions.

The faint smell of blood hit my nose. *Did they just get back from a dungeon?*

"Hmm? Well, if it ain't Lloyd!" The man who appeared to be the leader looked our way and called out.

Lloyd grimaced for a moment, then raised his cup toward the man. "Hey there. It's been a while, Zamrug."

"Ha, is that water? When're you gonna start drinking? You'll never set an example for those half-baked losers you're leadin' like that! Gah ha ha ha!" Ignoring Lloyd's silently seething companions, the large man named Zamrug continued. "Who're those kids? Are you invitin' rookies who might drop dead tomorrow to your party now? You'll really take anyone. You know the difference between a party and a woman's ass? For parties, bigger ain't always better—"

"They're acquaintances of the mayor," Lloyd said with a smile, cutting Zamrug off. "He asked me to teach them about Rakana. That's all."

"Tch! Hey! Bring another beer!" Zamrug called out to the kitchen.

"That's what kind of party the Crimson Wings are," Lloyd said in annoyance, looking back at me. "They love alcohol, money, and violence, and they value glory and freedom above all else." Lloyd seemed to loathe their very existence. "In other words, they're your typical adventurer party."

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That night, when the city had gone to sleep, I was standing alone on the inn's roof. I had selected several of the dozens of hitogata floating around me, then put them back and repeated the process. After a few times, I scowled and let out a groan.

"What are you doing, Master Seika?" Yuki asked.

"I Ching Divination," I replied.



“Divination, huh? You don’t usually do I Ching. Aren’t you gonna use divining sticks?”

“Do you see any bamboo around here?”

“Good point.”

I didn’t know if bamboo or yarrow even grew in this world. The worlds shared many plants, so it wouldn’t have surprised me, but I doubted they would be found anywhere nearby. “Tools aren’t the core of divination. You can make do with whatever.”

Yuki giggled. “You said the same thing in your past life and ruined the reputation of an elderly diviner who’d been favored by the nobles.”

“I’m surprised you remember. That was just an ignorant novice digging his own grave and exposing his lack of knowledge.” *However, looking back, maybe my actions weren’t all that commendable. I wanted to teach him a lesson for pawning a suspicious cursed object off on a friend of mind, but there was probably a way to do that without making an enemy of him.*

“Anyway, why are you doing more divination? Is something worrying you?” Yuki asked, ignorant of my internal regret.

“Yeah, just a little.” After a moment of hesitation, I decided to ask Yuki. “Have you noticed it?”

“Noticed what?”

“The flow of energy in this area. There’s a dragon vein beneath us.” Dragon veins were channels of energy that flowed through the earth. Regions with dragon veins flourished. Crops bore fruit in abundance, lively people gathered, and it had a positive effect on the entire surrounding area. People weren’t the only ones who benefited from dragon veins—spirits did as well. Secluded dragon veins far from human settlements were often teeming with powerful ayakashi.

“H-Hmm…” Yuki mumbled. “A dragon vein? I do feel some kind of power. Is that what it is? It feels different from the ones in Japan.”

“The nature of its power is different, but there’s no doubt it’s a dragon vein.” The magical power the people of this world possessed was different from ki or cursed energy, and it was possible that the difference in the energy running through the earth was the cause. “This area is even more rife with power than Astilia was. It’s no wonder the city is thriving.”

“Does that mean there’s an even more powerful spirit than that dragon living here?”

“No, I doubt that. To start with, I don’t think this world has any monsters more powerful than dragons,” I explained. “In addition, there are far more monsters here than in Astilia thanks to the three large dungeons. Splitting that power between so many individuals diminishes its effect.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, you’re right,” Yuki said, satisfied with that explanation. “But in that case, the people of this land are letting it go to waste.”

“How so?”

“They should have built their city right on top of a dragon lair instead of the middle of nowhere. Then it would’ve thrived even more.”

Dragon lairs were locations where the energy from dragon veins gushed forth from the earth. As Yuki had said, dragon lairs were even more powerful than dragon veins. It seemed that even a kuda-gitsune with relatively little supernatural power like Yuki could tell Rakana wasn’t built on a dragon lair.

“I’m not saying they need a feng shui master or anything, but does this country not have any sorcerers versed in divination?” Yuki said with a scoff. “I thought this world was well-off. The humans here seem pretty aimless to me.”

“No, even if they had a master of feng shui, I don’t think there’s anything they could have done,” I answered, slightly surprised at what I’d just heard.

“Huh?”

“There aren’t any dragon lairs around here.”

“Huuuh?!” Yuki was bewildered. “R-Really? I thought for sure those three mountains the skinny human was talking about were dragon lairs.”

“I understand why you might’ve thought that, but judging from the flow of energy, they aren’t. The flow isn’t pure enough.”

“Then why are the spirits around here benefiting so much from the dragon veins?”

“I suspect it’s because the boss monsters serving as the dungeons’ cores have taken the place of dragon lairs, absorbing all that power.” Organizing my thoughts, I began my explanation. “The dungeons this world has are otherworldly spaces that

produce monsters and treasure, with a powerful monster, sorcerer, or magical item serving as the core. Naturally, these spaces can't produce something from nothing. They slowly drain the core's energy. Dungeons are said to disappear naturally, which I would assume is the result of the core running out of energy."

In order to create, compensation was necessary. That was a truth of the world which applied to all things. Granted, when it came to sorcery, the cost and the gain weren't always aligned.

"So, how powerful must a core be to sustain a dungeon? Think back on the dungeon beneath Lodonea. Although the rainbow naga that served as the boss monster seemed quite strong, all the monsters in the dungeon were weak and there was barely any treasure. That shows just how much power is required." Considering what I'd read about dungeons at the academy, my theory seemed to hold true. "Taking that into account, the scale of Rakana's dungeons doesn't make sense. They would have to be powered by monsters on the level of the strongest ryuu, or magic items equivalent to the sacred treasures."

"But clearly they do exist. How do you explain that?"

"The only explanation is that they're using the dragon vein's energy."

"Ah! Because the boss monsters are taking the place of the dragon lairs!"

"Exactly." I nodded at Yuki. "They're like local deities in our previous world. They would take root in one location, absorb the latent energy deep in the earth, and bring blessings and disasters to the surrounding area. I think this world has monsters capable of absorbing energy from dragon veins in a similar way."

"Hmm..."

"At some point in the past, monsters obtained power from the land, eventually becoming cores and creating dungeons in each of the mountain ranges. It's not the boss monsters themselves that sustain the dungeons, it's the inexhaustible energy being absorbed from the dragon vein. Probably."

"That's pretty noncommittal," Yuki grumbled. "But didn't that human say the cores weren't monsters? They were defeated in the past."

"Yeah, and I bet the dungeon was destroyed each time that happened," I replied. "Then a monster with similar powers became

the new core and reformed the dungeon. If a vacancy opens up, monsters from the other mountains probably move in, and if the conditions are met again, the same phenomenon occurs. At least, that's what seems likely to me."

"Seems likely? You really aren't confident."

"At the end of the day, it's all conjecture. But if nothing else, I'm certain there aren't any dragon lairs. That makes this the most likely hypothesis."

"If you say so. Still, wouldn't that mean the spirits reigning over the mountain ranges have power close to a high-ranking ryuu?"

"Like I said before, probably not. It was the same for local deities. Even a vengeful god capable of causing flash floods can be safely sealed by a competent sorcerer, provided the procedure isn't botched. The ability to absorb energy from dragon veins and raw strength are probably unrelated. If not, there's no way adventurers would have defeated the boss monsters in the past."

"That's true. I doubt there's anyone in this world capable of defeating a high-ranking ryuu. Anyway, this land sure is convenient, huh?" Yuki said, her voice taking on an annoyed tone. "It's home to spirits that provide inexhaustible wealth and barely pose a threat. Those weak humans can only act so full of themselves because they live in such a plentiful area."

"Hmm... Maybe so, but I actually think it'd be better if the boss was as strong as a ryuu."

"Why is that?" Yuki asked as I hesitated. "They wouldn't be able to handle raging storms being created on a whim like our old world."

"While that may be true, the monsters being weak has its own issues," I explained with a grim expression on my face. "If the boss monsters serving as the dragon lairs are defeated, the flow of the dragon vein will stagnate. And then..."

"And then?"

"I don't know."

"Huh?"

"I don't know what'll happen. I've never heard of a dragon lair being plugged up in our previous world. So I haven't the slightest clue what will result."

"Oh..." Yuki sounded baffled, but even I had things I didn't know.

“At the very least, if it’s only one of the dragon lairs, it shouldn’t be a problem since there are two more. Eventually, another monster will become the new dungeon boss and things will return to normal. However, if all three bosses were to be defeated at the same time, I really couldn’t say what might happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a massive catastrophe.”

“I see. So that’s why you’re doing this divination,” Yuki said confidently, before shifting to a more somber tone. “Still, don’t you think you’re worrying too much? There are three bosses. Even if they aren’t as powerful as a high-ranking ryuu, I’m sure they’re still plenty strong. There’s no need to be so anxious.”

“There are only two bosses at the moment.”

“Huh?!”

“The northern boss is already gone,” I said quietly. “You remember hearing about how monsters aren’t appearing around the northern mountains anymore, right? Instead, the difficulty of the dungeons in the eastern and southern mountains has changed. The signs are already showing—there’s an imbalance in the flow of energy.”

“H-How can that be? Did the humans in this area defeat it?” Yuki asked in confusion.

“Beats me,” I said, shrugging my shoulders. “That’s one possibility. It could also have been migratory like a dragon and just moved somewhere else. At this point, it doesn’t matter. The problem is that Lloyd is planning on taking down the eastern boss. If he’s successful, there’ll only be one boss left. We can’t afford to be optimistic right now.”

Depending on how things go, we may end up having to leave the area entirely. And we don’t have any idea where to go next in that situation. I don’t even know if we’ll be able to get Fiona’s help. That being the case, staying here and trying to manage the worst-case scenario is an option. The only issue with that is that I don’t know what the worst-case scenario is.

“Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions come to mind as possibilities, but I don’t think there are any volcanoes around here. Maybe it really will be the stampede Amyu mentioned.”

A monster stampede was a phenomenon where a massive number of monsters gathered together and attacked a city or village. I got the feeling that was the most likely scenario here in

Rakana.

"Umm..." Yuki said hesitantly. "Even if a disaster like that were to happen, wouldn't you be able to do something about it? You subdued floods and storms in your past life."

"I could, of course, but that would draw attention to my power."

Yuki didn't respond.

"I get the feeling you're thinking, 'He's saying that *now*?'" Yuki had a look that said she wanted to say something, but she remained silent. I continued with a sigh. "It's one thing when it's to save people I'm close to, but I'd rather not use my strength to save a city full of strangers. I was fortunate enough that Fiona was able to cover up what I did at the palace. I don't want to waste her efforts."

Despite my blunder, she really helped me out. I'll have to thank her. On top of that, I want to avoid doing anything that'll draw the attention of politicians. Dealing with a stampede covertly will be a lot harder than an earthquake or volcano. If it comes down to it, we'll just have to run away.

"I..." Yuki said timidly. "I think it's fine for you to live the same way you did in your past life."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Helping out complete strangers with your power, being surrounded by friends and disciples, and living a peaceful life... That's what I mean."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded, my tone unintentionally harsh. "I'm in this world right now because living that way was a failure."

"But..." After a few moments of hesitation, Yuki squeezed a few words out. "Yes, you're right."

I silently reached out and petted the ayakashi atop my head. *She might be frustrated with the situation I've been in since reincarnating. Still, there's nothing I can do about that. The world isn't so simple as to be founded solely on violence, nor is it so forgiving as to leave overwhelming force unchecked. To avoid making enemies of cunning statesmen, I need to practice some degree of caution.*

"We've gotten a little off topic, but that's the gist of it. I'm at a loss as to what to do next, so I figured I'd rely on divination."

"So, what were the results?" Yuki asked.

"Right. The results..." I muttered with a sullen expression,

looking at the floating hitogata. I'd tried adjusting the divination several times, but the results were always inconclusive. Even looking at different hexagrams, they barely changed. *I guess I'll just have to interpret them as best I can.* "It seems like things will work out as long as I do what I want... I think."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"It can also be interpreted as 'don't lie to yourself about your feelings,' or 'let your companions guide you.'"

"Th-That's kinda nice, actually. But is that really the issue we're facing right now? What question did you ask?"

"I just asked about my future course of action like normal. I'd love to know why I'm getting these philosophical answers back. That's just how divination is."

It was no future sight. Even I wasn't all-powerful.

Interlude: Holy Princess Fiona in the Imperial Palace

“I’m not all-powerful either,” Fiona muttered, head cradled in her hands and her elbows propped on a fancy desk.

The imperial palace sat in the center of the capital, Urdnesc. Fiona resided in one of several detached buildings reserved for important visitors on the palace grounds. That she was staying in a detached building instead of the palace itself was evidence she was still far removed from the struggle for the throne—a fact she knew well. Although she wielded considerably more power than she had as a child under house arrest in a remote region, her lineage kept her brothers from paying heed to her words, as she was not born to the emperor’s legal wife.

Nonetheless, that wasn’t what was bothering her at the moment. Alone in the study, the Holy Princess spoke aloud.

“For example, all the visions of the future I see are through my own eyes. Thus, I can only learn of distant events through letters or hearsay, limiting the information I can obtain.” Fiona continued as though speaking to someone, despite the room being empty. “In addition, knowing the future doesn’t mean I can change it. It’s like stepping around a puddle only to fall into a massive pit. No matter how many futures I see or how cautiously I try to proceed, things don’t always go as I intend. How could this happen?”

“What has you so upset?” A voice responding to Fiona echoed through the empty room. It was a deep voice that seemed to come from the floor. “You have been acting strangely since yesterday. All you have done today is complain. Is there an issue with your cover-up?”

“No, I managed to make do on that front,” Fiona answered. Despite the grumbling of her holy knights, Fiona had successfully managed to conceal the destruction of the imperial palace. However, now a separate problem had emerged. “A stampede may occur in Rakana—the adventurer city I sent Seika to,” she said quietly.

After a brief silence, the low voice responded. “What do you

mean by ‘may’? Is it not a future you saw?”

“It’s a rather ambiguous future. Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn’t.”

“Is it caused by the Demon Lord?”

“Certainly not. Seika would never do such a thing. That said, it does seem to be related to his presence. I never saw any futures like it before sending him there.”

“What a troublesome Demon Lord,” the low voice practically spat. “However, is that ambiguity not a good thing? Simply change the future as you always do.”

“You make it sound so easy. As I explained, things never go as planned.”

“Right…” The deep voice shrunk back. Fiona didn’t seem upset, but perhaps remembering when Fiona was younger and more temperamental, her highest-ranking holy knight remained cautious. “And things will not go well this time?”

“I’ve tried changing plans several times, but I’ve never found anything that always avoids the stampede. I suspect it’s because it’s too vague. For example, it would be like trying to find a way to prevent yourself from yawning the next day.”

“I do not understand,” her first holy knight replied calmly. “However, I do not think you need to worry. A horde of monsters will not pose a problem for that Demon Lord. He will survive even if he must defend other humans.”

“Of course. That isn’t what I’m worried about—it’s Seika, after all. He can deal with a stampede. He may have already seen the signs coming. It’s Seika, after all,” Fiona repeated, an odd pride coloring her voice.

“Then what is your concern?” the deep voice asked in exasperation.

Fiona’s mood immediately turned dour. “If a stampede occurs in Rakana, won’t it seem like I tried to have Seika killed?”

“Hrm…” The holy knight was at a loss for words. It certainly would seem that way if someone who could see the future sent you to a city where a disaster was about to occur.

“Seika’s going to hate me at this rate. He may burn down the entire empire.”

“D-Do not make such jokes!”

“That part was a joke, but this really is a crisis for me.”

“If you wish to earn his trust, why not send a letter and explain your situation honestly?”

“I can’t do that. I don’t have anywhere else for him to flee to, and that would also mean losing Rakana. On the other hand, if I were to ask him to subdue the stampede now, that would put him in a situation where it’s impossible for him to refuse, don’t you think?”

“Well…”

“I really didn’t see the stampede coming, but from Seika’s point of view, I’m sure it seems like I knew everything and kept quiet about it. Asking him to stop it would make him feel like he’s being used and breed distrust, making future dealings even more complicated. I’d like to avoid that as much as possible—both for Seika’s sake and the empire’s. What I said earlier may not end up being merely a joke.”

“H-Hrm… Then what will you do?”

“I’m going to keep trying until the very last minute. If that doesn’t work, then I suppose all I can do is pray.”

“For a future where the stampede does not occur?”

“For a future where Seika doesn’t hate me.” Fiona closed her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her chest. She looked exactly like a priestess praying at a church. “Please have faith in me, Seika. I never intended for this to happen.”



Chapter 2

Act 1

We were already two months into our lives as adventurers that had begun under adverse conditions.

“It’s so hooot!” Amyu groaned, letting herself fall onto the table. We were sitting in a corner of the guild’s attached tavern. “It’s not even summer yet. Why’s it so hot?”

“Y-Yeah. I wonder what it’ll be like next month,” Yifa agreed feebly as she fanned herself.

Mabel was drinking her fruit juice with her normal expression, though she seemed even less talkative than usual. She was just as unhappy with the heat as the others.

As Amyu had said, it wasn’t even summer yet and Rakana was already suffering from a lengthy heat wave. Having lost the urge to go dungeon diving, we’d started wasting our afternoons at the guild like this. Glancing around, I saw other adventurers all doing the same thing.

“It’s because Rakana’s in a basin between mountains,” I said, sipping fruit juice that smelled faintly of citrus. “The air’s stagnant here. Not much to be done.”

“Why are you so nonchalant about it?” Amyu demanded with a glare.

“At least it isn’t humid. It could be worse.” It was an improvement over Japan’s summers. As long as we stayed out of direct sunlight, it wasn’t unbearable.

“Seriously? Was it that hot in your territory?” Amyu asked incredulously.

“Not at all,” Yifa answered faintly. “I don’t get his standards.”

“Heat doesn’t bother me that much,” I said, feeling forced to offer an excuse. “But I wouldn’t be thrilled if it started raining and made it humid. Actually…” A thought suddenly occurred to me. “Can’t you two use water magic?”

“Huh? Y-Yeah,” Yifa answered.

“What of it?” Amyu asked.

“Why not just make some ice and cool the room down?” The magic taught at the academy had been mostly theory, with the practical applications being limited to offensive magic and maybe healing if we were lucky. While handy cursed objects known as magic items were occasionally used, I rarely saw spells themselves in daily life. I would have expected it to be more widespread in a world with so many sorcerers.

“When it’s this hot, a small amount of ice is gonna melt immediately,” Amyu replied in annoyance. “I’d use up all my magic and collapse before the air even cooled. If you’re gonna exhaust yourself, you might as well just use a fan.”

“I see. Is it the same for you, Yifa?” I asked.

“Yeah. The elementals stop listening to me if I ask too much of them. I don’t think I could do it either,” she replied.

That makes sense. Even elementals don’t have unlimited magical power.

“I think they did something like that at the company,” Mabel interjected. “I heard they would freeze raw fish so they could transport it without it spoiling.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about!”

“But they always used at least two mages, so it was apparently pretty expensive. It was more the kind of thing a rich noble would do for fun.”

“Aww… It’s just not practical, huh? Anyway, the Lugrock company must have been more large-scale than I thought.” It didn’t seem that this world had any tradition of using magic in daily life or industry. It felt like a waste that its only uses were to exterminate monsters and give more power to the nobility, but it must have been difficult to apply in other ways. *Guess I’ll just have to suck it up.* “From what I’ve heard, it rarely gets this hot, even in the middle of the summer. It should cool off in a few days.”

“But it’s hot *now*,” Amyu complained.

“Fine,” I sighed. I didn’t want anyone’s health to deteriorate. I pulled out a few hitogata from my pocket and floated them in the air. With a quick hand sign, yin ki soon began taking heat from the surrounding area, cooling it off.

“Huh? It’s cold?!” Amyu shouted in shock.

“Wah! Seika, did you do this?!” Yifa asked.

“Wow,” said Mabel.

“I’m just cooling it off a little. Don’t rely on this too much or your body will grow weak,” I warned in response to their cheers.

“Ah hah hah! You’re the best!”

“Thanks, Seika! You really are amazing!”

“Can I go to sleep here?”

The girls who had been so languid until a moment ago made a complete reversal and were suddenly full of energy.

“My, you all seem happy. Did something—”

A guild employee came over, seemingly having heard the fuss the girls were making. She was the young receptionist who had been at the counter when we’d first gone to sell our materials. I’d gotten acquainted with her throughout our discussion regarding compensation, so I knew her name was Airia.

“H-Huuuh?!” she exclaimed. “Why’s it so cool over here?!” Airia put her hand over her mouth in shock as she approached the table.

“Uh, well…”

“Seika’s cooling it down,” Amyu said.

“Is he now?” Airia sighed. “He really has some incredible spells.” She showed no sign of leaving the table.

Weren’t you going somewhere?

“Airia? What are you doing over there?” Another guild worker asked, noticing her standing in an unusual location. It was the appraiser who had split the deer’s shell with a hammer and chisel. His name was Wallace.

“Wallace, come over here!” Airia shouted.

“Why are you calling him over?!” I cried out.

“What is it? Wh-Whoa, it’s cold!” Wallace was just as shocked as Airia.

“Isn’t it incredible?” Airia asked. “Seika’s doing it, apparently.”

“Really? Man, I wish you worked at the guild,” said Wallace.

“You shouldn’t recruit someone because of a single trick,” I replied. Like Airia, Wallace seemed glued to the spot. *Don’t you guys have anything better to do?*

“Shut up. Why’re you guys so— Whoa, it’s cold!”

“It’s too hot for this crap— Wait, it’s cold?!”

“What the—?! It’s cold!”

A group of familiar adventurers who had been wearily seated at a nearby table cried out in surprise as they got close. The three-man party consisted of Gadol, Nido, and Ricken, who all made similar facial expressions, perhaps because their personalities were so alike.

"Huh?"

"What do you mean it's cold?"

More adventurers and guild employees came one after another and our table was soon surrounded by a throng of people.

"Go away! You're making it too hot!" I finally shouted without thinking. *They're like cats flocking to the shade.*

"Then just make it colder."

"Yeah, you should just do that."

"Heh heh, want me to bring you a drink?"

"Who even are you people?" I asked. At some point, complete strangers had joined the crowd, acting like we were friends. *Adventurers are so overly familiar. Actually, I feel like my friends in my past life were the same way. Am I the problem?*

"It's cold over here!" Suddenly, I heard a high-pitched child's voice that didn't fit the guild's atmosphere. The adventurers, not used to dealing with children, turned toward the source with a start.

The child had fair skin and platinum hair cut into a bob. She seemed to be around five or six, and her features were refined and elegant. Her ears were slightly pointed—perhaps she was a half elf.

"Wah! Y-You're so cute! What are you doing here, little girl? Are you alone?" Yifa asked, crouching down in front of the child.

"I'm a boy! Eik!" he shouted deeper into the guild.

"I hear you, I hear you. Go play over there for a little bit," a man called back from the stairs. It was another familiar face—Eik, a merchant who supplied goods to the guild.

Mabel tilted her head and called out to him. "Eik, is he your son?"

"Is your wife an elf?" Amyu asked. "Nice going."

"Ha ha, unfortunately, the elf is my younger sister's husband. I'm looking after my nephew right now," said Eik.

"Then hurry up and get him. We're full over here," Amyu replied.

"Full? I'm not sure what you're talking about, but would you

mind watching him? I'm in the middle of some business."

"Are you seriously leaving your precious nephew in the hands of some adventurers?"

"His name's Tio. Thanks," Eik said, heading back up the stairs after forcing his nephew on the reluctant Amyu.

"Are you a swordswoman?" Tio asked, looking at Amyu's spellblade.

"What of it?"

"Fight me!"

"Huh?"

"I'm a swordsman too! I never lose to my friends anymore. Let's have a match outside!" Tio tugged on Amyu's sleeve and she shot him an annoyed look.

"What's the harm? You should play with him," I said. I couldn't help myself.

"Seriously? No way, not in this heat. I'm not leaving this spot!"

"Unfortunately, I'm gonna be out of magic soon," I said exaggeratedly, withdrawing my hitogata. Hot air immediately enveloped us, drawing complaints from the crowd that I promptly ignored.

"There's no way that's true!"

"It won't be good for you to get too used to this. You can play with the kid for a bit," I said, handing them two wooden rods.

"Where'd you even get these?"

"C'mon, let's go!" Tio shouted.

"Ugh, fine! But in exchange, we're all meeting up in your room tonight, Seika. I haven't been able to sleep well lately," Amyu said.

"Wait, hold on—" I protested.

"Let's see what you've got, kid!"

"Let's go, Tio! It's hot, so wear a hat," Yifa said.

"Okay!"

"I'll take you on if you beat Amyu," Mabel added.

"He's not gonna beat me!"

Amyu and the others loudly left the building. Eventually, the adventurers and guild employees realized it was getting hot and began to disperse as well. I could see the girls and the half-elf child through a window a little way off from my table and gulped down my now lukewarm fruit juice. It gave me an oddly nostalgic feeling.

“This seat open?” A large man suddenly sat down across from me at the table, blocking my view. Putting his feet up on the table, he fanned his chest.

“This is a bar, you know? You should order a drink, Zamrug,” I said, watching him. The leader of Rakana’s top party, the Crimson Wings, shot me an irritated look.

“Don’t need to. You know how much money I’ve blown here already? They ain’t gonna complain.” He was probably right. While they clearly weren’t intended for adventuring, his clothes were high-quality. Standing at the top of Rakana’s adventurers likely meant he had no shortage of money.

“So, what do you want with me? It’s hot today, so I’d prefer to be left alone.”

Zamrug took his feet off the table and leaned forward, looking me in the eyes. “You got guts talkin’ to me like that.” I silently returned his gaze, and Zamrug eventually sat back in his seat. “Ha, no wonder you’re the old man’s guest.”

“Old man? Oh, you mean the mayor.” Cyrus had mentioned that he was called all sorts of things. “Anyway, can you get to the point?”

“You’re doin’ pretty well for a newcomer, Seika Lamprogue,” Zamrug said, completely ignoring my request to get on with it. “When I heard some noble’s brat showed up with a bunch of girls in tow, I made a bet with my party that you’d be dead in a few days flat. Yet not only are ya still alive, but you’re takin’ on mid-level dungeons now. I lost a lotta money ’cause of you.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. We’ve had some pretty good luck.”

“Luck? Nah, you’re the real deal.” Zamrug deliberately paused, then changed the subject. “I bet Lloyd invited you to his party, didn’t he?”

“Yes. But we turned him down.”

“Why?”

“No real reason. I just don’t agree with his way of thinking.”

“Ha! That’s what I like to hear!” Zamrug said loudly.

“I take it you’re the same?” I asked, narrowing my eyes.

“Damn right I am,” the large man scoffed. “A large-scale party? Cooperation? What the hell does he take adventurers for? He doesn’t get what adventurin’ is all about.”

“I don’t really follow. What *is* adventuring all about?”

“Freedom,” Zamrug declared. For all his bluster, that word alone sounded genuine. “You know what freedom is? It’s not lettin’ anyone control you—which means not relyin’ on anyone else’s help. Bein’ free means you can be true to your desires. It means you gotta hone your skills to stay alive. Rakana grew ’cause of that desire and that longing to live. The weak die and the strong survive. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that. That need for strength is the reason this city remains free. If his party’s pussy rules spread, this city’ll lose that drive. Then the empire’s gonna swallow Rakana up. I can’t let a party like that take the number one spot here. This city’s adventurers need a strong party to look up to. Like the one the old man used to lead—”

“Although I don’t agree with Lloyd, your way of thinking isn’t any different,” I interjected, fed up with how long he was going on.

“Huh?”

“How are adventurers free?”

“Excuse me?”

“Adventurers wind up in this city because they have nowhere else to go. They have no money, no connections, no information, and they blindly venture into dungeons just to survive. Where’s the freedom in that? Isn’t that practically the same as being bound by your limbs and forced into the situation? Strength is all but worthless under those circumstances. Your survival is determined by plain luck. That’s why you and the mayor have the positions you do—not because you’re strong, but because you’re lucky.”

“You little…”

“That said, I understand why you don’t like Lloyd now.” The corners of my lips curved into a smirk. “It’s because you’re jealous that the mayor you respect so much trusts him more than you, isn’t it?” I remembered when Cyrus had called Lloyd into our meeting. It had seemed like the mayor regularly relied on Lloyd.

Zamrug’s face had gone expressionless. “Are you mocking me?” Reputation was everything to an adventurer—especially the man who stood at the apex of all the adventurers in Rakana. He couldn’t let an insult like that slide.

“Was I? You’re welcome to interpret it however you like.” I didn’t particularly care if we came to blows, but he had clearly come to me for a reason. It didn’t feel right to drive him off without hearing what that reason was. Reluctantly, I said a few more words to

prevent things from spiraling out of control. “Lloyd’s just helped me out a few times is all.”

“You don’t need to feel like you owe him nothin’.” It seemed like Zamrug had taken my statement as me standing up for Lloyd. Finally, he got to the point. “Join my party, Seika Lamprogue.”

“Really? You’re inviting me too?” I was disappointed that was all he wanted. “You want the four of us to join the Crimson Wings?”

“No, just you. The others’ll just get in the way. But I’ll compensate you. Even splitting it with your party, it’ll be more than you’re making now.”

“I see you hold me in quite high regard. I regret to inform you I’m just a simple porter and healer.”

“Don’t gimme that crap. You’re from the Lamprogue family and you’re leadin’ those girls around. No way you’re just support.”

“True, I can use a little magic as well. Nonetheless, I’m going to have to decline. My companions told me they don’t want to be on the receiving end of charity all the time, but I’m still not comfortable letting them adventure all on their own.”

“What are you, their dad?” Zamrug asked in annoyance. “All right—one time. Come with us one time and I’ll pay you as much as you want.”

“Just once? Where are you planning on going?”

“To beat the boss in the southern mountains.”

After a lengthy silence, I finally opened my mouth to speak. “Is that because Lloyd is going to defeat the eastern boss?”

“Yeah. We can’t let him get all the glory for beatin’ a boss. This city’s gonna rot if the Grove Alliance takes the top spot and bends everyone to their ideals. As Rakana’s number one party, we can’t allow that. With a small group of elites, the terrain in the southern mountains will be easier, and he’s got no choice but to put his plan on hold in this heat. That said, even my party would have a tough time takin’ down a boss with just the five of us, which is why I’m recruitin’ some help. Join us, Seika Lamprogue.”

I couldn’t help but make a bitter expression. *They’re trying to beat a boss too?* Sighing, I shook my head without hesitation. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to decli—” I cut myself off. Glancing at Zamrug, I remained silent for a moment and reconsidered. “Actually, sure.” I nodded, a thin smile on my face. “Let’s take down the southern boss.”

◆◆◆

As I was leaving the guild and returning to my room, Yuki poked her head out of my hair. “Umm, Master Seika? Is that smart?” she asked with a perplexed tone. “What happened to all that talk about the dragon vein?”

“Of course it’s not smart. I’m not taking down the boss.”

“Huh?”

“That Zamrug guy is probably pretty strong. If the allies he gathers are on the same level, they might actually be able to beat the boss. I was thinking about just ignoring Lloyd, but he’s trouble.”

“Umm, then why did you…”

“Because I’m going to get in their way while pretending to cooperate. This situation is too dangerous for me to not get involved.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea! How are you gonna do it?”

“Just wait and see. I have an idea.”

“If it’s something you came up with, I’m sure it’s a good one!” Yuki said happily.

◆◆◆

A few hours later, Amyu and the others really did come charging into my room.

“Seika, please! Cool us off!” After immediately collapsing on my bed, Amyu rolled around and scowled at me.

“Go away.”

“Don’t be like that! C’mon, you guys help me!” At Amyu’s urging, Yifa and Mabel backed her up.

“Won’t you do it, Seika?” Yifa pleaded.

“Urgh…” I groaned.

“I’ll do anything,” said Mabel.

“D-Don’t throw that out there so lightly.”

“The air circulation in our room sucks, so it’s super hot. I haven’t been able to sleep lately. C’mon, please?” Amyu said while closing one eye.

After a brief silence, I let out a long sigh. “Fine.”

“Woo-hoo! Thanks, Seika!” Amyu cheered.

“You’re so soft on them, Master Seika,” Yuki whispered in my hair. I had nothing to say for myself. Before long I had floated a few hitogata in the air, sucking the heat out of the room. Reenergized, the girls began frolicking.

“Ah ha ha! This is the best! I bet even nobles don’t get this!” Amyu said happily.

“Ahh… Isn’t it nice, Mabel?” Yifa asked.

“Yeah. I’m glad to be alive.”

Great.

"I'm gonna sleep here tonight!" Amyu said.

"Are all three of you sleeping on that bed?" I asked. "It's meant for one person."

"It's big, so we'll fit if we squish together. Mabel, come lie over here," Amyu ordered. "How is it?"

"I think it'll work," Mabel replied.

"Yifa, you get on this side."

"O-Okay."

The three of them looked ready to go to sleep.

"I think I'll finally be able to get a good night's rest," Amyu said.

"Don't get rid of the covers. I'm gonna stop the spell when it gets late. Getting chills while you're asleep isn't good for you," I said.

"All right, all right. You sound like an old man sometimes."

"Old man?!"

Before I even got rid of the light, I could already hear deep breathing coming from the bed. *Maybe they really were short on sleep, or maybe playing with that child during the day tired them out. Either way, I guess spoiling them one night won't hurt.*

"Actually, where am I supposed to sleep?" I said to no one in particular, looking at the already full bed at a loss. *Oh well. I already let it happen, so it's too late now.* Looking for a coat or something to lay out on the floor, I started searching through my bags. Compared to my early childhood in my past life or my journey across the mainland, that would be more than enough.

"Sorry, Seika," Yifa said apologetically, looking at me from the bed. "I guess we took your bed."

"You're still awake? There's no 'I guess.' That's exactly what you did." *You're a bunch of bed thieves.*

"Should I leave? I'll be fine in the other room."

"No need for that. Besides, Amyu would hit me when she woke up," I said with an awkward smile.

"Are you sure? But…"

"It's fine. Go to sleep."

"Okay." Yifa pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Yifa."

"What is it?"

"Is life hard for you right now?"

Yifa blinked two or three times, then cheerfully answered my question. “No, I’m having a lot of fun. I’m helping everyone out with my own strength. I was a little scared at first, but this city is full of nice people. Eik gave us some fruit today as thanks.”

“All right.” I was able to give a genuine smile. “I’m glad.”

Act 2

A few days later, with summer right around the corner and the heat wave finally abating, I was climbing the southern mountains.

“Keep up! Don’t break formation! Scouts, don’t go too far out! Make sure you stay close enough that you can make it back!” Zamrug barked orders next to me. His voice was so loud it felt like it could be heard from anywhere on the mountain.

Twenty-one adventurers in total followed his commands and repaired the formation. Our goal was to defeat the southern boss. After agreeing to his proposal that day at the guild tavern, I was ascending the mountain with this makeshift party now that the heat had subsided.

Of course, I had discussed everything with Amyu and the others. Though surprised, they hadn’t seemed particularly worried despite the fact that I was going to fight a boss. I wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about that—just what did they think of me now? If anything, they’d seem to be feeling bored and left out. Nonetheless, this trip was too dangerous for them to come along. They would just have to bear with it.

“Don’t let anything unusual slip by! Report back to me the moment any obstacles pop up!” Zamrug shouted. His absurdly loud voice and my own boredom prompted me to ask him a question.

“Isn’t shouting like that going to attract monsters? Exhausting the party before we even get to the boss doesn’t seem smart.”

“Huh?” Hefting his battle-axe on his shoulder, Zamrug looked down at me with a scowl. “Amateur. When you’ve got this many people, it’s gonna attract monsters no matter how loud you are. Fallin’ outta formation’s the bigger problem.”

“I see.” He was the expert. If nothing else, his actions matched his words. He’d been shouting similar orders since we first began our climb. While it seemed pointless at first glance, it was probably difficult for such a hastily made party to coordinate, so perhaps it was necessary. In addition, he always kept his eyes on the bigger picture and possessed the prudence to stop our advance

immediately when any issues arose. Despite his rough appearance and manner of speaking, Zamrug was actually quite cautious.

The group for this operation included two full parties in addition to Zamrug's Crimson Wings, and their leaders had hashed out all the details to a meticulous degree before departing. The southern mountain range's terrain seemed to be thoroughly ingrained in their minds, and they had even gone so far as to inspect their companions' equipment personally.

Of our party's twenty-one members, eight of them were assigned to scouting duty. They were currently spread out in all directions, maintaining vigilance. They were inferior to swordsmen and mages in terms of combat strength, so skilled scouts and thieves had been hired solely to ensure the rest of the group's safety along the way.

No one had ever seen the southern boss for themselves, and there were so many rumors, we didn't even know what kind of monster it was. Yet even taking that into account, it was an abnormal amount of caution. Maybe that was precisely why Zamrug's party had made it to the top.

"Tch, looks like a weakling's gettin' in the way. Everyone stop and get ready!" Seeing that one of the scouts had returned and ran over to one of the party leaders, Zamrug immediately shouted.

Before long, an orc nearly twice the size of a human emerged from the trees. It had dark, black skin and an oversized frame—it appeared to be a superior variant of orc known as high orcs. Looking down at us, the high orc suddenly swung its club. The attack seemed strong enough to fell even the largest of trees.

However, it was unceremoniously repelled by an elegant female knight in the vanguard holding a shield. The high orc stumbled after its attack was deflected, before being pelted by magic and arrows from the back line. Breathing its last, it fell to the ground with a loud thud.

"All right, get movin'! Forget the materials! The reward'll more than make up for it!"

The group resumed its march, walking around the orc's corpse. It seemed like a fairly strong monster to me, but it didn't look like anybody else thought much of it. Zamrug had assembled quite the competent band of adventurers. No one showed any interest in the high orc's corpse, which I had to assume was worth a good bit

of money.

"You're pretty serious. We could have at least collected its magic stone," I said.

"It's a waste of time and effort if the boss kills us."

"That's fair. By the way, we've been leaving all the fighting to the two parties in front of us. We haven't done anything ourselves. Isn't that going to provoke some animosity?"

"I'm the one who hired 'em. You got a problem? Dealin' with the weaklings on the way there is their job. My party's gonna be the main one handling the boss. That's what we agreed on and what they're gettin' paid for, so they ain't gonna complain."

"I see." Knowing Zamrug, he'd probably laid out the terms thoroughly when he'd recruited them. It didn't seem like I could count on it causing any strife and making us turn back.

"Besides, this is nothin' to them. They could march for three days straight, fightin' monsters the whole time," Zamrug added, oblivious to my ulterior motive.

"In that case, I think I would've preferred their role."

"Hmph, don't be stupid. You think I went outta my way to recruit you just to waste you on some weaklings? You're fightin' the boss. I dunno what you're capable of, but if it comes down to it, I expect you to show your worth."

Zamrug seemed to rate me quite highly. Granted, given our party's activities and the fact that I had released a monster inside the guild, he might have had an idea of what I was capable of. That said, in my past life, there had been powerful warriors who'd been wary of me from our very first meeting. It was possible he had a similarly uncanny intuition.

I sighed internally. *This isn't working. We're almost at the summit. I can't expect anything to make us turn around naturally at this point, so I'll have to make a move.* I sent an invisible hitogata far ahead of us, then made a quick hand sign with one hand.

Summoning: Nurikabe. After a short while, several of the scouts returned. Seeing their grim expressions, Zamrug stopped the party's advance.

"What happened?!" he demanded.

"Th-There's a wall..."

"A wall?"

"There's a wall in the forest! We can't pass it!"

“Huh? That’s ridiculous! Tch, tell all the scouts to return. We’ll advance at half pace—and draw your weapons. Proceed with caution,” Zamrug said, his vigilance evident. By calling back the scouts at the first sign of any abnormalities, he both confirmed their safety and reinforced the combat strength of the main group. Although it slowed us down, it was the right call when faced with an unknown foe. Of course, it wasn’t actually an unknown foe.

Finally, it came into view.

“What the…” Zamrug mumbled in amazement, looking up with the rest of his party.

It was a massive wall that stretched all the way up to the top of the tree line. The unassuming white plaster wall stretched endlessly in either direction. While it was clearly out of place in the forest, it didn’t seem like something that could have been man-made. At the very least, it would prove difficult to get past.

“Wh-What should we do, leader?”

“Tch. Everyone, back away from the wall. Don’t do nothin’ unless ordered.” Zamrug swung his battle-axe at the wall. Although it made a dull thud, the wall was completely unharmed. Zamrug tried a few more times, but the result was the same. “Magic. Then arrows. Use whatever you got.”

Fireballs and arrows immediately pelted the wall. However, the fire left no burns, and the arrows bounced off harmlessly. Soon, the back line finished their attack and silence fell over the party.

“Well, this is a problem. It doesn’t look like we can keep going,” I said, feigning ignorance. It wasn’t a problem for me—it was exactly what I wanted.

Nurikabe were wall-like ayakashi that blocked the paths of passing humans. If you tried to go over or around one, it would extend endlessly in that direction. Their true nature was something akin to illusions utilizing supernatural power; thus, physical attacks were ineffective. While they didn’t actually cause any harm, it was nearly impossible to force your way through a nurikabe, making them extremely irritating ayakashi. There were a few ways to get past them, but they weren’t methods Zamrug and the others would be able to come up with on the spot.

“Umm, Master Seika, was using a nurikabe your genius idea?” Yuki whispered inside my hair. She sounded disappointed.

Yeah, it was. Sorry if it's too straightforward for you. Who cares as long as it lets me achieve my goal?

Ignoring Yuki, I continued pretending to be clueless. "Maybe it's the boss monster's power? Either way, this is an unforeseen complication. We should turn back and—"

Suddenly, I felt a large flow of energy. Something was flying from the summit toward us at incredible speed. It was an actual unforeseen complication. I immediately panicked. "Ah, uhh…"

"Tch, you're right. I don't know what this thing is, but we don't have a contingency for it, so we should give up for now. Sorry, everyone. I shoulda done more research. It'd be dangerous to keep tryin' to force our way through, so let's head back while we still—"

Before Zamrug could finish speaking, a large shadow appeared overhead. Everyone looked up and saw what appeared to be a winged lizard flying above us. However, it wasn't a dragon. It had wings in place of its forelegs, making its manner of flight closer to that of a bird. In this world, monsters that were similar to dragons were known as dragonkin. It was one such species—a wyvern.

While powerful, wyverns generally weren't particularly feared. Even the imperial military killed them on occasion, and they were no specialists. This one was nearly as large as an adult dragon, and the tattered edges of its wing membranes and vine-like plants hanging from its body attested to its age.

"I-It's an ancient wyvern!" someone shouted. "What my grandpa said was true!"

My expression went stiff. This was completely outside my expectations. I hadn't sensed that it had moved until it was too late. I never would have guessed the boss was capable of flight. *Th-This is bad…*

As I panicked, Zamrug quickly came to his senses and barked orders to the group. "Everyone, prepare for battle. Ain't no doubt about it, that's the boss! Ancient wyverns breathe fire! Don't gather up all in one place!"

Just as Zamrug gave his warning, the wyvern bearing down on us opened its maw, the interior glowing red. A moment later, scarlet flames poured out. Rather than a steady stream of fire like a dragon's breath, it launched a fireball similar to a magic spell.

The fireball abruptly vanished above the heads of fleeing

adventurers. After checking that the fire hadn't spread to any trees, I scattered the hitogata that had served as the focal point of the barrier. It wasn't particularly threatening compared to a dragon, but I was still at a loss as to what I should do next. The ancient wyvern was clearly aiming right at me.

What had caused the dragonkin lurking deep in the forest to stir? Was it because I had summoned the nurikabe, or was it because there were so many people encroaching on its territory? At this point, it didn't matter. I needed to get it to retreat to the other side of the wall. As the wyvern descended to attack me directly, I floated a single hitogata in the air.

Phase of fire, earth, and metal: Heaven-Shaking Light. A light with the power of a small sun burst in midair. Everyone shouted in unison and covered their eyes. Heaven-Shaking Light was a spell that ignited a mixture of black powder and powdered metal, creating a blinding light and deafening explosion. The intense light was generated by the rapid combustion of magnesium powder. Although it was disorienting enough to make standing difficult at close range, it possessed very little force, making it nonlethal.

That should be enough even to make a wyvern flinch. A few more of those and it'll fly back to its territory... Or so I thought. I stopped covering my eyes with my arm, and my jaw dropped. "Huh? Crap!"

The ancient wyvern was falling, its wings flapping limply. A single Heaven-Shaking Light had been enough to knock it unconscious.

It's so weak! People had defeated them in the past, so I hadn't expected the bosses to be all that strong, but I certainly hadn't expected it to be so pathetic. And to make matters worse, it was falling on our side of the wall. *I-I messed up... Wait, Heaven-Shaking Light should've had the same effect on everyone here. If I can just knock it to the other side before it hits the ground—*

I caught sight of a single figure from our party still moving—a large man wielding a battle-axe. It was none other than the group's leader, Zamrug. His eyes were squinted as though his vision hadn't fully returned, but his movements were swift and he was sprinting right for the location the wyvern was going to crash. He lowered his axe and got ready to swing.

"Raaaaaah!" Swinging his battle-axe upward, Zamrug severed

the falling wyvern's head in one blow.

"Huuuh?!" I couldn't help but shout. As I had feared, the energy I felt immediately left the forest like a light that had been extinguished.

His momentum too much to control, Zamrug crashed into the now headless wyvern's wings, doing a somersault and falling on his back. He didn't move.

"L-Leader?"

"Zamrug? H-Hey, are you all right?"

A few of the adventurers who could move nervously called out to Zamrug. Pushing himself up, the large man slowly rose to his feet. His left foot might have gotten injured when he fell, as he was dragging it as he approached the head of the wyvern he had felled. Then he planted his battle-axe in the ground next to him, the edge covered in dirt and blood.

"Who beat the boss?"

"Huh?"

"Who beat the boss?! Say it!"

"Z-Zamrug."

"You did, leader..."

"No. It was all of us. We beat it together. I beat the boss because you were all with me. Everyone here brought it down."

"W-We..."

"We beat the southern boss?"

"That's right. We defeated the boss! We conquered the southern dungeon! Make some noise!"

"Y-Yeeeaaah!"

"Leader!"

"Zamrug! Zamrug!"

I stood alone and dumbfounded as everyone cheered. *H-How did things turn out this way?*

"We're celebratin' once we get back! I'll treat you to enough drinks to empty every barrel at the tavern! Don't let your guards down 'til we get outta the forest!"

Another cheer roared through the party. I was the only one who wasn't happy.

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Just as Zamrug had declared, the day naturally transitioned into a party. While disassembling and transporting a boss monster of that size would ordinarily have taken more than a full day, even with several people, that wasn't the case when I could simply store the entire corpse in another plane. Zamrug had apparently heard rumors of my unlimited-capacity item box and had invited me to join with the return trip in mind. He really was a meticulous guy.

As a result, I was now in the guild tavern alongside the other members of the group. Since we had earned so much money, some of them had suggested heading to a nicer spot, but the guild had the biggest bar in Rakana and Zamrug didn't want to bother other people with our large group, so he shot the idea down.

I was starting to wonder if he was actually a timid person deep down. Maybe he was just playing the part of the rough and rowdy adventurer.

"Don't hold back! Drink all you want! Hey, we need some more booze! Keep it comin'!"

"Woo-hoo! Leader!"

"A toast to Zamrug! The dragonkin slayer!"

They sure are loud. I was drinking alone at a table a little bit removed from all the commotion. *How did it come to this?* The ancient wyvern seemed to have truly been the boss. As expected, there had been a drastic decrease in monsters during our descent from the mountain. Just like the one beneath Lodonea, when the dungeon lost its core, it lost its power as well.

Though monsters were similar to animals, they were in fact a type of spirit. Monsters that depended on the dungeon's power probably died when the boss was defeated, leaving only naturally born monsters. The boss had indeed been serving as the dungeon's core.

It proved my theory correct—which meant we were in a terrible situation. Now the only boss monster left serving as a dragon lair was the one in the eastern mountains. *Hopefully nothing happens, but I wouldn't bet on it...*

"Hey!" I suddenly heard the high-pitched voice of a child next to me amid all the excitement. I looked over and saw a half elf who looked to be five or six years old. It was Eik's nephew, Tio, who I'd met the other day. He was standing in the corner of the tavern

with me, wearing an expression of pure nonchalance. I had no idea why he was here, but I just smiled at him.

"What is it, kid?"

"Here," he said, handing me a bottle.

Confused, I accepted it. There appeared to be candy inside. Although there wasn't a lot, it appeared to be a luxury variety. "What's this?" I asked Tio.

"A present."

"Huh?"

"Oh, that's where you were." Rakana's wholesale dealer, Eik, pushed through the crowd of people.

"Uncle! You're so slow!" Tio shouted cheerfully.

"You went and disappeared on me," Eik said with a troubled expression, ruffling Tio's hair. Then he turned to me. "I hear you beat the southern boss, Lamprogue. I had a feeling you'd be able to pull it off."

I sighed.

"That's to celebrate your achievement. And thanks for the other day."

"The other day?"

"When you played with Tio."

"That was Amyu and the others. I didn't do anything."

"Is that so? Then share them with those girls," Eik said, his hand still on Tio's head. "This one's parents are both adventurers. They often stay in dungeons overnight, so I get stuck watching him. Unfortunately, I've got my own job to worry about, so I can't pay too much attention to him. And to make matters worse, he takes after my sister and gets into fights a lot. Maybe he stands out because of his appearance. Would you mind playing with him again sometime?"

"Sure, I guess."

"I appreciate it."

"Tell Amyu I want another match!"

I looked down at Tio and chuckled. "I'll let her know." I watched the two of them go, then popped one of the candies in my mouth. As one would expect of an expensive candy, it was sweet. The flavor was even higher-quality than the candies I'd once had in India. I drank some of my beer. *It doesn't really go well with alcohol. Figures.*

“Gloomy guy, aren’tcha? What’re you doin’ drinkin’ alone?” Zamrug suddenly plopped down in a nearby chair.

I closed the small bottle and cast him a sidelong glance. “Your injury seems to be doing well. But you should probably refrain from drinking too much.”

“You call this an injury? Booze tastes best on the night of a victory. Can’t call yourself an adventurer if ya don’t drink,” he said, taking a swig.

Zamrug had broken his foot in the fight against the boss and was the only one to have been injured. It had already been treated by a priest’s healing magic, but there was no way he’d made a full recovery. He was likely just enduring it out of pride.

“Anyway, I gotta say, I didn’t expect ya to know light magic that powerful. I’ve never heard of anything like it—or that barrier you used. That some kind of Lamprogue family secret? You don’t gotta tell me, but I knew I was right about you. You’re the one who contributed the most in that fight.”

I didn’t respond.

“Which reminds me, I’ve heard you’re a pretty heavy drinker. Wanna have a little competition?”

“You sure are carefree.”

“Huh?”

“I’m sure you noticed it too. The southern mountain is dead. That boss monster was the core. All the riches Rakana gets from the dungeon are going to take a hit. That’s going to cause some hardship for a lot of adventurers.”

“Ha, I ain’t worried,” Zamrug said, taking another swig from his cup. “The boss monsters have been beaten before. They say the monsters temporarily decreased just like now, but things were back to normal in less than a year. Happens with every mountain. This time’s no different.”

Zamrug continued as though he’d fully expected my concern. “And there are plenty of ways to make money on a mountain when the monsters are gone. You can venture into areas that were too dangerous before and mine valuable ores or gather all the rare herbs you want. You can make detailed maps for when the dungeon revives. I bet some of the smarter guys are already gettin’ to work. In times like these, greed is a strength. Then, once the dungeon comes back, the city’ll be even stronger. That said,

there are some guys out there who ain't good for nothin' but fightin'. Guess the guild could just hand out food or somethin' for a while."

"Will the guild be able to afford that when their income drops?"

"An entire ancient wyvern corpse oughta give 'em more than enough funds. Materials of that level fetch a crazy price, even for just one. And I doubt the guild wants to lose skilled adventurers. Add in a word or two from me, and I think things'll be just fine."

"Then both the guild and the city's adventurers will owe the great dragonkin slayer a debt, increasing your influence even more. Is that the idea?"

"Ha! I haven't put that much thought into it. I'm just after strength and glory. Like an adventurer should be. Though I guess it might end up that way," Zamrug said with a smile. It was a smile I'd seen countless times in my past life—the smile of a schemer plotting their next move. Just how much of his persona was genuine?

For the time being, I just paid him some lip service. "Well, at least there are ways for them to make a living. That said, I expect jobs exploring the eastern mountains and cleaning slimes out of the sewers will be in demand for a while."

"Right, the eastern mountains..." Zamrug sounded annoyed. "That dungeon ain't gonna last long either."

"Huh?" I didn't like the sound of that. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Lloyd's plannin' on beatin' the boss."

"You think he'll actually do it?" I asked, my tone stiff. "He's not as strong as you, and you just barely beat the boss with my help. I don't think the Grove Alliance is gonna have an easy time with a monster that strong." After today's fight, I was convinced that while the bosses were weaker than I'd expected, they were still plenty dangerous. Without me, I would have given Zamrug's group fifty-fifty odds.

"Oh, it ain't gonna be easy. But I bet he'll pull it off," Zamrug said confidently. "Despite how he might seem, he brought his party all the way to Rakana's number two spot. If he's set his mind to it, it's only a matter of time. Though I might be stronger than him, rumor has it he's the bastard child of an officer in the imperial military. Dunno if that's true, but anyway, he's got a knack for leadin' people. The reason I was in such a hurry is 'cause I was

confident he was gonna beat me to the punch. Hell, it could've happened as soon as today—"

The next moment, there was a commotion by the entrance of the tavern. I heard the voices of a few adventurers who were brimming with excitement speaking with the guild staff.

"Tch, it really was today. We just barely beat him," Zamrug grumbled in a low voice. Then he opened his mouth wide. "Lloyd!"

The sudden shout turned everyone in the tavern's eyes toward Zamrug. The adventurers speaking with the guild staff turned as well.

"Zamrug." Lloyd, covered in dirt and blood, muttered quietly in the silence that followed Zamrug's shout.

"Took ya long enough! Nothin' to say to me?"

"I heard the news. Congratulations." Contrary to his words, there was clear discontent in Lloyd's voice. "You beat the southern boss, and from the looks of it, with no injuries."

"Sure did. And you?"

"It wasn't easy, but we managed," Lloyd said, the corners of his mouth curving into a smile. "Fortunately, there weren't any deaths. In terms of results, it went about as well as we could've hoped."

"Ha ha, good for you. Come and have a drink! It's my treat today."

"I'll pass. Sadly, I've still got a lot to do."

I stood up from my seat, and Lloyd looked over at me.

"Oh, Lamprogue. I guess Zamrug really did win you over if you're here. That's too bad. I would've liked to have your help bringing that giant abyss daimon's corpse back."

"Lloyd," I said hesitantly. "Did you beat the eastern boss?"

"Yeah. I told you we were going to, didn't I? Though it seems like you didn't think we'd actually succeed."

"Just tell me one thing. Did the dungeon disappear after you beat the boss?"

Lloyd's eyes went wide, then he nodded. "Since the number of monsters greatly decreased, I suspect so. But there's nothing to worry about. It's happened before. It'll go back to normal soon—Lamprogue?"

I raced out of the guild tavern before he could finish speaking.

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Teleporting several times, I made it to the inn we were staying at. Without even giving myself time to catch my breath, I flung the door to the girls' room open. "Amyu! Yifa! Mabel!"

The three let out gasps of surprise, their eyes wide as they turned to look at me. I seemed to have caught them in the middle of changing as they were all in their underwear, but now wasn't the time to worry about that.

"Stay calm and listen to me."

"S-S-Seika?!" Yifa panicked.

"Wh-Why are you so calm right now?!" Amyu demanded.

"Get out," said Mabel.

The three glared at me, covering themselves with blankets or hiding behind the bed, but I couldn't back down.

"I get what you want to say, but now's not the time. We need to leave the city as soon as possible."

"H-Huh?"

"Pursuers?"

"No—worse. Anyway, finish packing by tomorrow morning." I had no idea how long we could afford to delay. Months? Years? Centuries? It was even possible that my fears were completely unfounded. However, the reverse was also possible. Disaster could strike as soon as tomorrow. "I'll have horses and food secured by dawn. I'll explain later—"

Just then, the entire city shook.

"W-Wah! Wh-What's going on?" Yifa said in a panic.

"A-An earthquake?" Amyu asked.

The shaking stopped just as suddenly as it began. It wasn't nearly enough to collapse a building, but I was nonetheless horrified. I couldn't believe it was happening so soon. It was no earthquake, nor was it a volcanic eruption.

I crossed to the other side of the room and opened the window. I could faintly see the city's walls in the night. And on the other side, I felt countless sources of power.

"So that's what it is."

It was my first time seeing the phenomenon, but I was certain—the dragon vein had brought about a disaster. A monster stampede had begun.

Heaven-Shaking Light

A spell that creates a powerful light through magnesium combustion. By removing charcoal from gunpowder and adding in a large quantity of easily combustible metal powders such as magnesium or aluminum, it will create a powerful light and loud sound instead of an explosion. Although the spell is intended to incapacitate similar to a flashbang grenade, when used at extremely close range, the heated gas from the combustion can cause serious damage.

Act 3

The next morning, Rakana was like a kicked hornet's nest. Overnight, the guards stationed on the city's walls had noticed the first wave of monsters. This was reported to the mayor, who immediately began to build up his forces. By the time the sun started to rise, news of the stampede had already spread through the entire city.

"This doesn't look good," I muttered, surveying Rakana from atop the roof of the inn.

A horde of monsters had encircled the city, and although all the entrances had been blocked, the sturdy walls were barely holding them back. Yet despite the fact that the walls hadn't been breached, there were already monsters inside the city. Winged monsters had infiltrated the city by flying over the walls.

Ordinary citizens were taking shelter inside buildings, while adventurers were busy exterminating the monsters attacking the city. However, there had already been significant damage, and screams could be heard in isolated pockets. The human side still just barely held the advantage, but the moment even a small number of the monsters outside the walls got in, they would be crushed.

The situation outside the city as dawn broke looked hopeless. Swarms of all sorts of monsters were approaching. It truly was a disaster. Monsters trampled each other and clung to the walls, showing their insatiable desire to consume the city and its inhabitants.

Guards and adventurers fired spells and arrows from the walls, toppling the monsters trying to climb them. Under Cyrus's command, the city's adventurers had quickly joined the defense, maintaining the current balance. Zamrug, Lloyd, and their parties were likely participating as well, but it wouldn't last forever.

Once a section of the wall was breached or an underground monster dug a tunnel inside, that would be the end. The monsters might not have possessed the intelligence necessary to open the gates, but the resources at their disposal were incomparable.

There was no hope of reinforcements. Barring the empire, it was hard to imagine any human army capable of overcoming this disaster. Rakana would be destroyed before long.

I looked over my shoulder. “Hey, you three. Ready to go?” Amyu, Yifa, and Mabel had come up to the roof. There were no monsters in the immediate vicinity. I had knocked killer bats and chimeras out of the air with Faint Lightning and downed gargoyles with Discharge, leaving no monsters that dared approach me. “Where’s your stuff?” I asked, tilting my head.

“Seika, what’s your plan now?” Amyu asked nervously.

“Run away, obviously,” I said with a reassuring smile.

“How are we supposed to do that?”

“We’ll manage.” *Summoning: Mizuchi.* A long, blue-scaled body emerged from a spatial distortion in the sky. Seeing the ryuu for the first time, the three girls’ eyes went wide. I would have preferred not to show off my ayakashi, but it was too late for any better means of escape. With the massive ryuu behind me, I smiled at the girls. “I’ve kept quiet about it this whole time, but I’ve actually tamed several monsters. We can fly on this one. It’s not too different from riding on a dragon. You remember what that was like, right, Yifa?”

“B-But Seika… That’s not a dragon,” Yifa said hesitantly.

“It’s close enough. It’s large enough to carry the four of us no problem. Go on and get your things. I’d rather not be seen and cause a commo—actually, I’m not sure it really matters.” It didn’t make a difference if people who were going to die soon saw us. There was no need to silence them.

“H-Hold on!” Amyu said, her voice stern. “We’re the only ones escaping?”

“Yeah.”

“Then what’ll happen to everyone else in the city?”

My smile vanished and I shook my head. “They’re done for. The city of desire will be ruined by its greed. You could say it’s fate.”

“But…” Amyu’s voice trembled. “If you’ve got monsters like this, couldn’t you stop the stampede?”

“Probably.”

“In that case—”

“Let’s say I do save the city. Then what?”

“Huh?”

“If you insist, I’m willing to do as you ask. So, how many people should I save to make you happy? Do I save unrelated adventurers being attacked by monsters after the stampede is over? Merchants being attacked by wild animals or bandits? Women being assaulted by thugs? What about a village being struck by famine? A war between humans?”

Amyu didn’t respond.

“I can go anywhere and save almost anyone. But I can’t save *everyone*.” Simply being the strongest wasn’t enough to make that possible. “Where do I draw the line? Who do I save, and who do I abandon? If it’s left up to me, I’m only going to save people I care about. I’m not going out of my way for complete strangers. Do you understand? If you do, then stop making unreasonable demands and go get—”

“They’re not strangers!” Amyu shouted forcefully. “Tio’s here, isn’t he? What about him?”



Her words made me freeze and my eyes open slightly in surprise. Yifa and Mabel followed her up.

"Airia, Wallace, and the others are all out there trying their hardest right now, aren't they?"

"Eik and Nido's party too."

They were all names I knew.

"I'm not going," Amyu said, taking a step away from me. "I'd regret it for the rest of my life if I ran away while everyone else was fighting."

"And you two feel the same way?" I asked.

Yifa hesitated. "I-If you say you're gonna run, I'll go with you. But is that really what you want?"

"What do you—"

"Seika." Mabel looked me in the eyes. "When you saved me, we weren't friends or anything."

"Well... It's a different situation when it's just one person."

"The situation doesn't change what you're capable of, does it?"

I didn't answer.

"What is it you actually wanna do?"

The two of them showed no sign of moving.

What do I wanna do? That doesn't matter right now, I thought to myself in annoyance. *Even if they stay, they can't save this city. Hero or not, Amyu's too weak to deal with that entire horde of monsters. I'll just have to take them against their will—*

"Master Seika." Yuki suddenly whispered into my ear. "Forgive me for offering another pointless suggestion, but I have an idea. Why not send the people of this city to the afterlife yourself?" Yuki ignored my bewilderment and continued. "It would be a simple feat for you. Give them a comfortable death rather than letting them get eaten by spirits. Then there'll be no one for you to save, and those girls will have to give up. It's two birds with one stone."

What Yuki was saying did have some logic to it, but...

"Do you not want to? Abandoning them is the even crueler choice, so if you can't bring yourself to send them off personally, then I'm certain that isn't what you want deep down. The Seika who used his power to save everyone he could in his past life would never accept that. I think you should follow your heart, just like you did in our old world. Didn't your divination tell you the same thing?"

I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. After a silence that felt like an eternity, I had Mizuchi turn around and return through a hitogata gate. The ryuu's massive body was sucked into a spatial distortion. As the ayakashi's presence faded, I gazed at the morning sky for a moment before turning halfway to face the girls.

"Just this once," I said.

"R-Really?!"

Contrary to their joy, my expression was exceedingly glum. *What am I even saying? This wasn't supposed to happen.*

"Oh, but should you really have sent that dragon-like thing back?" Amyu asked. "Wouldn't it be helpful?"

"I'm not gonna use Mizuchi. It stands out too much. I'd like to avoid starting rumors if at all possible." *It's probably too late for that, but I can't give up just yet.* "I don't need it. I'll figure something out."

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The once-grand city hall was now the site of chaos.

"Reinforce the northern wall, and make sure they get more healers. Our strength has diminished too much there. If the people are done evacuating, you can send some of the people we've got huntin' monsters in the streets. There's no end to the flyin' ones, so we gotta focus on defending strategic positions." Amid all the panic, Cyrus alone was calmly listening to reports as he leaned back in his chair.

"You seem pretty relaxed," I said.

"Hm? Oh, it's you, kid." Cyrus shot me a cynical smile as he compared the damage reports to a map of the city. "I'm just putting on a brave face. If I start gettin' flustered, my people aren't gonna be able to keep their cool either. I gotta say, you're an unlucky lot. Ya come here fleein' the empire only to run into a stampede."

I thought about what Fiona's intentions had been when she'd suggested this city as a refuge. If she had known the stampede would occur, I wasn't sure why she would send us here. If her goal was to kill me, it wasn't a very good method. Her future sight had to have shown her I wouldn't die from something like this.

Alternatively, if she had wanted me to save Rakana, she would have at least told me that in advance. I found it hard to believe that the Holy Princess would be so careless as to do something that would make me distrust her. All that being the case, I had to assume that the current situation was something even she hadn't foreseen. Her future sight didn't tell her everything. *Though to be honest, I think that's just what I want to believe.*

"I'm busy," Cyrus said bluntly. "If you need somethin', then out with it. You might be the princess's guests, but if you want me to help you escape, that ain't happenin'. I would've run away a long time ago if it was possible."

"These girls say they wanna help." I motioned to Amyu and the others behind me with my jaw. "Put them to work. I think you'll find them useful."

Cyrus raised his head and looked at us. "There's no guaranteeing your safety. You understand that?"

"How's that any different from adventuring?" Amyu shot back. Cyrus chuckled.

"Head to the northern wall. Can any of you use healing magic?" Amyu and Yifa raised their hands. "The blonde one's a mage, huh? Then focus on healin'—we need it. And the Hero's a magic swordsman, right? That's perfect. Monsters are flyin' over the walls, so bein' able to defend yourself with a sword is useful. Lass with the axe, can you use ranged weapons?"

"More or less. Just lend me a bow," Mabel replied.

Cyrus smirked. "Tell that to the guys near the tower. They'll give ya whatever ya need. Head over immediately once you're ready. They're waitin' on reinforcements."

"Got it." Amyu nodded. "We're heading out, Seika!"

"Right. Be careful."

"We will! Y-You do your best too!" said Yifa.

"Let's celebrate again once this is over," Mabel added.

As I watched them run east, Cyrus called out to me.

"So, what are you doin', kid?"

"I'll be helping with the defense, of course. But I won't be following your orders. I have my own way of doing things."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mayor Cyrus, what do you think our odds of victory are in this fight?"

Cyrus's expression went blank. "You can't even call this a fight. I always feared this day might come, but this is on a whole other level from an ordinary stampede. It's like tryin' to put out a forest fire with a bucket. Rakana's done for."

"Is that right? I see things differently."

Cyrus furrowed his brow. "What do ya mean?"

"I mean I think we can win." I focused on the flow of energy around the city. In order to create, compensation was always necessary. That was true of all things. Even monsters couldn't be created from nothing. I faced Cyrus and smiled. "If everyone gives it their all, we can do this. You just stay here and keep giving orders."

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I was looking out over the city from above Rakana's tallest structure—the church's bell tower. While it no longer served its purpose of announcing the time, as that ran the risk of attracting monsters, it was still a useful location for making an announcement.

"Master Seika," Yuki said, poking her head out of my hair. "Are you sure you should've sent those girls to a battlefield? I thought you would've wanted to be able to watch them in case something happened."

"I *am* watching them. I have shikigami monitoring them as we speak. I also made substitutes, so even fatal wounds won't take them down. If push comes to shove, I can also go help them personally." I looked through the eyes of a crow shikigami and saw the three of them doing quite well for themselves.

Mabel seemed experienced with a bow and was downing large monsters climbing up the walls with arrows enhanced by gravity magic. Yifa was highly valued at the base of operations at the tower, as she could both heal the wounded and shoot down monsters attacking from the sky.

Then there was Amyu, the all-purpose Hero who could use a sword, magic, and even heal. In addition to the value she provided as a combat asset, her efforts also seemed to boost the morale of those around her. There was a certain beauty to her style of fighting, she was energetic, and above all, the sight of a young girl

like her fighting her hardest encouraged the others. People who shone the most on the battlefield truly did exist. I had mixed feelings about Amyu being one of them, but for now, it was fine.

"Those girls are going to have to survive on their own eventually. It's not good for me to keep being overprotective."

"I think you're still being plenty overprotective," Yuki mumbled in exasperation. "Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"Playing politician. Cover your ears, Yuki."

Yuki looked at me in confusion.

"Testing, testing." Listening to the sound of my voice above my head, I adjusted the formula on my hitogata. According to an eccentric Western musician, sound consisted of vibrations in the air and could be expressed as a mathematical formula in terms of the frequency of those vibrations per unit of time. If one vocalized according to this formula, they could theoretically sing any sound. Moreover, by adjusting certain parts, one could freely modify pitch, volume, and other aspects. Finding it to be an interesting concept, I had devised a formula of my own, though I'd never expected to be using it in a situation like this. I inhaled deeply.

"Hear me, warriors! I bring good news!" A loud voice reverberated through the city, shaking the very air itself. Via the eyes of my shikigami, I saw adventurers fighting on the walls, wounded individuals being treated, and citizens sheltering in buildings all looking up. My voice was first converted into a mathematical formula by the hitogata in my hand, then greatly amplified, and finally transformed back into sound released from hitogata high in the air. A voice loud enough to rival the church's bell reverberated once again.

"Reinforcements are on their way! Help will soon come from the outside! Just hold on a little longer!" The city suddenly grew excited. I'd already accomplished my goal, but I continued anyway. "Legends of your heroism and courage will be told for a thousand years! Rise up, warriors! Protect the futures of your children and grandchildren who will tell your story!"

As gallant battle cries rose up from the adventurers, I dissolved my equation and scattered the hitogata.

"Um, Master Seika, when did you hear about reinforcements?"

"That was a lie, of course."

"Huh?"

“When nobody knows when a battle will end, some people will give up. However, if they can see even the faintest hope, they’ll fight until the verge of death. That’s just how people are. I need them to keep trying a little longer.”

“Hrm, you sound kinda like a tyrant. What if they find out?”

“Once we win, everybody will be celebrating. Nobody’s gonna remember the reinforcements that never came. That’s also how people are.”

“Humans are quite foolish, aren’t they? You know…” Yuki giggled atop my head. “I’ve been thinking, you’d make a good politician.”

“Me? Don’t be ridiculous. I’m no good at lying to people.”

“That’s not the most important part of being a politician.”

“Then what is?”

“Getting people to listen to you. The most important trait for a politician is being beloved by the people. Wouldn’t you agree? I’m sure any country you ruled would be a good one.”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“Hmph!” Yuki pouted.

“Anyway, it’s time to get this crisis under control.”

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A fierce battle was unfolding on the eastern wall. Bug-like monsters such as poison larvae and hell ants were scaling the wall, and they clearly didn’t have enough people to deal with them all. Several of them made it to the top, forcing adventurers armed with hammers and swords to scramble and fend them off.

“Damn it, some of the mages are starting to run out of magic! Anyone with a bow, deal with the monsters climbing the walls! And ask the mayor for mage reinforcements!”

To avoid getting in the way, I teleported to the roof of a tower in the wall and called out to Lloyd as he directed his party. “What’s the situation?”

“Whoa! Lamprogue?! H-Ha ha, leave it to the mayor. Those reinforcements got here quick.”

“I see things aren’t so bad that you’ve lost your sense of humor.”

“I guess. But I doubt my jokes will last much longer.”

“Is that right?” *Phase of fire and earth: Oni Flame.* A blue fireball

struck an ant monster that had climbed to the top of the wall, sending its dark red body tumbling back to the ground. None of the adventurers reacted to my spell—they had their hands full with two more ants that had made it up.

"It's reassuring having you here," Lloyd said with a feeble smile. "We should be able to hold out a little longer now."

"I'm honored. Shall we start by clearing up the wall?"

Lloyd shot me a puzzled look.

I dispatched multiple hitogata I had turned invisible at equal distances across the wall. It was my first time using the spell on such a large scale. I needed to make sure I got it just right. Watching the swarm of monsters ascend the wall, I made a hand sign, followed by a short mantra.

Phase of yang, wood, and fire: Burning Cascade.



A torrent of flames ran down the ramparts like a waterfall. The vast conflagration engulfed all the monsters clinging to the walls, then spilled onto the ground, creating a scarlet sea. The intense heat reached all the way up to the top of the walls, making it difficult to even look out at the burning swarm of monsters.

I spoke to Lloyd, who had fallen speechless alongside the other adventurers. “Pouring boiling oil on people attacking a castle is a standard practice, isn’t it? It works even better when you light it on fire.”

Burning Cascade was a simple spell that ignited sesame and olive oil using fire ki. Its heat and ability to spread made it highly effective against overwhelming numbers.

“I could’ve also used molten metal, but that might’ve damaged the wall. Repairing a wall as grand as this is probably difficult.”

“H-Ha ha… You’re really something else. I never would’ve imagined…” Lloyd mumbled.

“It’ll probably keep burning for a while, so that should buy you some time before the monsters start climbing the wall again. Can I leave this area to you? I’ve got other places to go check on.”

Lloyd came back to his senses somewhat and nodded. “Yeah, thanks. We can handle it.”

“See you.” With that, I swapped places with a shikigami I had monitoring the southern wall.

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The southern side had few monsters capable of scaling the walls, but in exchange, there was an endless stream of flying monsters bearing down on the adventurers. A few of them were powerful variants that required several people to deal with.

“Seems like a tough fight.”

Zamrug practically jumped. “What the—?! Oh, it’s you. You scared the shit outta me.”

“I’m here to help. You looked like you could use some backup.”

“Ha! I wish I could say otherwise, but now ain’t the time for actin’ tough.”

The number of adventurers fighting on the southern walls had clearly dwindled since the morning. The tower was filled with the injured, and the few healers they had were working nonstop.

While the flying monsters were certainly numerous, it was an abnormal number of casualties given the combined strength of the assembled adventurers.

"Look at that." Zamrug fixed his gaze beyond the attacking monsters. There was a single creature in the distance.

It was massive. In terms of size, it rivaled even a dragon. It bore the head of a lion, two fish tails, and had six bat wings coming out of its back. It appeared to be a gigantic chimera.

I squinted my eyes. I felt an unnatural flow of power coming from it—it was no common monster. *Is this also due to the dragon vein?*

"I've never seen or heard of any chimera like that," Zamrug said, his face warped into a scowl. "It's so big it can't even fly right. It's just been sittin' there this whole time. Creepy bastard."

"That said, I can't imagine it's harmless."

"Yeah, it's— Whoa! Watch out!" Zamrug shouted and the adventurers on the wall readied themselves.

The chimera opened the jaw of its lion head wide and howled. "Groooaaar!" A moment later, the impact struck the top of the wall. The horrifying low-pitched sound felt like it was shaking me to my core. Everyone was paralyzed as though overwhelmed by a superior existence. It was no ordinary roar.

It didn't harm us, nor did it rob us of our freedom. And yet, the adventurers were clearly moving sluggishly. They struggled to find their footing, even against monsters they had been handling with ease just a moment ago.

"Tch, that damn howl!" Zamrug spat bitterly, holding his ears. "Our bodies won't move like we want 'em to 'cause of it! The chimera's too far away for bows or magic to reach, so there's not a damn thing we can do!"

"I see." Superior variants of wolf-type monsters occasionally possessed the ability to howl as well. It was a technique that induced panic in enemies who heard it. That unusual chimera's howl was the reason the fighting at the southern wall had been so difficult. I would have to do something about it. Of course, it would have been simple for me to teleport over and blast it, but there was no need for all that effort. "Let me handle that howl."

"Huh? What're you—"

I floated a hitogata and made a hand sign. *Summoning:*

Yamabiko. A small ayakashi emerged from a spatial distortion and landed on the roof of the tower. It had black fur and resembled both a dog and a monkey, while not quite being either. Tilting its head, it stared at me with bulging eyes.

I pointed toward the chimera. “Face that way.”

A moment later, the ayakashi opened its mouth and spoke, its voice exactly like mine. “Face that way.”

“Shut up and face that direction. Copy me again and you’re dead.” This time, the yamabiko obediently turned toward the chimera. “We’ll be fine now,” I said to Zamrug.

“Hey.” Zamrug wasn’t even looking at me. “Here comes another one!” he shouted, his eyes fixed on the chimera as it opened its mouth.

“Groooaaar!” The chimera’s howl struck the wall once again, leaving the adventurers cowering in fear. I looked at the yamabiko. Upon hearing the terrifying howl, it calmly returned its tilted head to its normal position and opened its small mouth.

“Groooaaar!” An identical howl rang out, this time from atop the wall. The monsters flying through the air fell to the ground one after another as though they’d been knocked unconscious. Even the massive chimera trembled and took a few steps back.

Yamabiko were ayakashi that lived deep in the mountains and echoed any sound perfectly. They were so weak that even children could defeat them, yet they showed no fear of sound, perhaps because they were in their element. Yamabiko could even mimic the voice of an oni or the roar of a ryuu.

“This is a monster I tamed,” I told Zamrug as the other adventurers were frozen in shock. “It’ll counter the howling, so things shouldn’t be so one-sided anymore.”

“I-It’ll counter the howling? What the hell kinda monster is that?”

“I’ll leave it with you, so you can take things from here. Oh, and it’s not very strong, so make sure it doesn’t get attacked by any other monsters.”

“G-Got it.”

“See you.” Just as I was about to use a teleportation hitogata, Zamrug called out to me.

“Hey! Seika Lamprogue!”

“What?”

“We’re havin’ a drinkin’ contest once this is all over. Don’t forget.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Sure. Let’s meet again at the celebration.” Then I swapped places with a shikigami watching the northern wall.

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The northern wall had been in peril as its strength dwindled, but they had managed to recover with the aid of Cyrus’s swift reinforcements. However, now there was a new danger approaching.

After teleporting to the top of the wall, I called out to Amyu, who was right next to me.

“Huh?! S-Seika?! Stop appearing out of nowhere!” Amyu turned to face me, then wiped the sweat off her brow in relief. “Should you be here? Didn’t you have something to do? And you announced something about reinforcements coming…”

“Keep this between us, but the reinforcements thing was a lie. Cyrus probably won’t deny it, though, if only to avoid causing chaos.”

“I figured as much.”

“We don’t need reinforcements anyway. I just got done helping the eastern and southern walls. The western side doesn’t have any dungeons, so there aren’t too many monsters there. The north is all that’s left.”

“All right. Well, a big problem just showed up.”

“I see that.” Amyu’s gaze was directed at a giant suit of armor—most likely a living mail. Its size aside, its hollow body and apparent sentience would naturally lead one to believe it was a mail. However, it was clearly abnormal, having a stiffer gait than most of its smaller counterparts. Each time it took a step, its ankle and knee joints bent and rivets popped off. It didn’t seem capable of supporting its own weight.

Its flow of energy was abnormal as well. It had to be yet another distorted monster born from the dragon vein’s rampaging power. The giant living mail slowly approached the wall one step at a time.

“It’s holding a mace,” Amyu said with a grim expression. As she

said, the armor held a mace with interlocking flanges in its right hand. It was a particularly troublesome weapon.

Once the living mail got near the wall, it unsteadily raised its mace, then struck the middle of the wall. The impact was strong enough to shake the ground beneath our feet. Several adventurers stumbled, pointing at the living mail and shouting. Part of the wall appeared to be on the verge of collapsing.

On the other hand, the attacker's weapon hadn't emerged unscathed either. Many of the mace's flanges had been crushed flat. The living mail struck the wall once more, sending metal rivets flying through the air as the wall crumbled further.

"It looks like it'll collapse on its own if we leave it alone," I mumbled, watching the scene unfold.

"Are you talking about the armor or the wall?" Amyu asked uncertainly. I was clearly talking about the living mail, but I couldn't blame her for wondering.

"That armor looks sturdy, though." *Whether I use a spell or an ayakashi, it's going to be a problem. I guess I'll go with him,* I decided after a moment of hesitation.

Summoning: Kuroshishi-douji. A large, black figure emerged from a distortion in space, wearing a straw raincoat and hat, wielding a nodachi longsword. However, it wasn't human. It had large, sharp claws, and its fangs were too large to be contained in its mouth. The dark figure suddenly drew its sword, and the blindingly fast blade was stopped by a barrier right before my eyes.

"Ha. That's quite the greeting, Kuroshishi."

"Haruyoshi... Is that you, Haruyoshi?" Kuroshishi-douji pulled his nodachi back. His breath slipped out from between his fangs like steam. "Why do you look like that? What is this world? Why did you release me?"

"The circumstances required it. Anyway, you should be happy, Kuroshishi. I'm granting your wish."

"Explain."

"Look, it's a battlefield. There are warriors—enemies worthy of your blade." I pointed below just as the living mail swung its mace, shaking the structure beneath us.

"That pathetic spirit doesn't interest me," Kuroshishi-douji spat, taking one look at the giant suit of armor.

"Cheer up. It may not compare to an oni hunter, but that horde

makes the Parade of One Hundred Spirits look like no big deal."

"Hmph. Very well. It may serve to ease the boredom I've long endured. I shall clear the way for you, Haruyoshi. To think a human would honor a deal made with a spirit. Do not forget the next battle."

"I keep my promises. When we return victorious, I'll treat you to some of this world's alcohol. Look forward to it."

"I shall hold you to that." With that, the black figure leaped off the wall. He fell right in the middle of the countless monsters swarming below us.

Amyu bent forward and looked over the wall in shock. "Huh?! That person just fell!"

"He's not a person."

I heard the sound of a sword being drawn below, and the living mail's right arm hit the ground. Its left arm followed, then its torso was cut through and both its legs were lopped off. The severed parts fell, cut clean through. After the living mail was cut to pieces, each flash of Kuroshishi-douji's blade sent monsters flying, a bloody mist swirling around him as he darted through the battlefield. At the rate things were going, all the monsters on the northern side would soon be wiped out.

"He's an oni," I mumbled as the adventurers stared on in shock.

Kuroshishi-douji—the black beast. He was an oni swordmaster who had chosen a fitting name. He had lived deep in the mountains of Tanba, where he sought out the powerful and had sent many mighty warriors to their graves. Although he wasn't strong enough to fell a ryuu, he also lacked a ryuu's conspicuous, inconvenient size. He was perfect for such a situation.

"Oni? Is that a monster's name? Is that thing another one of your monsters?" Amyu asked in confusion.

"Something like that."

"So you were just speaking with a monster? What did you talk about? Was that a monster language you were speaking?"

"No, just the language of a distant country," I said with a smile. "Anyway, enough about that." I looked out beyond the wall. *It's not over yet, huh?* I focused on a hitogata and prepared to teleport. "I should probably head back over to the eastern wall and help out. I'm sure you can handle—"

Suddenly, the ground began to shake.

“Whoa!”

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

The adventurers around us were confused.

I, on the other hand, looked out far in the distance. “Is it coming?”

The earth erupted spectacularly, sending a cloud of dust high into the sky before the wind started blowing it our direction. A dark shadow appeared amid the brown, hazy landscape.

“Wh-What is that thing?!”

“It’s huge… I’ve never seen anything like it!”

“Wait, is that a wyrm?!”

The adventures started to freak out.

It had a long body, no eyes, and its jaw took up most of its head. The monster that emerged from the ground appeared to be a type of subterranean dragonkin known as a wyrm, but its size was abnormal. The visible portion alone was already several times larger than a normal wyrm. It struggled to emerge from the ground, writhing clumsily and giving the impression that it had poor control over its own body. It was yet another warped monster—one that had grown too large due to the dragon vein’s influence.

“Finally showing yourself, huh?” I muttered. I had noticed it underground a long time ago, but it had been incredibly slow to reach the surface.

The wyrm opened its maw, shaking its head furiously. Then, a horde of monsters started pouring out. Goblins, orcs, skeletons, living mails, gargoyles—live monsters of all sorts emerged from the wyrm’s mouth as though it was vomiting them up. It looked like it was suffering.

“Wh-What is that?” Amyu asked.

“The boss of this dungeon,” I replied.

Amyu turned to face me, her bewilderment plain to see. “Boss? What do you mean?”

“Rakana is currently turning into a massive dungeon.” With all the dungeons gone, the dragon vein’s energy had looked for an exit—a monster to absorb its power, like the previous bosses had done. Unfortunately, one particular wyrm that lived deep underground, nearest to the dragon vein, had coincidentally been proficient at absorbing energy and had likely become the focal

point of the dragon vein's flow.

In accordance with the laws of this world, once that wyrm had absorbed the incredible power, it had become a dungeon core. Rakana had been caught up in it as well, turning the area into a massive dungeon capable of creating monsters.

"And that's the boss. In other words, if it goes down, the stampede should end." We had needed to hold out as long as possible to wait for it to reach the surface. Without ever having seen it directly, and lacking both its true name and any mediums, I couldn't use curses. Attempting to defeat it while it was still underground would have required me to ruin the terrain. That in itself was equivalent to a disaster.

"B-But who's gonna take it down?"

"Me, obviously," I said completely seriously.

Amyu froze for a moment, then let out a long sigh. "I wonder how strong the Hero from the fairy tales was. Would she have been able to handle something like that? If you'd been the Demon Lord, would she still have been able to save humanity?"

"Of course she would. It's the legendary Hero we're talking about," I said with a lighthearted smile.

Amyu gave me a conflicted look. "I don't think I could ever beat you no matter what I did."

"I can die like anyone else. I'm only human."

"W-Well don't." Amyu's expression seemed to hold a mix of emotions, and I could only chuckle in response. "Don't let that thing kill you."

After that, I swapped places with a shikigami I'd set to watch over the battlefield, which teleported me right into the middle of the horde of monsters. Orcs and skeletons that noticed tried to attack me, but I just continued through the air and soon landed right in front of the massive wyrm.

"Poor creature," I mumbled to myself as I watched it writhe.

A moment later, the wyrm opened its mouth and another swarm of monsters poured out. I prepared a spell to sweep them all away, then stopped myself. Several flashes of a sword entered my vision.

"I shall clear the way, Haruyoshi." Be it through the head or through the torso, every monster I could see was sliced in two, falling to the ground. Behind me, I heard the satisfying sound of a

sword being sheathed. “Now, do it.”

“I appreciate it, Kuroshishi.” I directed a floating hitogata toward the wyrm. Making a hand sign, I recited a short mantra, constructing a steel wall from metal ki. The wyrm writhed, shaking its head in preparation for spitting out more monsters. “I’ll put you to rest now.”

Phase of wood, fire, earth, and metal: Heaven-Shaking Eruption. A huge quantity of black powder exploded on the other side of the wall. A deafening roar rang out alongside a shock wave that shook the air itself. Sound vanished from the world for a brief moment, but my inner ears soon recovered and the surrounding tumult returned. White smoke filled the air, and I sent out a release hitogata to turn the steel wall into dust.

Looking back at the wyrm, I saw that its head was missing. The countless tiny stones launched by my Heaven-Shaking Eruption had blown it away entirely. When black powder was spread over a flat surface with one side in contact with a heavy material such as stone or metal, most of the blast was directed toward the opposite side. Heaven-Shaking Eruption utilized that principle by affixing a thin layer of black powder to a steel wall. This directed the explosion forward, concentrating the force into a powerful, focused blast.

It was something I had learned from engineers from the Song Dynasty. The incredible force had nothing to do with sorcery—it was simply the result of a large amount of black powder combined with human ingenuity and knowledge. It was possible this world would one day be able to combat dragons with similar ingenuity.

The wyrm’s corpse rapidly withered like a beast that had died in a dry desert. I turned around to see that the stampede was ending. Flying gargoyles and chimeras fell to the earth, skeletons and living mails collapsed into pieces, and orcs and goblins crawled along the ground as though they were rapidly aging and wasting away. Having lost its core, the dungeon had been extinguished, and the monsters relying on its power met the same fate.

Next to me, I heard an oni grumble in complaint. “A dull battle, as expected.”

“Don’t be like that. Rejoice, Kuroshishi. We won.” I sighed, then smiled at the oni. “It may have been an easy victory, but it’d be

disrespectful to them if we didn’t celebrate.”

“By them, do you mean the humans or the spirits? Either way, that’s no concern of mine.”

I didn’t answer the oni’s question. Cheers of joy could be heard from the walls in the distance.

Burning Cascade

A spell that ignites heated vegetable oil. The most common lamp oils in the eleventh century were olive oil in Europe and sesame oil in Japan. The flash point for typical vegetable oils is around 300 degrees Celsius, preventing it from igniting unless heated to that level beforehand.

Heaven-Shaking Eruption

A spell that causes an explosion focused in a certain direction. By detonating gunpowder spread over a flat surface, the shock wave that would normally be spread out evenly is weakened on the sides and strengthened perpendicularly. When one side is covered by a heavy object, the kinetic energy is released almost entirely in the remaining direction. This is known as the Misnay-Schardin effect and is utilized today in claymore mines and explosively formed penetrators.

Act 4

The massive stampede was routed in less than a day. The outside of the city, once crawling with monsters, was now quiet. The amount of power I felt flowing from the dragon vein had been cut to less than half of what it had been. With that in mind, causing a disaster of that scale must have taken a considerable amount of energy. I estimated that it would take at least a year to return to normal. On the other hand, that meant there would be no risk of another stampede during that time.

I didn't know what would happen next. I suspected that when the dragon vein's power returned, more boss monsters would be born, and new dungeons would form around them. That was how this land seemed to work.

Fortunately, the city had suffered surprisingly little damage. Given it had been a once-in-a-lifetime disaster, it was nothing short of a miracle. Of course, there had been some casualties. Rakana would have to hold a funeral for them all eventually.

However, right now it was time to celebrate, not dwell on the tragedy. There were many things that needed to be done, and focusing solely on the losses wouldn't make anyone happy. On that note, adventurers were having drinking parties all over town as the sun set. I was seated in the corner of the guild tavern, drinking quietly.

"Gah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Despite that, it was still quite loud. Zamrug's boisterous laughter could probably be heard all the way from the next building over. While there was nothing wrong with being cheerful, I was no good with people like him.

Yet somehow, I feel like this is how all my friends in my past life were. I must be misremembering.

Amyu and the others had also participated in the merrymaking, but they'd quickly gotten hammered and were sleeping in the corner. They didn't seem to hold their alcohol well.

"Seika Lamprogue! Come over here!" Zamrug's voice boomed through the tavern. When I hesitated, he grabbed my arm and forced me up. "This is Seika Lamprogue! The one who took down

that wyrm and saved the city from the stampede!”

The adventurers all cheered and Zamrug handed me a cup of liquor. Even more cheers rang out when I put it to my lips. *These guys will cheer for anything.*

“You downed that liquor like it was nothing. You sure know how to handle a drink,” Lloyd said as I escaped the spotlight and fled to his table.

“I’m not drinking because I want to,” I replied. “You guys really get carried away.”

“A huge amount of money is going to flow into the city. Having your livelihood guaranteed is worth celebrating.”

“I wonder about that. Those materials can’t all immediately be turned into money, and if you aren’t careful about how you sell them, their value will plummet. The dungeons aren’t gonna go back to normal for a while either.” It went without saying that after the stampede ended, a plethora of monster corpses had been left around Rakana—in other words, a mountain of treasure.

There was apparently an old law which stipulated that they all became the city’s property temporarily. It would crash the market if all the adventurers sold at once, so it was a reasonable policy. In exchange, a substantial sum of money was distributed to the city’s residents each month, with adventurers who participated in the battle naturally receiving extra. There was a least a year in which they could live without working ahead of them, so it was understandable why everyone was celebrating.

Yet with the dungeons destroyed, the adventurers currently had no other means of subsistence. Since what the city gave them went into their living expenses, there was little room for frivolous expenditures.

On top of that, merchants looking to exploit the situation would undoubtedly flock to Rakana. Slowly selling off the materials while maintaining market prices to ensure that they weren’t taken advantage of wouldn’t be easy. Still, I didn’t think I needed to worry too much. Cyrus seemed like a capable leader, and he had Fiona’s help. They would probably manage just fine.

As thoughts of Rakana’s future floated through my head, the cup Lloyd was holding caught my eye. “Are you actually drinking today?” I asked.

“Yeah. When mourning comrades, even I drink a little,” Lloyd

said, tilting his cup. People of a similar mind seemed plentiful tonight.

"I'm glad you're drinkin', Lloyd, but we can't have you killin' the mood! We're celebratin' our victory tonight! If the party's leader—" Zamrug hiccuped in the middle of speaking. "If the party's leader ain't happy, his comrades won't be able to rest in peace! Save that gloominess for later!" It was hard to tell if Zamrug was being serious or if he was just drunk.

"I can't do that. My people died because of my orders," Lloyd said, his expression somber. "I don't have the right to forget about my part in that and celebrate. I bet the mayor isn't taking part in the festivities either."

"The old man's different. He ain't an adventurer anymore, and he's gotta conduct himself like the council chairman should. But you and me? We're adventurers who choose how we live and don't get hung up on what's done. Your comrades were the same way. Thinkin' you're responsible for the life of every single member of your stupid-huge party is just arrogance."

"And yet I disregarded the typical adventurer's way of life and twisted their ability to choose for themselves, promising that we'd succeed as a party. If I don't take responsibility for that, it'd make all my words a lie."

"Ha! Keep sayin' shit like that and your party's gonna start takin' advantage of you. They'll think it's natural to have someone lookin' out for them at all times."

"That's fine. In fact, I'd like everyone in this city to think that way. It's wrong to believe that losing friends and dying young is a given."

"You—"

"Would you two knock it off already?" Putting my cup down, I finally lost my patience. "If you're gonna fight, do it somewhere else. You're ruining my drink."

At some point, the surrounding area had gone silent. The other adventurers seemed lost in thought, caught up in the argument between the leaders of Rakana's two top parties.

"What do you think, Seika Lamprogue?" Zamrug asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"How do you think adventurers should be?"

I wasn't sure how to respond to Zamrug's sudden question. I

looked over at Lloyd in search of help, only for him to nod.

"I'd like to hear your thoughts as well," said Lloyd.

Upon closer inspection, the two of them seemed to be drunk. I sighed. *Why do I have to humor their drunken argument?*

"Then let me say this first—I think you're both wrong," I said. "Neither of your methods will achieve even your own ideals. You don't understand how hard it is to manage a community." I was bewildered by the words coming out of my own mouth. I was oddly fired up and had started speaking without thinking. *Am I drunk too?*

"Lloyd, I told you this before. People are all different. When education is too homogenous, those who can't adapt are left behind. Moreover, a community without any competition where everyone simply follows the leader will inevitably grow weak. You won't be able to save everyone, and the community will gradually waste away. Is that an ideal system to you?" Lloyd fell silent, and I turned to Zamrug next.

"The same goes for you, Zamrug. The freedom adventurers possess is nothing more than an illusion. They hardly ever decide anything for themselves. In dangerous, information-scarce locations like dungeons, everything is decided by luck, not individual effort or ingenuity. Calling that freedom is nothing more than the arrogance of someone lucky enough to find success. Or is the current state of affairs ideal to you?" Zamrug fell silent as well. A hush had soon engulfed the entire tavern.

"Then what should we do?" Zamrug finally asked. "I know plenty of newbies who've died despite their talent. Maybe they'd be drinkin' with us right now if I'd taught them about the dungeon, but I don't think creatin' a bunch of coddled adventurers is good for Rakana."

"I don't claim that my plan is perfect," said Lloyd. "But spreading knowledge and skills will decrease the number of people dying pointless deaths. At the very least, it's better than nothing. Like you said, there are problems, but I haven't been able to come up with anything else. If you've got some perfect method, then tell us what to do."

"I don't have anything of the sort," I said. "The perfect way of managing an organization is the type of thing that's always sought after and never obtained. I don't think one even exists. That said,

there are certainly better ways than what you're doing."

"Like what?" Zamrug asked.

"Please, tell us," Lloyd agreed.

The two leaned in and I was slightly taken aback. *What am I even talking about?* Still, my mouth moved on its own. "If helping too much and not helping at all are both suboptimal, then you should just give people the opportunity to learn on their own."

"I'm sorry, could you explain what exactly you mean?" Lloyd asked.

"Make the knowledge and skills necessary to survive in a dungeon accessible to everyone." I adjusted my tone slightly and continued. "The locations of dangerous monsters, how effective different weapons are against them, how to recognize traps—any necessary information like that could be written down in books, for example. Then they could be lent out by the guild, or even just sold for a profit. Just make it possible for people who want that information to obtain it. If nothing else, it'll decrease the number of adventurers going into dungeons completely blind. It also fosters that will to independently strive for survival."

Perhaps due to the language or writing system, many people could read and write in this world. Even in a city as rugged as this one, it most likely wouldn't be a problem. "Of course, I don't claim that this method is foolproof either. It doesn't change anything for people with no desire to learn on their own, and even those who arm themselves with all the knowledge they can may lose their lives to random chance. It's just an alternative to the extreme methods you two are choosing." I recalled an old Latin proverb: "God helps those who help themselves." At the end of the day, there was a limit to what people could do for each other.

As the tavern began to stir, Lloyd and Zamrug seemed somewhat dumbfounded.

"W-Well, that would certainly..." Lloyd's voice trailed off.

"What about the content? If we're really gonna make somethin' like that, my party can help out a bit," said Zamrug.

"No." I didn't know why I was taking this issue so seriously when it wasn't my concern, but I couldn't help myself. "There are so many dungeons out there, it's best to gather as much information as possible."

"Is it really going to be that easy to find people willing to help?"

Lloyd asked. “If our goal is just to help beginners, we’ll only be able to offer so much as a reward.”

“And what if we get info from people who don’t know what they’re talkin’ about? It ain’t gonna be funny if wrong information gets someone killed,” Zamrug added.

“I don’t think you’ll have much trouble finding help. People are surprisingly eager to volunteer for group projects like this. As for the accuracy of the information, you’re just going to have to use your own judgment. You could try verifying contributors, but in the worst-case scenario, you may have to go through several revisions, improving the trustworthiness every time. If you’re really worried, you could put the name of the contributor alongside the information. Adventurers who value their reputation will make sure what they say is correct. In addition, people might view that publicity as a reward in itself and be more inclined to contribute.”

“Th-That makes sense,” said Lloyd.

The clamor in the bar heated up, while I, on the other hand, gradually calmed down. *I have no idea what got into me.* I took a sip from my cup to cover my emotions, then cast my eyes down before making one final statement to wrap up the conversation.

“In the end, I’m just a newcomer here. I’m sure you all know more about adventurers than I do. If you really wanna try my drunken ramblings out, you can discuss it among yourselves.” The moment I finished, the adventurers in the tavern all began talking to each other.

“So basically, we just write books about dungeons?”

“Zamrug said his party’s gonna help, right?”

“Sounds like fun! I’m gonna give it a shot!”

“Who’s gonna fund it? The guild?”

“Could also get the council to do it.”

“Let’s add the names of the investors too. We can win over some rich people by promising them fame!”

“We can let the guild manage the stuff for beginners, but we should sell the other stuff and make some money.”

“Top-ranking parties have money. This idea’s got potential!”

“No it doesn’t, dumbass! How much do you think books cost?”

Zamrug raised his voice over all the commotion. “Gah ha ha ha! Look at how easily they bought into it! You’ve got some good ideas, Seika Lamprogue.” He took a swig from the cup he had

nearby, then added one more thing. “Anyway, the rest is up to you.”

“Huh?” I looked at Zamrug blankly.

“Don’t tell me you’re gonna act like it ain’t your problem after gettin’ everybody all worked up,” Zamrug said, sounding fed up.

“He’s right,” said Lloyd. “We’re just adventurers. This sort of thing is best left to someone with a proper education like you.”

They didn’t exactly teach us how to make books at the academy. I sighed deeply. “I don’t have that kind of knowledge. Like I said, you can just work it out among yourselves. I’m fine with helping out, but I’m not taking the lead.”

Zamrug and Lloyd fell silent, then Zamrug opened his mouth to speak.

“You’re a smart guy, but you’re a dumbass where it really counts, Seika Lamprogue.”

“Pardon?”

“With all this excitement, everyone in the city’s gonna know your name in just a couple weeks. The savior of Rakana who came up with a genius idea to help beginner adventurers. Anytime someone sees you, they’re gonna ask about it. ‘When’s the dungeon guide gonna be ready? Where can I read it? Put my name in it!’ All kinds of crap like that.”

“Huh?”

“And that’s if you’re lucky,” Lloyd followed up. “They might start pestering your party members who are sleeping over there. The mayor and councillors might even get on your case.”

“Huuuh?” My jaw dropped. *Should I have kept my mouth shut?*

Zamrug and Lloyd had big grins on their faces.

“Might as well give in,” said Zamrug.

“We’ll help you as much as we can,” Lloyd added.

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After that, things grew as hectic as I’d been warned.

“Seika,” Mabel said without even looking over at me. We were in a room at the guild, and Mabel had been writing at the desk next to me all morning. “Why are we stuck writing? We’re adventurers now.”

Her resentful tone compelled me into silence for a moment

before I finally responded. “Sorry.”

I could hear Yifa speaking with a customer at a reception desk that had been set up. “R-Really? That happened at the northern cave? A-Ah ha ha…” She sounded tired. The old woman she was speaking to was a former archer, and she had said the same thing three times now, so I could hardly blame her.

It had been a month since the stampede, and just as Zamrug and Lloyd had predicted, rumors of a book on adventuring for beginners being developed had spread through the city. Moreover, it had spread alongside my name as the one who proposed it. People were calling it a book on how to clear Rakana’s dungeons or a how-to guide on dungeoneering.

Worst of all, my face was already well-known, but because of everything I had done to quell the stampede, people were approaching me even more. The topic was always the dungeon guide. Morons would show up one after another, mention some hidden passage in a dungeon or a random monster’s weakness, then ask to have their name added to the book, forcing me to make my escape every time.

Adventurers weren’t shy people in the first place, and now that they didn’t have to go dungeon diving, they had too much time on their hands. Perhaps I should have expected things to turn out this way. On top of all that, Amyu and the others had also become targets, and they were constantly complaining and telling me to do something about it.

Even a manager from the guild had come to the inn and tried to offer me a large sum of money, claiming it was an initial investment. I hastily sent him away, only for him to return the next day with a member of the city council in tow. At that point, I had no other choice but to give in and nod in agreement. I had at least managed to get them to cancel their idea of erecting a bronze statue of me in honor of my service to Rakana.

I sighed. The guild had provided me with a room, and I was busy compiling information once again today. A line of adventurers who all wanted me to listen to their stories had formed outside. I just wanted it to be over. “How did things end up like this?”

“It’s not so bad,” Amyu said, dropping a bundle of papers on the desk. “We’re getting paid at least. Not like we’ve got anything

better to do. It beats sitting around. That aside, do you actually know how to make a book?"

"More or less." I'd made several books in my past life, both as a hobby and to teach my disciples. I still remembered how to bind them. The method seemed a little different in this world, but I'd manage.

"Seriously, you know how to do that too? I feel like you can do anything," Amyu said in exasperation.

"That said, I have no idea when it'll be finished with that long line out there."

"Yeah..." Amyu's voice trailed off. "I get it, though. If I was in their position, I'd hunt you down and tell you everything I know."

"You would? Why?"

"It's like how there are always people recounting their adventures at bars. Everyone just wants a chance to hear themselves talk. It's your fault for giving it to them."

"I wasn't trying to. Sheesh, adventurers are such a pain."

Amyu giggled. "What are you talking about? You're the one who saved them."

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The mayor arrived when the sun was at its peak and Amyu and the others had gone out to buy lunch. "Hard at work, eh, kid?" Cyrus said with a grin.

"What do you want?" I asked, frowning at him. I had been taking a break by myself.

"I just heard you were doin' something interesting so I thought I'd drop by."

"You're shameless. I'm sure you were the one who made the guild executives and council fund me."

Cyrus gave a hearty laugh. "Ha ha! Busted, huh? Consider it payback for when you lied about reinforcements during the stampede. I didn't know what I was gonna do."

"That's some way to treat the city's savior."

"We can go ahead and build that statue."

"Please don't."

Seeing my unhappy expression, Cyrus laughed and then looked around the room. "This city's accepted you, Seika Lamprogue."

“Have they? Well, I guess I’ve earned it after all that effort I’ve put in.”

“Nah, I’m not talkin’ about the stampede. You were part of this city even before then. Ya could’ve earned the recognition of those around you through bravery and accomplishments like Zamrug, or ya could’ve fascinated people by bringin’ a new sense of values to the city like Lloyd. I thought you were the former type when I first saw you, but I also believed you might change the city like the latter type. I was fine with either as long as it became Rakana’s strength. But y’know what, kid? In the end, you were neither.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“People are naturally drawn to you,” Cyrus said calmly. “You have power. You have knowledge the average person doesn’t too. But neither of those things mattered—your real talent was your ability to win people over. Ha ha! I must be gettin’ old for me to misjudge ya like that.”

“Excuse me? I don’t think that’s true…”

“You think I’m off the mark? Have ya tried lookin’ back on your life until now?”

How have things been until now? Thinking back on my past life, I do feel like I always had someone at my side. There were my disciples. Warriors and mountain ascetics I had befriended. An eccentric noble and a worldly sorcerer from the Bureau of Exorcists. The people I had met in the Song dynasty and the West. An ayakashi that knew human speech. My late wife who passed away from disease, and the tragic emperor. Even after reincarnating… I guess he’s right. I planned to abandon these people if the need arose to avoid repeating the mistakes of my previous life, but I couldn’t bring myself to discard anyone.

“Who knows? I’ve forgotten.”

“Hmph, sure.” Cyrus scoffed at my attempt to play dumb. “That gift is far more valuable than power or intelligence. Make sure you treasure it.”

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After Cyrus left, silence returned to the room. I had said I wouldn’t be seeing anyone else until the next bell, so the line of adventurers was currently absent.

“That human is pretty sharp,” Yuki said from atop my head. “He figured out exactly the kind of person you are.”

“You agree with him? To be honest, I’ve never really noticed it myself.”

“What are you talking about? You had all those friends in your past life.”

“Yeah, but not in this one. Those girls are the only ones I’m all that close with.”

“What about the family you were born to? Then the head of the academy acknowledged you, that weird princess is fond of you, and all the ruffians in this city respect you.”

“I think the adventurers here are just an overfamiliar bunch.”

“That’s not it, Master Seika. I think people are drawn to your character in this world just like our last one.”

I couldn’t help but smile awkwardly at Yuki’s declaration. “Ha ha, people are drawn to me, huh? That’d be nice if it were true, but it’s not exactly ideal for someone trying to live more shrewdly this time around.”

“Umm… You don’t regret it, do you?”

“Hm?”

“Saving this city, I mean.” Yuki suddenly grew meek. “I thought it was best for you, so I spoke out of turn back then. But I’m just an ayakashi. I’m worried I might have ruined your plans…”

“You were worried about that?” I chuckled and extended my hand up to my head, petting the small ayakashi with one finger. “It’s fine. While I can’t say I didn’t attract any attention, I didn’t have to summon a ryuu or use any large-scale sorcery. I’m sure even this world has a few mages capable of doing what I did. It’s not enough for politicians to deem me a threat.”

There were a few people who claimed to have seen a strange dragon during the stampede, but the rumors eventually died off. It had been a chaotic time, so most people just thought they had seen a chimera or something. The town wouldn’t have emerged unscathed if there really had been a dragon. Summoning Mizuchi hadn’t caused me any major headaches.

“To be honest, I’m surprisingly happy with my decision. I’m glad I saved them. We have a place to live now, and I managed to pay Fiona back a little. It’s all thanks to you speaking up, Yuki.”

“R-Really?” Yuki’s voice sounded a little more cheerful. “Heh heh!

I’m glad I was able to help!”

“And I’m glad I listened to you. I also felt like I bore a little bit of the blame for the stampede.” The moment the words left my mouth, I realized I had said too much.

Just as I feared, Yuki immediately inquired further. “Because you couldn’t prevent them from beating the southern boss? You don’t need to feel bad about that. Nobody could have predicted what happened.”

“Uh, no, that’s not the part that bothered me…”

“Master Seika?” Yuki extended her neck upside down and peered at my face. “Are you hiding something from me?”

“Well… Uh…” I averted my eyes. “You remember that deer monster I captured that escaped later?”

“Yes.”

“It was probably the northern boss.”

“Huuuh?!” Yuki cried out in shock. “It was?!”

“As far as I could tell from its flow of energy, I suspect so.” I had just assumed it was just a little stronger than usual when I’d captured it.

“Th-They did say the northern dungeon lost its power before we got here,” Yuki said, her voice shaking. “That deer spirit fled because you sealed it. W-Were you responsible for one-third of that disaster?!”

“No way!” I said in a panic. “First of all, that deer wasn’t anywhere near the northern mountains when I captured it! The dungeon lost its power way before I sealed it! It was probably just a naturally migratory monster that was in the middle of moving when I caught it. I didn’t have anything to do with the dungeon disappearing!”

“Then why did you feel responsible for the stampede?”

“W-Well…because I let it get away. If I had managed to return it to the mountain, I might have been able to restore the northern dungeon before the stampede happened.” I didn’t realize that the deer monster had been the northern boss until after it was all over. Looking back, I really had been a fool. “Even I’m not capable of everything, of course. I know there’s no point in regretting it now, but when I think about what I could’ve done if I’d realized sooner, I just can’t help myself.”

“Is that right?” Yuki pulled her head back, then spoke clearly.

“Then you’ll have to put your all into making that book.”

“Huh? Why is that?”

“You can’t change the past, so think about what you can do right now.”

“Write this book? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“It should be obvious. You can make sure you won’t have any regrets next time,” Yuki said in a calm, composed tone. “Besides, you used to like things like this, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did.” I gave a defeated smile and picked my glass pen back up. “Guess I’ll get to work.”

A cool breeze blew through the open window, making the corner of the paper flutter. Autumn was approaching.



Extra Story: Black Nodachi

Deep in the mountains of the Tanba province (part of modern-day Kyoto, Hyogo, and Osaka prefectures), a black oni was born.

Ayakashi births didn't occur naturally. They didn't come from their mother's wombs, nor did they hatch from eggs. Like so many other spirits, the black oni just appeared one day.

However, not occurring naturally didn't mean their births occurred without cause. Next to the oni lay the body of a criminal who had perished after being cast out of his village for his wrongdoing. The newly born black oni's existence was a feeble one. It seemed like his life would not last long either.

Without human recognition, ayakashi soon fell asleep. Then, when a human approached, they would awaken and frighten, eat, curse, or exchange words with the human, thus gaining recognition. They would continue this process until they gradually faded away. Sleep and humans—that was all there was to an ayakashi's life. The black oni was no exception.

Unfortunately for the oni, he was born deep in the mountains where humans rarely ventured. He might never encounter a human, fading away in eternal slumber. Or, perhaps, he would be consumed by a powerful ayakashi capable of maintaining consciousness for a long period without human recognition. These were common fates for weaker spirits, and it was likely that the oni would follow the same path.

Yet there was one thing that set the oni apart from other spirits: He was afraid of falling asleep. Sleep was comforting to most spirits, but not the oni. Perhaps it was due to the lingering thoughts of the criminal he had been born from—a soul so frightened of retaliation that he had been unable to dream. Whatever the case, as drowsiness silently closed in on him, the oni was overcome by unbearable horror.

The oni raced through the mountains as though trying to outrun his fear.

The saying, "meeting a Buddha in hell" refers to finding good fortune when one needs it most. If the oni's existence as an

ayakashi, plagued by drowsiness, was his own personal hell, then finding a human would be his Buddha.

After sprinting through the mountains, the oni came across a young ascetic hermit descending a waterfall and attacked him. Like most mountain hermits, he was fully prepared to deal with wild animals and spirits he encountered while training, and ordinarily, the weak oni would not have posed a threat. Luckily, the hermit had been in the middle of climbing down the waterfall and was in no position to defend himself. He tumbled helplessly down onto the rocks below.

The oni chased after him.

“Urgh…” The hermit had collapsed in the stream, still clinging to life. His spine might have broken, as his legs wouldn’t move. Blood poured from his mouth. His broken bones had likely pierced his entrails. The hermit stared at the oni as though on the verge of voicing a curse, but before long, he let out one final wheeze and breathed his last.

The oni wasn’t tired anymore. In fact, his body was brimming with strength. He had realized how he was meant to live.

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The oni started attacking humans. He would descend the mountain and lurk near the village, assaulting hunters and woodcutters who ventured out. Occasionally, he would encounter a mountain hermit and attack them too, paying no heed to the danger. He tried to make them feel as much fear as possible before killing them, sometimes even eating them alive. That was how he dispelled his drowsiness.

The hunts weren’t easy. Far from it, in fact. The weak oni was constantly risking his life. Despite being an ayakashi, he still felt pain and feared death, but the terror of falling asleep overshadowed all else.

As the oni continued his attacks, he learned ways of dealing with the humans who tried to fight back. He learned how to dodge oncoming axes, defend against arrows, and even resist talismans and seals. Bearing scars and burns from sorcery, the oni learned the art of battle. Each time he attacked a human, he could feel his strength increasing and his body growing larger.

Then, decades—no, centuries passed.

One day, a man visited the mountains, calling out to the oni, “Hey there! You must be the man-eating oni!” He was a human unlike any the oni had seen before.

Rather than the dirty clothes of a hunter or woodcutter, he wore a vibrant, elegant attire covered in simple armor. He resembled a noble the oni had once attacked in the past, but his eyes gleamed fiercely in the face of the ayakashi before him, and the sword at his hip was even larger than the man was.

“Ha ha ha! What ominous ki! You’re a worthy opponent.” It seemed the man had come to the mountain to seek the oni out.

Even from the mountains it resided in, the oni had felt the tide of war rising in the human world. He had thought it didn’t concern him, but if it resulted in humans like the one before him being born, perhaps he had been wrong.

“Wh-Who…you?” the oni asked the man.

“Hmm? Ha ha ha! A douji that understands human language?” It must have sounded unsettling, as most humans had reacted with fear when the oni had spoken words he vaguely remembered. This man, however, bared his teeth in a smile, his eyes wide with madness. “Interesting! It’s been some time since I met such an intriguing spirit! Very well, douji! I am the warrior —! Rejoice, for you shall be the eighth spirit slain by my blade Kuroshishimaru!” the man shouted, drawing his exceptionally long sword.

Though its edge was ragged, it was a beautiful blade. Even the oni, who knew nothing of the value of man-made objects, could appreciate its beauty.

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“Ha… Ha ha…” Collapsed on the ground, the man feebly laughed toward the sky. His head was split open, and there was a gaping hole in his stomach.

Breathing heavily and barely standing, the oni looked down at the man on the verge of death. Though he had won their fight, the oni hadn’t come out unscathed either. The oni couldn’t move his right arm, his body was covered in sword wounds, and one of his horns had been cut off. The axe he had stolen from a woodcutter

had long since broken, and his left arm, which he had used to pierce through the man's stomach, was covered in blood and fat.

The man smiled up at the oni. He had called himself a warrior. Indeed, his death was not like the others the oni had killed.

"Magnificent, douji," he managed to eke out, breath heavy and body failing. "How did I do?"

The oni stirred slightly, unsure of the meaning behind the man's words. A trace of desperation appeared in the man's crazed eyes.

"I honed the strength of my body... My skill with the blade. I strived to reach the pinnacle of power through endless training. Tell me—how did the heights I reached look to you?"

The oni obliged, stringing a few words together. "You...strongest human I know." The oni had made a habit of engaging with humans in their final moments. It helped ward off his drowsiness.

The man opened his eyes wide and laughed. His eyes no longer seemed to focus on anything. "Good, I can die in peace. Ha ha ha, this has been a pleasant dream. Will I see paradise when I awaken?" After a moment's consideration, he shook his head, wheezing out, "No, it'll probably be hell. Ha ha. That's fine too."

The oni couldn't comprehend the man's words. He spoke as though conflating reality with a dream, which the spirit could only perceive as madness.

"My only regret is that I can't bring Kuroshishimaru with me... If I can't realize my dream of wielding it until it shatters..." A little bit of life returned to the man's hoarse voice. "Then I'll give it to you, douji."

The oni looked at the man in confusion.

"Wield Kuroshishimaru until it breaks. Until it's rusted and covered in blood."

The oni looked at the nodachi sticking into the ground next to the man. Seeing it coated in his own blood made it all the more beautiful.

"I can tell. You sought strength as well. We're the same. That's why you're covered in scars... Why, your skills are so superb..."

The oni's breath caught in his throat. He was bewildered. What had this human seen in his life of merely fleeing from sleep? He felt compelled to answer, though he didn't know why.

"I..."

“My blade shall become your strength. It will take you to the pinnacle.”

“You…”

“Wield it, douji! Then one day, return it to me! Even if it’s in the depths of hell below! Tell me your name, douji…”

The oni didn’t have a name to give him, but it didn’t matter. The man didn’t seem capable of hearing him anymore.

“Your name… Douji… Kuroshishi…” With one long, final breath, the man passed away.

At the same time, the oni realized something—his body had changed. His wounds were gone, and he could move his right arm. His horn hadn’t returned, but unprecedented strength whirled around within him. The oni put his hand on the hilt of the nodachi. It felt so natural, it was like the blade had always been a part of him. He had inherited the beautiful weapon from a mighty human.

The oni cried out. He cried out due to the weight of what he had obtained. It wasn’t the sword, nor his newfound strength. For the first time in his life, he’d found something greater—honor.

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At the time, the oni didn’t understand that Kuroshishimaru was the name of the sword, or that douji was a derogatory term for oni. Nonetheless, the next time he was asked for his name, there was no hesitation in his answer—Kuroshishi-douji.

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The oni stopped attacking uninteresting humans. Instead, he sought out challengers.

When he cut down the weak, he felt his pride fade. He abandoned the hunters, woodcutters, and mountain hermits. Eventually, he only took on worthy opponents who heard rumors of the man-eating oni and came to defeat him.

With each battle, the oni grew stronger. As time went on, the humans he fought polished their skills and evolved. The oni teetered on the verge of death countless times, watching, learning, and absorbing the humans’ skills for himself.

Sometimes, he would find himself assailed by drowsiness.

During those moments, he would descend to the village, kill livestock, and plunder sake from storerooms. While drinking too much would make him even drowsier, he enjoyed having a small taste. He ignored humans who cowered in fear at his presence. Killing them would have done more to stave off his drowsiness, but he needed word to spread and reach the ears of powerful fighters. His short visits to the village were enough to keep his slumber at bay a little longer.

One night, the village was attacked by bandits. The moment one raised his blade against a child, the oni slaughtered them all. Other times, the oni would kill bears and wild dogs that had acquired a taste for human flesh. He would even cut down vengeful spirits and ayakashi that harmed humans.

In time, the villagers began offering the oni meat and sake. It was surprisingly effective at warding off his drowsiness. The oni stopped attacking the village.

When he had no challengers, the oni would tirelessly swing Kuroshishimaru. He faced the sky, imagining powerful foes yet unknown, and swung again and again. Eventually, the oni reached the point where he could precisely navigate the gaps between raindrops and clear away all the trees on a mountain. Kuroshishimaru was no longer merely a sword—it had become part of the oni.

A long time had passed since that day. The pinnacle the man had spoken of no longer seemed so distant.

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However, one day, the oni realized the truth. Those thoughts had been nothing more than arrogance on his part.

It was a beautiful autumn day and red leaves danced through the air. In the middle of an open field lined by tree stumps, the oni found himself trapped, his ability to move sealed by a formation of talismans.

Blue flames created through sorcery scorched his body. He couldn’t so much as move a finger. That he was still gripping Kuroshishimaru seemed to be nothing short of a miracle. The wounded oni’s foe looked at him with a smile.

“Ha ha, you’re quite the odd oni. I had heard that you wielded

martial arts, but that was no swordsmanship no human could ever dream of. An oni swordmaster. What an intriguing specimen I've caught."

It was a sorcerer. It was hard to believe he had scaled the mountain, as there wasn't a speck of dirt on his kariginu robe. He had delicate features and seemed to be in his twenties, though his true age was impossible to discern. At the very least, the atmosphere about him was not that of a young man.

He was abnormal. In fact, he barely even seemed human. The oni had cut down many sorcerers in the past, but the man before him was different on a fundamental level. If a ryuu were to take on a human form, it might become a being like him. How conceited the oni had been to think he was anywhere near the pinnacle.

The sorcerer was surrounded by countless talismans cut into human shapes that floated in the air—hitogata used by exorcists.

"Don't take it personally, Kuroshishi-douji. You've simply grown too strong," the gentle man said. "Your presence has driven all the wildlife away from this mountain. Beasts displaced from their homes and insects, now unchecked by natural predators, have begun to ravage the village's fields. The villagers are lamenting that it's now difficult to offer you anything in worship. Of course, I understand that your strength is for the purpose of protecting the village. However—"

"No," the oni said almost automatically. "My strength is my own. It does not belong to anyone else."

"Oh, is that so?" the man said with a puzzled expression. It seemed to carry a bit of humanity in it.

"How did I do?" the oni asked.

"Hm?"

"I honed the strength of my body. My skill with the blade. I strived to reach the pinnacle of power through endless training. Tell me. How did the heights I reached look to you?" The oni realized he was saying the same words as the man he had slain long ago, as though desperate for validation. For the first time in his life, he had been defeated. He had seen the fate of those who were defeated countless times. It was the end of the road.

"Let me think..." the man said with a serious look on his face. "As far as oni go, you're certainly abnormally powerful. For an ayakashi to defeat you, it would need to be around the level of a

ryuu, a bake-gitsune with seven tails or more, a daitengu, or a kuubou's false sun. I imagine the legendary oni who once lived on Mt. Ooe and Mt. Suzuka were around your strength. However, in terms of skill with the blade, you're likely the best in all of Japan, humans included."

"Heh. I see." The oni chuckled, each word a monumental task. Although he hadn't even managed to scratch the sorcerer, he could still take pride in his swordsmanship. "Good... I can die in peace."

"You care about that stuff? You almost seem like a warrior. Well, no matter. Get a good rest in the other plane." The man chanted a mantra and the landscape began to warp, centered around the hitogata in front of him. It was a sealing technique used by sorcerers.

"Tell me your name, exorcist..." the oni said.

The man was taken aback for a moment, then gave an awkward smile. "Most sorcerers wouldn't tell an ayakashi their name. But since you strike me as more of a warrior, I'll answer you out of respect for our match. I'm Haruyoshi," the exorcist said. "Haruyoshi Kuga."

The oni was sucked into the distortion, then disappeared. He found himself in a completely empty world. The drowsiness he had long forgotten steadily crept up on him, yet for some reason, he was no longer afraid. He wasn't going to sleep—he was waking up. In hell, where the warrior awaited him. The only problem was that he had no desire to return his sword. They would just have to have another duel.

"Heh..." He was looking forward to it. The oni closed his eyes.

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"Hm?" The oni woke up. Rising to his feet, he looked around. He saw the courtyard of a human estate. It was far larger than even the most affluent home in the village, yet it had few trees or stones, leaving it wide open. The breeze brushing against him was not that of Tanba. He could feel the presence of a large number of people to the east, though less so in the immediate area. Was he in the capital he had heard so much about? At the very least, it didn't appear to be hell.

“Hey! Over here.”

The oni turned and saw the exorcist. He was wearing casual, light yellow kariginu, and had a confused look on his face. Several children stared in wide-eyed astonishment next to him.

“What are you spacing out for?” Haruyoshi asked. “I’ve never seen a groggy ayakashi before. You certainly are an odd one.”

“Why have I not awoken in hell?”

“Hm? What kind of exorcist would politely send an ayakashi he sealed on to the afterlife? Serve me, Kuroshishi.”

The oni was taken aback. Had his road not come to an end after all?

“I’m not going to have you cut anyone today. I just want you to train this child in swordplay,” Haruyoshi said, pointing at a boy. The child held a wooden sword in his hands, his lips pressed together as he stared intently. He likely wasn’t old enough to have come of age yet. His height was barely half that of the oni.

“Master! Can I beat him up?!” The boy suddenly opened his mouth and shouted.

Haruyoshi gave a bitter smile, then spoke surprisingly softly. “You’re welcome to try, but I doubt you’ll be able to. Kuroshishi-douji here is an incredible swordsman. Watch his swordplay during your match and learn as much as you can. I can’t keep up with you anymore.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Facing high-level spirits helps steel your nerves. You’ll find the experience useful, even when facing humans.”

“Yes, sir!”

“You’re always so enthusiastic.”

As he watched Haruyoshi and his disciple speak, the oni silently came to an understanding. If it was a duel of blades Haruyoshi wanted, then that was a suitable job for him. The oni placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, then suddenly pulled it back after feeling an intense heat. The palm of his hand had been slightly burned. A single hitogata had been stuck to Kuroshishimaru’s hilt.

“Now, now! Don’t go pulling a real blade on a child with a wooden sword!”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” the oni asked in response to Haruyoshi’s scolding.

“You use a wooden sword too,” Haruyoshi said, tossing one to

the oni.

It was longer than the wooden sword the child was holding, yet it still seemed like a toy to the oni. It wasn't something he could rely on. "You expect me to duel with this?"

"I do. And no using it like a club. Treat it like a real sword. If you think you've cut your opponent, that's it. Reset and start again."

"What purpose is there in this child's play—" The oni cut himself off. There *was* a purpose. An immense amount of information could be gleaned from a swordsman's stance and footwork alone. Even if they were made of wood, crossing swords with someone could provide a wealth of knowledge. The oni realized for the first time that this was how humans learned swordplay.

"Very well." The oni readied his wooden sword. He had already tasted defeat once. He could obey a simple order.

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A few hours later, the child was lying on his back in the courtyard, panting. He was soaked with sweat despite the cool air. Though he had no open wounds, he was likely covered in bruises.

Meanwhile, the oni wasn't tired in the slightest. That was how great the gap in their strength was.

"Urgh..." The child groaned and stood back up, readying his wooden sword.

"Enough. There's no point in continuing."

"Y-Yes, sir." The boy lowered his wooden sword. He was just barely standing, yet he didn't use his sword for support. The oni was impressed by his grit. "H-How did I do?" he asked. The oni shrunk back slightly in the face of his determined gaze.

"You're quite skilled. I think you will grow strong if you keep at it." The oni voiced his honest thoughts. Given another ten years, the boy would likely become a warrior capable of giving him a tough fight.

"Thank you very much, master!" the boy shouted, bowing his head low.

"Wha—"

"He's got spirit, doesn't he, Kuroshishi?" Haruyoshi had been watching the whole time and spoke so proudly that it almost seemed like he was talking about himself. "He's never faltered or

stopped putting in effort, even when he wasn't very good at sorcery. He excels at swordplay, so I'm sure he'll accomplish great things."

The oni wasn't sure what to say.

"All right, —, go get changed," Haruyoshi said to the boy. "It's a little early, but we're going to start preparing dinner—"

"Hey, Haruyoshi!" A voice called out to Haruyoshi from outside the courtyard's hedges. Then a man passed through the gate. "I brought some fresh char. Let's have a drink and— Whoa!" The sleepy-looking man cried out at the sight of the oni. He appeared to be a warrior. He had two swords at his hip and carried himself with the poise of one trained in martial arts. Tossing aside his bamboo fish basket, he placed his fingers on the older, slightly worn hilt of the sword on his left. "Heh heh. What's this? An oni? And an exceptional one at that."

The man's eyes had the same fire in them as the oni's challengers. The oni silently readied his wooden sword. There was a good amount of distance between them, but at their level, it likely didn't mean much.

"What's the deal? You gonna come at me? 'Cause if not, then I— Gwah!" The moment the man took a step forward, a wooden sword came flying at him and struck him on the forehead, sending him bending over backward.

"Don't pull out your cursed sword here, moron!" Haruyoshi shouted angrily. "He's an ayakashi I exorcised! If you wanna duel him, use a wooden sword!"

"Oh, he's yours, Haruyoshi? All right, then." The man chuckled and picked up the wooden sword that had been thrown at him.

"Are we dueling after all?" the oni asked as he watched him pick up the sword.

"You can speak, oni? Of course we are." The man readied his wooden sword. "When two swordsmen face off, it's only natural that they have a duel."

From both his stance and his ki, the oni could tell he was a formidable foe—yet the oni had his doubts. Why would such a powerful, battle-hungry warrior obey Haruyoshi? At least in the oni's case, it was because he had been sealed once already.

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“Phew! I give!” A few hours later, the man was sprawled out on his back.

Still standing, the oni looked down at him. This time around, he hadn’t come out unscathed. He had taken his fair share of strikes. Had it been a duel to the death, there was a one-in-ten chance he might have lost.

“The hell was that?” the man said with a chuckle. “Oni swordsmanship? I didn’t even know that existed!”

“It’s mine alone.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that! Youkai huntin’ would be even more of a pain in the ass if it spread! It was fun, though.” The man grinned and looked at the oni. “So, I’m pretty good too, aren’t I?”

“Indeed.” The oni thought for a moment. “In terms of strength, I was superior this time. However, I don’t know if that would hold true were you to draw that blade.” Even in its sheath, the sword hanging from his left was emitting an ominous aura.

“I dunno about that,” the man said hollowly, his hands clasped behind his head. “Your sword’s no joke either. I think I’d still be at a disadvantage in a real fight. Heh heh, then again, that’s when it’s the most fun.”

“Shall we try it?”

“Nah.” The man stood up and brushed the dirt off his hakama. “You’re Haruyoshi’s ayakashi, aren’t you? I can’t go cuttin’ down a friend’s property.”

“Friend…”

“Are you guys finally finished?” Haruyoshi asked wearily. At some point, he had sat down and started watching them. His disciples next to him also looked fed up, with the exception of the boy the oni had dueled, whose eyes were sparkling.

“That was awesome, master! You did all that with just a wooden sword! Master’s friends are all incredible!”

“Heh heh, I can’t even tell who he’s talkin’ about.”

“Who are you calling my friend? Good grief,” Haruyoshi said as he stood up. “—, go get changed. I’ll lend you some clothes. I don’t want you walking around the estate like that.”

The man chuckled. “Let me spend the night while I’m here. Oh, and let me use the bath too.”

“You have no shame.” Nonetheless, Haruyoshi would oblige. The oni found the scene strangely pleasant.

“Master, I’m back!” The next moment, a high-pitched voice echoed from the gate. The oni turned reflexively to face it and saw a girl walking toward them.

She appeared to be around thirteen or fourteen years old. She wore a reddish-brown suikan robe and seemed quite energetic. The oni felt his left hand unconsciously tighten around Kuroshishimaru’s sheath.

“Hey, master! That story about the ox cart with a face turned out to be a lie! That guy was actually visiting his lover’s house to— Wah!” The girl noticed the oni and her eyes went wide. “Whoa… That’s a big oni. Is he yours, master?”

“Welcome back, —. Yes, his name is Kuroshishi-douji. He’s an oni swordmaster,” said Haruyoshi.

“Wow, you’re right. He has a sword.” The girl stared at the oni.

“He’s a strong one, —,” said the warrior.

“Ah, —! Hey there! Did you lose to him?”

“Sure did. Heh heh, he got me good.”

“You didn’t even put up a fight,” said the boy.

“Sh-Shut up!”

The cursed sword wielder, the young swordsman, and the girl all seemed to be familiar with each other and conversed happily. The oni tensely opened his mouth to speak.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, you can talk. You must’ve been alive for a long time,” said the girl.

“Would you like to duel him?” Haruyoshi suddenly proposed.

The girl’s face lit up. “Can I?!”

“I’m sure you aren’t gaining any strength dealing with all those trivial spirits. If you’re ready, give it a try.”

“Woo-hoo! I’m ready anytime!” The girl pulled a bundle of talismans out of her sleeve and tossed them into the air. The hitogata fluttered toward the ground, then abruptly straightened out and floated around the girl. It was quite a brilliant display.

The oni wordlessly readied his wooden sword. The girl appeared to be a sorcerer. Given the unusual ki about her, the oni assumed she was his next opponent.

“Hey, Kuroshishi.” Haruyoshi called out to the oni. “Drop the wooden sword and draw your real one.”

The oni’s eyes went wide. “Have you lost your mind, exorcist?”

“There’s no point if you don’t use your full strength. Don’t worry, a fatal wound or two isn’t enough to kill her.”

Silently dropping the wooden sword, the oni put his hand on Kuroshishimaru’s hilt. The hitogata that had been attached was now gone, and he felt no heat. Tension he had long forgotten consumed him. Was the girl truly that skilled?

“Are you gonna die for real if I kill you, Mr. Oni?” the girl asked, her eyes genuine.

“Yes,” the oni replied stiffly. “For humans and ayakashi both, that is usually how it works.”

“All right,” the girl said with a wide grin. “Then I’ll hold back!”

The oni didn’t hear her through to the end. Just as he took a step forward and loosed Kuroshishimaru from its sheath—

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It only lasted a few minutes. The oni lay collapsed on the ground, his limbs scorched. Kuroshishimaru, the blade he had never once let go of, even during his defeat at the hands of Haruyoshi, had fallen to the ground next to him.

The girl giggled. “I win, Mr. Oni.” She crouched next to him, peering at him with a wide grin. Her reddish-brown suikan remained untouched.

“— really is somethin’ else,” the wielder of the cursed sword mumbled in astonishment.

“Eh heh heh!” the girl giggled. “Aren’t I awesome?!”

Jumping around and frolicking after being praised, she seemed like a completely ordinary girl—but she wasn’t. Like Haruyoshi, everything about her was different.

“By the way, master, why do oni make blue flames when you burn them?”

“That’s a good question. I’ve never really thought about it. It doesn’t seem like it’s due to temperature or any sort of reaction, so it probably has to do with the state of the surroundings,” Haruyoshi replied.

“It’s not that hot, so there’s no way it’s made from phosphorus or tin.”

The oni silently watched their exchange. It wasn’t all that different from what he had seen in the village. That was what

made it so odd.

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For some reason, that night turned into a grand feast. There was a sorcerer from the capital who had sensed a powerful spell, a noble who just happened to stop by, and a merchant who had come to deliver sake only to join in on the festivities who all served to bring even more food, alcohol, and people. The oni sat in the corner of the spacious room, his wounds mysteriously healed as though time had been reversed.

“You always impress, Kuroshishi,” said Haruyoshi, taking a sip from his cup next to the oni. “You know how to drink. The sake’s strength doesn’t mean you should guzzle it down and wind up in a drunken stupor. Look at this mess.”

People were sprawled out across the room. Some were even sleeping half naked. The night had grown late before they knew it, despite the revelry that had been in full swing not that long ago. The evening dark had settled in beyond the light of the talismans. The children had been sent to bed and were likely fast asleep already. Haruyoshi downed cup after cup, insisting that he wouldn’t get drunk. Nonetheless, he seemed more talkative than usual.

“I once feared sleep. Though sake is good, it makes me drowsy, so I had no choice but to learn to drink sparingly,” the oni said, taking a small sip from his cup.

“You feared sleep?” Haruyoshi mumbled. “I always thought sleep was part of being an ayakashi. I guess it’s no wonder you reached the level you did if you were forgoing sleep to hone your skills.”

“That wasn’t the reason.” He had simply been afraid. No, perhaps that had changed somewhere along the line.

“Whatever the reason, that’s a good way to drink. It makes treating you worthwhile. I’ll give drinks to the ayakashi I summon every once in a while, but they all drink so heavily that it worries me. Then they pass out immediately after. For all their love of alcohol, ayakashi tend to be lightweights. Though looking around, maybe humans aren’t so different.”

“There is something I would like to ask you, Haruyoshi.” The

exorcist raised his face from his cup and looked at the oni. “How is it that you can live like an ordinary human? The warriors who challenged me were all different from the normal villagers. They were obsessed with battle and didn’t get along with most people. Yet you’re different.”

Haruyoshi listened silently.

“And it isn’t just you. There are others among the children who are far from ordinary, yet the sights I’ve seen in this estate are no different from what I saw in the village. Everyone exchanges words peacefully and shares their thoughts.” The oni couldn’t comprehend it. The abnormal were cast out from the group—even one far removed from human society like him understood that. Or perhaps the lingering thoughts of the criminal he had been born from many centuries ago made him feel that way. “How is it that you can live life as a human? That you can live among humans?”

After a brief silence, Haruyoshi opened his mouth to respond. “If I had to give an answer, I’d say it’s because I *am* human, more or less. Sure, socializing isn’t my strong point, but that hasn’t stopped all these folks from being overfamiliar. And all my disciples are good kids.”

“Is that so?” It wasn’t a very satisfactory answer. The oni still didn’t understand. But perhaps that was simply all there was to it.

“Anyway, I should probably clean up. I need to make sure everyone gets a proper rest too.” Haruyoshi put his cup down, then seemed to have an idea. “Kuroshishi, if you’re afraid of sleep, you don’t have to go to the other plane.”

“What?”

“I would need you to help out around the estate in return, though.”

“Huh?!”

At that moment, a long, white animal poked its head out of Haruyoshi’s hair. The beast took one look at the oni and immediately ducked back inside. “I-I don’t wanna work with that scary spirit, Master Haruyoshi.”

“You’re such a scaredy-fox,” Haruyoshi said with a defeated smile.

“It’s fine.” The oni silently shook his head. “I no longer fear sleep. And without an opponent to duel, I feel idle and bored.” Training alone likely didn’t serve much purpose anymore. He knew

now that there were heights solo practice would never bring him to.

“If you say so.”

“But in return…”

“Hm?”

“If you ever stand before an extraordinary warrior or unparalleled spirit, call upon me. Or bring me to a battlefield. You may not need my help, but at least allow me to clear the way for you, Haruyoshi.”

“You really do sound like a warrior.” Haruyoshi gave an exasperated smile. “There aren’t too many opponents strong enough to satisfy you, but war has seemed increasingly likely lately. That time may well come.” Haruyoshi’s expression clouded over for a moment before he forced a smile. “You have my word, Kuroshishi. If I ever find myself on a battlefield or facing a worthy opponent for you, I promise to summon you.”

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The oni awoke. He seemed to be on a mountain’s peak. A beautiful mountainside, red with autumn foliage, stretched out below.

“Over here.”

The oni turned and saw a younger Haruyoshi looking back at him. The oni remembered now—he had been summoned to this strange world by Haruyoshi, his appearance now different, and had engaged in a short battle.

“Are you just not used to sleeping? Is that why you always seem so drowsy?” Haruyoshi asked with a sigh. “You never change.”

“You, however, have changed quite a bit, Haruyoshi. What is it this time?”

“I promised to treat you to this world’s alcohol, didn’t I?” Haruyoshi looked to his side, where there were several bottles of varying sizes.

“I can’t drink all this.”

“It’s not my fault. I asked for good alcohol and they gave me all this. I don’t wanna make those girls drink too much, so help me get rid of it, will you?”

“Heh.”

“Is something funny?”

“No,” the oni said, letting a slight chuckle slip. “Let me correct what I said earlier. You haven’t changed at all, Haruyoshi.”

“What do you mean?” Haruyoshi shot a confused look at the oni just as the swordsman sat down next to him. “Anyway, what do you think?” Haruyoshi said, pulling himself together and looking down at the mountain. “Nice scenery, isn’t it? There aren’t many monsters around with the dungeon gone, so places like this are accessible now. Makes waiting for the autumn weather worthwhile.”

“Indeed. We first met on an autumn day just like this.”

“Watch your phrasing. It almost sounds like you’re writing a love poem.”

“Neither you nor I are suited to poetry.”

“You’ve got that right.” Haruyoshi nodded.

“While that battle offered little resistance, those spirits that were neither beast nor ayakashi were quite intriguing,” the oni said after a short pause. “Fighting unfamiliar foes is a necessary part of training. Feel free to call upon me again, Haruyoshi. Even for weak foes like that.”

“You really do sound like a warrior,” Haruyoshi said with an awkward smile. “But I have to warn you, the people and spirits of this world aren’t very strong. Even foes of that level don’t come around very often.”

“No matter. I shall wait as long as necessary. It’s not as though I age. The opportunity will arrive eventually.”

“Well, *I* do age, and my body isn’t fully matured yet. The question is what to do going forward.” After a brief moment, Haruyoshi asked the oni a question. “Kuroshishi, do you still desire strength?”

“That goes without saying.”

“Why is that? Why do you choose to live that way? You could’ve lived like a normal ayakashi.”

“Well…” The oni pondered his answer for a moment. “Because I promised a warrior I once dueled that I would one day return his — No.” The oni denied his own words. He knew that wasn’t the reason. “Because this is the road I’ve decided for myself.” He wasn’t fleeing anything, nor had anyone requested it of him. The oni felt that he had chosen to pursue the honor of victory by his

own will.

“I see. I envy you,” Haruyoshi grumbled quietly. “I’m jealous you can decide on your way of life without hesitation. I just can’t seem to figure out how I want to live in this world.”

“Heh.”

“You laughed again.”

“It’s just…” The oni’s lips curved into a faint smile. “I finally understand why you called yourself a human.”

“Just now? I’ve always been a human, whether you understand it or not.”

“Heh… Heh heh.” The oni laughed, then spoke seriously. “Follow your heart.”

“My heart…”

“Don’t listen to your fears or the words of anyone else. Find what your heart desires. That’s the only way I know to put it.”

“Follow my heart, huh?” Haruyoshi wore a bitter expression. “I wouldn’t be struggling if I could always be true to myself.”

“I suppose that’s how the human world is,” the oni said with a chuckle. “Cast your problems aside for now and have a drink, Haruyoshi. I want to hear your story.”

“Fair enough. Hmm, where should I begin?”

An autumn breeze blew through the mountainside, the colorful leaves faintly swaying. From a distance, it almost looked like the Tanba scenery the oni had seen so often.

Extra Story: Storm of Petals

One spring day, in a room on the top floor of Rakana's city hall, a girl was sitting on the couch in front of Cyrus. She covered her mouth with her hand and giggled.

"What a lovely city hall. I've visited many cities, but it's the largest I've ever seen—it's astonishing. It reflects the prosperity of the city you govern, Chairman Cyrus," Fiona Urd Alegreif said with a smile. She had hair such a pale blue it was nearly white and beauty that would take anyone's breath away despite her youth.

Even Cyrus, someone who'd risen up as an adventurer and had little to do with nobility, had heard rumors about her. Holy Princess Fiona—Emperor Gilzerius's only daughter, born of a forbidden relationship with a priestess at the central church. Extolled by poets, she was known throughout the empire. Ordinarily, Cyrus would never interact with a member of the imperial family, yet here she was sitting before him.

"I appreciate you accommodating my sudden visit," Fiona said, her smile slightly apologetic. "You only just returned from your meeting with the Free City Alliance, so I'm sure you're tired."

Taking a moment to respond, Cyrus thought to himself. There was nothing strange about Holy Princess Fiona contacting Rakana. It was an appealing city for a multitude of reasons. Unlike other free cities, it wasn't even an imperial-governed territory. It was in essence something akin to a massive slum, yet due to the wealth provided by the nearby dungeons, the city was thriving. The imperial princes kept a close eye on Rakana in hopes of claiming it for themselves. With the Holy Princess's name starting to pop up in the struggle for succession, it was no surprise to see her here.

It was the timing that was odd. Cyrus had only received her notice a few days ago, as he had been returning from a Free City Alliance meeting held in another city. The suddenness of the request concerned Cyrus. Not only had the city not been prepared to host her, but the Holy Princess's own preparations must have also been made hastily.

From the content of her notice, it didn't seem to have simply

arrived late, and Cyrus ruled out the possibility of the princess merely coming on a whim after meeting her in person. There had to be some sort of reason she had arrived now of all times.

Cyrus cut himself off. There was no point agonizing over a question without a clear answer. Be it dungeons or politics, there was nothing to be gained without diving in headfirst. Even before a member of the imperial family, Cyrus held his head high and didn't shrink back as he spoke.

"Hmph, hardly. All I did was poke my head into a boring meeting and ride in a carriage. That ain't enough to exhaust me."

Fiona giggled. "I suppose I should expect as much from the first-rate adventurer who once led the Scarlet Beaks."

"That's ancient history. I can't outrun my age. If I couldn't afford a nice carriage to make the journey comfortable, I woulda left the alliance a long time ago just 'cause of the inconvenience. Guess I oughta thank the emperor for not taxin' this prosperous city."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that."

Fiona's smile remained unchanged, causing Cyrus to frown. She'd simply brushed off his talk of taxation. What was the purpose of her visit?

"So," Cyrus said, giving up on trying to pry anything more out of her. It was never his specialty to begin with. "Why did you come here today, princess?"

"My, there's no rush, Chairman Cyrus." Fiona's faint smile deepened. "I'd like to hear more about this marvelous city."

"Hmph, it's a city of good-for-nothing savages. It ain't a place a princess should be interested in. I don't recommend goin' out at night if ya value your life."

"Now, that's not true. But rest easy, I can guarantee my own safety."

"Hah. With an escort like that, I can see why you'd be confident." Cyrus glanced at the two guards standing behind Fiona.

They weren't human. One was an ashen-skinned ogre with a massive greatsword on his back, while the other was a black-and-white-furred wolffolk with a pair of clawed gauntlets held near his waist.

"Can't say I expected an imperial princess to have man-eating demons escortin' her," Cyrus said with a stiff smile.

"Only a small subset of demons consume human flesh. And

because there have been fewer conflicts between humans and demons, that culture has been gradually fading."

"So I take it those two are different?"

"Who can say?" Fiona gave an ambiguous answer and looked up at her guards behind her. "Chairman Cyrus seems to have taken an interest in you two. Introduce yourselves."

At Fiona's command, the ogre and the wolffolk spoke in order.

"Fourth seat of the holy knights, Vromd."

"Fifth seat of the holy knights, Kanu Lu," the wolffolk panted.

Cyrus could feel his expression go stiff. "Holy knights? Them?" He had heard that the holy knights were Holy Princess Fiona's personal bodyguards. The poems had made them sound like knights straight out of fairy tales, but the people before him were nothing so fanciful. "You've collected quite the outrageous bunch, princess."

Cyrus had seen several adventurers known as braves. They showed no interest in forming parties or increasing their rank. They didn't seek easily evaluated measures of success like money, fame, or status, so they were always rated poorly as adventurers. In fact, some of them couldn't even live normal social lives. However, they were strong, capable of single-handedly annihilating hordes of monsters, going toe-to-toe with dragonkin, and saving countless people. They were extraordinary individuals who sometimes appeared among humanity.

The demons who had introduced themselves as Vromd and Kanu Lu were clearly stronger than any brave Cyrus had ever met. He could tell even without fighting them. Their stance, their weapons, the very air around them—everything about them told him that they were braves who had surpassed all others.

But that wasn't the only reason Cyrus trembled. The fourth and fifth seats? That meant there were three others above them. Cyrus couldn't even imagine how strong they must have been. Nevertheless, one thing was clear to him—the Holy Princess had something that attracted legendary individuals to her.

"Would you like to establish a collaborative relationship, Chairman Cyrus?" Fiona suddenly asked, still smiling.

"What do you mean?" Cyrus replied, still shaking on the inside.

"I'm fortunate enough to be blessed with money, so unlike my brothers, I have no desire for Rakana. Therefore, I'd like to help the

city maintain its independence. In return, I ask for some minor accommodations."

"Don't look down on this city. We don't need a princess's help to stay independent."

"So you say, but if my brothers set their minds to it, I'm certain they could cause the city some trouble. Particularly if, say, you were to be assassinated."

"Hmph, don't be ridiculous—"

"E-Excuse me!" The next moment, there was a knock on the door and a staff member entered holding a silver tray with teacups on it. He seemed quite nervous, shaking the tray and rattling the cups. Watching the trembling staff member place the cups on the table, Cyrus quickly lost his hostility.

"Can't you carry a damn teacup?! Sorry, princess. The staff here may not be worth nothin', but I assure you the tea's top-class—"

"Don't drink that."

Cyrus froze as he was about to bring the teacup to his mouth.

The wolffolk panted heavily, his gaze sharp as he pointed at the cup in Cyrus's hands. "Don't drink that. It smells."

"I apologize for the discourtesy, but he has a keen sense of smell," Fiona said, her expression unchanged. "The tea leaves might have gone bad. You there—would you mind giving it a taste?" she said to the young staff member who had brought the tea.

"Huh? M-Me?" he asked in confusion, his face pale.

"Yes. I'd like you to try it." Fiona smiled brightly.

The staff member, on the other hand, was wide-eyed, sweat dripping from his brow. Cyrus didn't know his name. He was a young man who had started working at the city hall in the spring.

"Is something the matter? A little taste won't hurt you. If it's just bad tea leaves, that is."

"A-As you wish. Just give me a moment to prepare..."

Prepare to drink tea? Before the question even entered Cyrus's head, the young man had already swung his arm. A moment later, a needlelike dagger appeared in his hand. It was an assassin's weapon—one that an adventurer would never use to fight monsters. The blade was colored with a yellowish substance that could only be poison.

By the time Cyrus realized it, the dagger was already headed

straight for him. Just as he raised his arm to defend himself—

"Stupid." Silver claws flashed before his eyes, and with a loud clang, the dagger went flying through the air. The gauntlets' wielder, Kanu Lu, had positioned himself between Cyrus and the assassin. Just how fast was his reaction speed to have been able to make it in time? The wolffolk hadn't simply blocked the blade—he had caught it between the claws on his gauntlet and wrenched it out of the assassin's hand. It all happened in the blink of an eye, against a blade as slender as a needle. Cyrus didn't know how it was even possible.

"Stupid. Human stupid," the wolffolk panted.

"Argh!" The assassin launched a roundhouse kick at the holy knight. A blade shot out during the kick, presumably from some sort of contraption in his shoe. Rather than block it with his gauntlet, Kanu Lu lunged forward and bit into the assassin's shin. "Gwah!"

Ignoring the assassin's cry, the wolffolk shook his head, slamming the assassin into the floor. The assassin stared up in fear at the one who had downed him. Drool was dripping from between Kanu Lu's sharp fangs.

"He smells good," the wolffolk panted. "He smells tasty, princess."

"Ahh!" The assassin froze up.

"Oh my." Completely unbothered by the violence, Fiona tilted her head with a slightly troubled expression. "I planned on having a piglet prepared for you tonight. Would you rather eat him, Kanu Lu?"

"Pig," the wolffolk claw fighter responded after a moment's hesitation.

"Then please refrain from eating any humans," Fiona said with a wide grin.

Cyrus was convinced now—none of them were normal, the princess included. No, she was probably the most abnormal one of them all. But as the leader of Rakana, he couldn't afford to back down. In both adventuring and politics, you were devoured the moment you showed your back.

"That's a lot of fuss over a little poison," Cyrus said, teacup in hand. The tea was made with high-quality leaves and smelled delicious. It was hard to believe it had been poisoned. "Don't want

something this expensive gettin' cold." Cyrus downed the tea in one gulp.

Fiona, her holy knights, and even the assassin looked on in shock.

Seeing their expressions, Cyrus gave a satisfied chuckle. "Hmph, not bad. It was worth puttin' in that express order."

"Are you mad?" Kanu Lu stared at Cyrus. "Spit it up. Need me to help?" he panted.

"I'm good," Cyrus responded curtly. Then he chanted a spell he hadn't used in a while. "Restoring white! Spirits who govern life, grant me the strength to resist deadly poison—Cure!" With a faint glow, the discomfort he had started to feel immediately faded. Cyrus smirked at the stunned holy knight. "This ain't my first time bein' poisoned. It's happened here and in dungeons. Rakana's leader isn't gonna kick the bucket that easily."

"I'm surprised," Fiona said with her hand in front of her mouth. "I'd heard you were an adventurer, but I didn't think you'd be a priest."

"I was once a member of the clergy. Don't look like the type, do I? Only a few people know about it."

"I see. Well, that certainly explains why you're so stubborn," Fiona muttered, glancing out the window.

Cyrus watched her and pondered. She seemed to be checking something, but the square outside couldn't be seen from where she was sitting. Was it the position of the sun or the shadows of distant buildings? That would mean she was checking the time—but why?

"Chairman Cyrus," Fiona said, interrupting his thoughts. "The people you are obstructing have grown frustrated with your reluctance to die and opted for more heavy-handed methods. By which I mean you will be crushed by forces so great you can't withstand."

"Excuse me?"

"But fret not," the forbidden princess said with a smile. "To make up for the suddenness of my visit, I shall take care of your problems for you." The moment she finished speaking, Fiona looked at the ogre holy knight Vromd. The ogre silently nodded and walked over to the window facing the square, his gait heavy.

"What are you doing?"

“Wait just a moment,” said Fiona, her smile never leaving her face. “We’ll continue our conversation once the commotion subsides.”

A moment later, there was a loud bang, and the window and the wall surrounding it shattered.

“What the—?!” Cyrus was taken aback. He had no idea what was going on, but a moment later, he grasped the situation.

A giant boulder had destroyed the window and wall. It was large enough to crush a house and had been fired at the top floor of the city hall from the square outside. It was likely the advanced-level earth spell, Rock Cannon.

He knew this because the boulder had been stopped right in front of him by Vromd’s heavy greatsword.

“No way…”

The ogre had blocked a boulder large enough to blow away a chunk of the city hall with the tip of his sword, stopping it right where it had come through the window. Honestly, he wasn’t even sure if he could call it a sword. It looked like it had been cut from a lump of iron and was so bulky it was impossible to imagine anyone swinging it, yet Vromd had drawn it with only his right hand. With his left hand, he held out the jacket he had been wearing, protecting the Holy Princess from falling debris.

The ogre race was blessed not only with impressive physique, but magical power as well. A human could never hope to compare to their physical strength. Yet even taking that into account, Vromd was abnormally strong to be able to stop advanced earth magic with one hand.

“Thank you, Vromd,” said Fiona.

The ogre nodded, then twisted his greatsword. That alone was enough to split the rock impaled on it, sending it tumbling outside. Screams arose from onlookers in the square. Cyrus couldn’t imagine anyone had been crushed, but he didn’t have the luxury of worrying about that right now.

“I will have the culprits outside apprehended, though I suspect they won’t have any knowledge as to who the real mastermind is.”

“What is this farce?” Cyrus asked, glaring sharply at Fiona. “The Holy Princess discovers a plot to assassinate Rakana’s leader in advance and has her holy knights stop it? Is this just another story for poets to write about?” It was too good to be true. Given the

timing of the earth magic, it had to have been staged. No matter how good her intelligence network was, it was impossible for her to pull off naturally.

"Were that my intention, I would have prepared a more creative plot," she answered calmly, her expression unwavering. "I didn't come here to put you in my debt. I regret to inform you that they were in fact very real assassins seeking to kill the leader of Rakana. I only had them removed from the stage because they were impeding our negotiations."

"Still, there's no way you coulda known the exact timing."

"No, as it so happens, I *do* have a way," Fiona said with a whimsical smile. "I cannot yet tell you, but perhaps there will come a day when you learn my secret."

"I ain't a fan of secrets."

Fiona giggled. "My, that's curious. Isn't it considered common courtesy here not to inquire as to other people's circumstances? When adventurers gather allies, strength is all that's needed to merit trust. Do you find my abilities lacking, Chairman Cyrus?" Fiona stood up, walking through the dust floating around the room.

"That said, I'm sure you're wondering what it is I seek. First, I ask that the companies I invest in be given priority on purchasing the spoils the dungeons produce. This arrangement benefits you as well—these companies have branches in distant lands with scarce access to dungeons, so they'll purchase the materials in bulk at above-market prices and—" Fiona suddenly stopped speaking. After staring into space for a moment, she suddenly mumbled in concern. "Ahh..."

"What's the matter? You sound worried all of a sudden."

"It should have been fine, but... I suppose not. Oh well, nothing to be done. We were pressed for time."

"What are you talking about?"

"My apologies, Chairman Cyrus. It seems there's one more interruption."

"Voooooooh!" A roar suddenly thundered from the square and a massive figure rose up, visible through the hole in the wall. It looked at Cyrus with bestial eyes.

"Wh-What the hell is that?!" It had a piglike face and green skin and was tall enough to reach the top floor of the city hall. "A giant

orc?! What's it doing here?!"

"It appears to have been summoned by an enemy," Fiona said calmly, despite her slightly troubled expression. "I wonder what went wrong? The summoner wasn't supposed to show up during the patterns where the mage launched his spell. Things never go as planned."

The huge orc approached the city hall, each step it took shaking the floor. It wasn't holding a weapon, but its body was so big, it could likely flatten a building with its fists alone.

Cyrus didn't move. It wasn't because he was frozen with fear—it was because Fiona was making no effort to evacuate. Her holy knights readied their weapons, clearly prepared to confront the giant orc.

"What are you doing?! Run!" Cyrus shouted. "I don't care how strong they are! The city hall's gonna get flattened and they'll be caught up in it!"

Fiona didn't respond to Cyrus. She simply stared at the giant orc and held her hands in front of her chest as though praying.

"Oh, what a predicament I find myself in," said the Holy Princess, an almost theatrical air to her tone. The orc raised its arm toward all of them in the city hall. "If only a brave, powerful knight would save me."

"Give me a break." A deep voice suddenly seemed to reverberate from beneath the floor. "What a difficult princess you are."

For a brief instant, Cyrus saw a golden sword streak down the orc's center. A moment later, its massive body split vertically. Bisected cleanly in half, it tumbled onto the square, its arm still raised. Blood and guts spilled everywhere.

Cyrus simply watched in amazement. Looking down from the destroyed window, all he saw was the orc's corpse and curious onlookers. The one behind it all was nowhere to be seen.

"What just happened?" he mumbled.

"Now that things have settled down, shall we return to our discussion, Chairman?" Fiona asked, sitting back down on the couch as though nothing had happened.

"Wh-What?"

"There won't be any more attackers. You have my guarantee. Let us continue our negotiations."

An assassin was face down on the floor, the window and wall were destroyed, and a giant monster had been killed by someone out of nowhere, yet the Holy Princess alone maintained her dignity.

“As I was saying, I would like you to give the companies I’m affiliated with favorable treatment. It would be beneficial for Rakana as well, so I’m sure you’ll find it an agreeable proposal. And one other thing.” Fiona once again stopped speaking.

Although Cyrus was still overwhelmed by the situation, he could feel that the next request was her real objective. The Holy Princess wore an almost tortured smile, and the next words out of her mouth were not anything he could have expected.

“If my friends ever flee to this city, I would like you to help them.”

◆◆◆

In a room on the top floor of Rakana’s city hall, Cyrus gazed out the window at the square below after finishing with his documents. Though it was normally just a wide-open space, various monster parts were currently lined up all over the place. They were all materials the adventurers had harvested from the monster corpses left after the stampede.

Appraisers bustled about, sorting the materials by type and value. It had been going on nonstop for the past few days. Everyone was surely exhausted after the intense battle, yet strangely enough, their faces were all cheerful as they worked energetically. It was understandable—they had gone from thinking the city would be destroyed to sitting on a mountain of treasure.

However, for Rakana’s leader Cyrus, it wasn’t all happy news. He had to arrange a mass funeral, repair damaged buildings and walls, and convert the materials into funds among other things. He barely had time to sleep. Still, they were good problems to have. They had survived the largest stampede in history. He wasn’t going to complain.

“That princess sure sent someone crazy my way,” Cyrus said with a bitter smile. The princess’s friend had turned out to be the Hero. That alone was surprising enough. He had thought it was a

joke when he'd first heard it. He couldn't believe the Hero from the fairy tales was actually real. But the one who'd given him the biggest shock wasn't the Hero girl—it was the boy who had arrived with her. "Seika Lamprogue, huh?"

Cyrus couldn't think of anyone stronger than him. He probably wouldn't ever be able to. He had defeated the wyrm responsible for the stampede and had nearly single-handedly quelled the disaster. He was no ordinary person. Even the holy knights who had accompanied Fiona two years ago—the mysterious swordsman who had cut the giant orc in half included—likely would not have been able to do what the boy had done.

While Cyrus was curious as to his true identity, he also didn't feel like it was necessary for him to know. The people of Rakana didn't pry into other people's backgrounds. His old party had never asked him why he'd left the church, or what he'd lost to make him come to the city. That was the sort of city Rakana was, and why Cyrus loved it so much. The boy probably appreciated it too.

"Heh... In the end, that deal has only benefited us." They had been introduced to distant companies and as fate would have it, even received help dealing with the stampede. Rakana had built up quite a debt.

Naturally, he had every intention of reaching out to Fiona when it came to selling the newfound surplus of materials. He had already sent a letter. It was only fair that he paid her back at least a little bit.

"Guess I can offer her a little discount on the materials."

◆◆◆

"Hmm, this is vexing."

In a detached structure on the imperial palace grounds, Fiona crossed her arms and groaned. Documents were piled up on the desk in front of her, and she showed no signs of getting started.

"What has you so distraught?" a low voice asked from nowhere. There was no one else in the room, yet Fiona answered calmly.

"Should I be happy that I've obtained rare materials for a low price, or should I lament the fact that the stampede ended up occurring? No, clearly I should be upset. It was the worst possible outcome. Fortunately, both Rakana and Seika emerged

unharmed."

"What is done is done," the voice said. "You've said it yourself that things do not always go as planned. I believe you felt the same way when you protected the city's leader Cyrus from those assassins."

"Ah, back then," Fiona said, reminiscing. "That was quite stressful too, wasn't it? I had been planning on taking it slow and approaching Rakana at the right moment when I suddenly saw a vision of the chairman being assassinated. That really threw me off. Had I ignored it, I'm certain one of my brothers would have gotten involved."

The owner of the voice recalled that day. Fiona had suddenly let out a hysterical cry, then frantically wrote a letter and dashed out of the palace with a few nearby holy knights she had gathered. He had wondered if she'd lost her mind. Even after that, things hadn't gone as planned.

"Come to think of it, we had to deal with an unexpected summoner, didn't we? I had hoped to avoid using your blade there, but when I don't view enough futures, the unforeseen is bound to happen. Short on time or not, I should've exercised more caution."

"What is done is done. If anything, I think you made the best of that situation."

Two years ago, Fiona had visited Cyrus in person in order to protect him from assassination and form a partnership. Because their relationship had been established ahead of schedule, the companies under her influence had grown and greatly increased her personal wealth. In a way, it was an even better outcome than the futures where those events hadn't occurred.

"I think you should make use of this opportunity as well."

"What do you mean by that?" Fiona asked.

"Send a letter under the pretext of explaining the situation. It is for a loved one, is it not?"

"Seika is no such thing." Fiona pouted. "He was simply my husband in the past. Though I suppose chronologically, it's actually the future."

"The things you say are always difficult to follow. Nonetheless, if he is your husband, then that is all the more reason," the voice said, pulling himself together. "A man left on his own is liable to have his heart swayed. A letter is one way to keep him close."

“Wh-What in the world? Who did you hear that from?”

“One of the palace maids. She called herself a master of love. I am certain about this one.”

“You pick up the strangest things about human society,” Fiona said with an exhausted sigh. “I don’t love the idea of following some chatty maid’s advice, but I suppose I shouldn’t remain silent. Writing a letter is a good idea. Hmm…”

“What is it this time?” the voice asked as Fiona groaned again.

“What sort of stationery should I use to write Seika?”

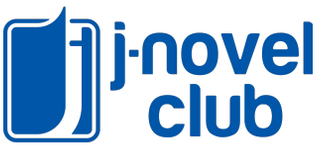
“Perhaps you should ask an expert.”

In the end, Fiona didn’t write the letter until another season had passed.









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by Kiichi Kosuzu

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