
5
Kiichi Kosuzu
Illust. Yuunagi
The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World
Monsters Can't Match My Youkai!


5
Kiichi Kosuzu
Illust. Yuunagi
The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World
Monsters Can't Match My Youkai!





The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World

Monsters Can't Match My Youkai!

5

Kiichi Kosuzu
Illust. Yuunagi




"Protect that money no matter what."
Amyu
Magic Swordsman
Yifa
Mage
"O-Of course, Amyu!"
"We've got this."
Mabel Crane
Heavy Warrior

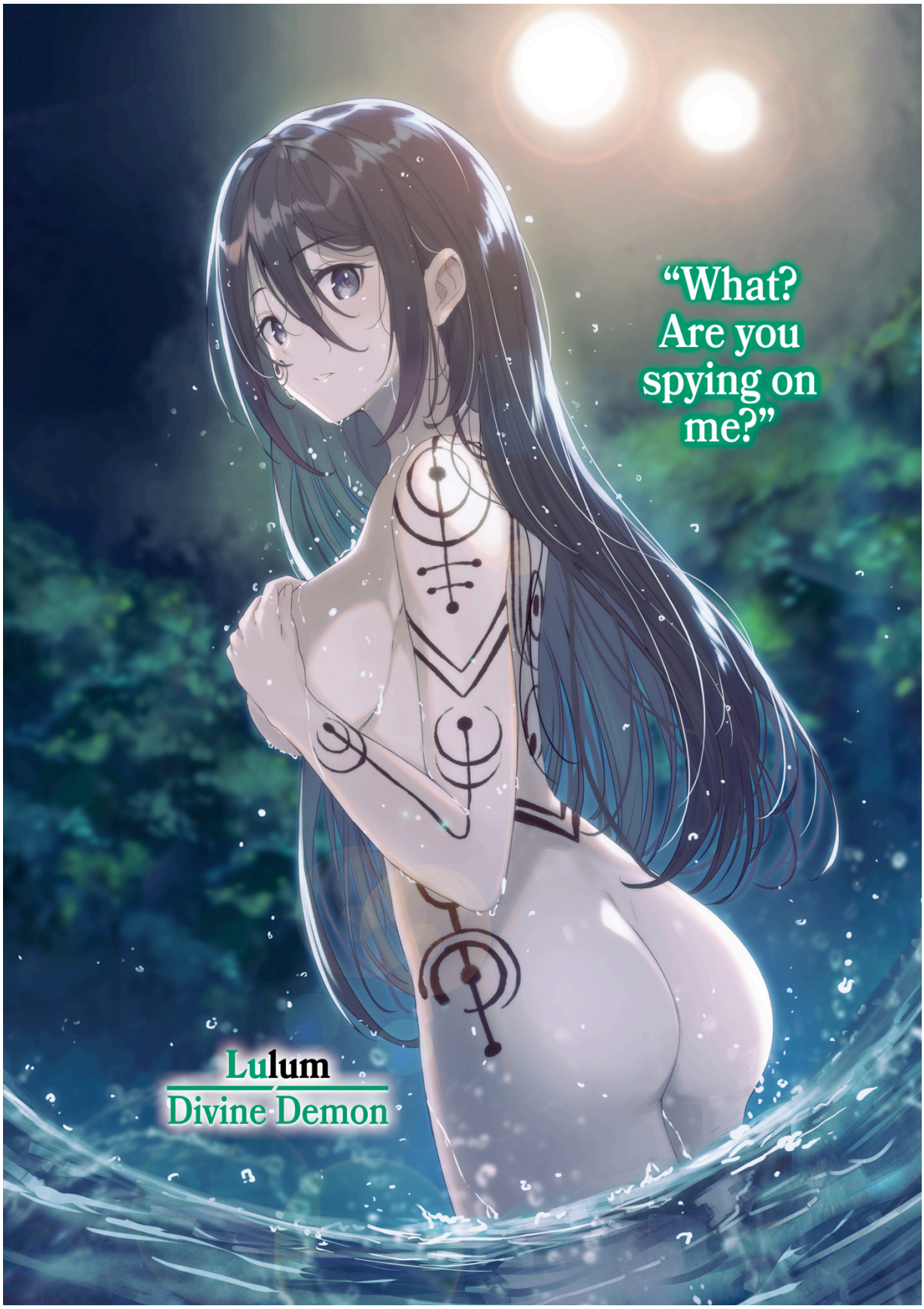

“What? Are you spying on me?”
Lulum
Divine Demon



Table of Contents

1. Cover
    1. Color Illustrations
    2. Jnovels
    3. Act 1
    4. Act 2
    5. Act 3
    6. Act 1
    7. Act 2
    8. Act 3
    9. Act 4
2. Extra Story: Gold and Ghosts
3. Extra Story: A Transformation of Scales
4. Bonus Textless Illustrations
5. About J-Novel Club
6. Copyright



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

Zerobooks Universal

Zerobooks USA ONLY

Zerobooks IOS

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

Jnovels.com

Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with

Chapter 1

Act 1

Dear Seika,

As the cold subsides and the flowers begin to bud, I hope this letter finds you well. Please forgive my delay in writing you. While I heard you made it to Rakana safely, I've had my hands full with urgent matters and haven't had the opportunity to pick up the pen. In all my life, I've never experienced such frustrating days as I have recently.

Yet thanks to those efforts, I've put most of my difficulties behind me and managed to find the time to write you this letter. I'm pouring the joy of finally being able to put my thoughts into words into this ink. I think that's enough preamble. Allow me to say what I've wanted to tell you the most.

Seika, I cannot thank you enough for saving Rakana. In truth, I knew there was a possibility the stampede would occur. A few days after you departed, I began seeing it intermittently in my visions. However, I was unable to secure another safe haven for you. Although I wished to inform you, I found myself under watch from several opposing factions due to the turmoil and was unable to send a letter.

I'm not all-powerful, and unforeseen circumstances like this occur on occasion. I sincerely apologize. It doesn't make up for it, but I've included a document you should find useful. Write down whatever sum you like, then take it to any listed companies and they should lend you the money.

I'm told you've begun living as an adventurer. When I heard that Chairman Cyrus tossed you into the city without so much as a proper welcome, I couldn't help but grimace, but I'm glad you seem

to be doing well for yourself. The thought of you as a rugged adventurer intrigues me greatly. I simply must see it for myself one day.

Take care of yourself. I'll write you again.

Sincerely, your Fiona.

I silently closed the letter as I sat in my inn room in Rakana. As Fiona mentioned in her opening, the cold had eased considerably. The long winter was over and the country was welcoming spring. In just another month, it would be a full year since we arrived in Rakana. Looking back, it had been quite hectic.

"Oh, did you get a letter, Master Seika?" Yuki asked, rousing herself from bathing in the sun by the window.

"Yeah. It's from Fiona."

"Ah, from the princess. Feels a little late now. What did she say?"

"She thanked me for dealing with the stampede."

"Hmph."

"She didn't realize it was going to happen until after I left and couldn't contact me for various reasons."

"Sounds like she's just trying to smooth things over," Yuki said, clearly skeptical of Fiona. "I think it's suspicious. She expects us to believe she couldn't see that future and just happened to send you to this city? Don't you think she's tricking you?"

"Hmm... Maybe. Then what do you think her true intentions are?" I asked, folding the letter.

"I think she knew everything and sent you here to deal with the disaster. The city's leader seems to be cooperating with her. Or maybe she views your strength as a threat and was planning on using the disaster to destroy you along with the city!" Yuki shouted indignantly.

"That doesn't seem likely to me," I replied with an awkward smile. "I'm still alive, so if nothing else, I don't think she was trying to get me killed. If that was her goal, she would've chosen a method where I was actually dead in the future she saw."

"Oh, good point."

"I'm not convinced she wanted me to put down the stampede either. Keeping quiet about it then sending a letter filled with

excuses later just doesn't seem like a good strategy to me." The Holy Princess could see the future, excelled at politics, and possessed incredible strength in the form of her holy knights. It was difficult for me to believe this was the best she could come up with.

From Fiona's perspective, there was no merit in making me distrust her. She wouldn't want to deal with the fallout of me causing another major incident. Yet someone who could see the future leading me to a city where a disaster was about to occur was incredibly suspicious—so much so that it raised a red flag even for Yuki of all people. There was no reason for Fiona to deliberately choose such a crude method.

"So, contrary to how it might seem, I think she's actually telling the truth in this letter. At the very least, I don't think she had any ill intent. She was probably just as shocked as we were when she saw the stampede in her visions."

Fiona had wanted to warn us of the danger, but she didn't have anywhere else for us to go. And she couldn't simply tell us to both bunker down in Rakana and somehow save the city. She had probably been frantically searching for some way to change the future and hadn't managed to find anything. Then, after worrying herself sick for a while, she had finally just decided to write a letter apologizing. That was how it seemed to me, anyway.

"Hrm, now that you mention it, you might be right," Yuki groaned. "But don't you think it's possible she even foresaw how you'd respond?"

"I doubt she's counting on someone who suddenly ransacked the imperial palace to be that rational."

"I'm not really sure what to say to that..." After a brief pause, Yuki asked another question. "Do you trust that princess?"

"Hmm..." I hesitated for a moment. "I'm not sure I'd say I trust her, but I don't think she's our enemy. I'm being naive, aren't I?" I asked abruptly. I had gotten involved in political conflict in my past life and been assassinated as a result. No matter how much I owed her, or how well she got along with Amyu and the others, it probably wasn't wise to let my guard down around a princess.

Yet, contrary to my expectations, Yuki shook her head. "No. I

think that's fine."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes." Yuki nodded.

I was surprised. *I was sure she was gonna scold me.*

"You had friends in our previous world's imperial family, didn't you? I think it's okay for you to live the same way you did in your past life."

"The same way, huh?"

Yuki had said that before. After dying the way I had, I found it hard to be so optimistic. It would be pathetic if living the same way here resulted in me meeting the same fate. Even if I wasn't fully committed to living more cunningly, I needed to at least be cautious enough to avoid drawing the attention of those in power. Granted, I couldn't deny that I had been willingly breaking that rule lately. Either way, it wasn't realistic to distance myself from Fiona at this point. I didn't want to be scolded, so I would just follow Yuki's advice for now.

"In that case, I guess I should try to get along amicably with Fiona." I smiled, then looked down at the other piece of paper she had included with her letter. "Besides, she even gave us this."

"What's that paper?"

"A promissory note." The small, rectangular note was the finest quality piece of paper I had ever seen. It had an intricate design along its border, as well as the bank's name, Fiona's signature, and an official seal. However, the amount remained blank. "She said to write any sum I want."

"Um, what's a promissory note?"

"In essence, it's a piece of paper you can exchange for money. If I bring it to the bank written here, or a branch of one of the companies Fiona has invested in, I can convert it into money. And I'm apparently free to choose how much."

"Wow! Isn't that amazing?! All the wealth in the world can belong to you!"

"No, I can't write a ridiculous sum like that. At the end of the day, Fiona is paying for it. I'll need to decide on something appropriate." Still, it seemed like I could ask for a considerable amount.

“Fortunately, we aren’t too pressed for money anymore, but it’s never bad to have this in our pocket. It could save us on a rainy day.”

“That’s wonderful, Master Seika,” Yuki said. “Not only does it give you funds, but her letting you choose the amount means she really trusts you. The princess could face ruin depending on how much you ask for. Being trusted by the imperial family isn’t a bad thing.”

I blinked for a moment at Yuki’s words, then chuckled. “No, the bank can only pay as much as they have in their possession, so I don’t think she’d be ruined.”

“O-Oh, is that right?”

“But I suppose I’ll think of it that way.” With a small smile, I stood up and grabbed my coat.

“Are you heading out?”

“Yeah, I need to buy some stationery. I’m a little worried about how Fiona feels about me right now. I should reply as soon as possible. That said...” I furrowed my brow. “I’m not sure what to write.”

“What are you worried about? Don’t you like writing letters?”

“I do, but her letter kinda felt like something you would write to a sweetheart. She said, ‘Sincerely, your Fiona,’ and stuff.”

“Hmm?”

“Maybe that’s how a princess gets ahead. I’m just not sure how to respond. Truth be told, I don’t know much about the etiquette of this world’s upper class.”

“Um, Master Seika, I don’t think that’s it.”

“What do you mean?”

“No, never mind. There’s no point in telling you,” Yuki said, her tone on the verge of a beleaguered sigh. “You know, I’ve thought this ever since your past life. Be careful, Master Seika.”

“Seriously, what are you talking about?”

“Please don’t do anything that’ll make a woman stab you in the back,” Yuki said like she was lecturing a hopeless man.

◆ ◆ ◆

“Adventurer ranks?”

It was a few days after I responded to Fiona’s letter. As I was having breakfast alone in the guild restaurant, Amyu and the others noticed me and came running over, leaning in eagerly as they asked if I’d heard about adventurer ranks.

“They’re ratings given to adventurers, right?” I asked, searching through my memory. “What about them?”

“Our ranks were finally decided!” Amyu said excitedly, sitting down in front of me without ordering anything.

Not following, I tilted my head. “What do you mean by decided?”

“Um, adventurers are ranked based on their accomplishments and years of experience,” Yifa said, sitting next to Amyu and keeping her eye on the staff.

“Right, that’s how it works. And?”

“We beat a bunch of monsters alongside everyone else during the stampede last year, so the guild was trying to figure out what to do with the ranks of everyone who fought.”

“The guild ranks you based on the kind of monsters your party has defeated, but since parties weren’t really a thing during the stampede, there was an argument over how much credit people should get,” said Amyu, adding to Yifa’s explanation. “Should they move everyone up to rank two or three because there were high-level monsters involved, should they not count it at all because it was a special situation, or should they split the difference and just make everyone rank four or five. That kind of thing.”

I sighed. Since I still wasn’t following, I decided to start by asking about the basics. “What exactly are the accomplishments and experience needed to rank up?”

“Well...” Amyu stared into space as though trying to remember. “You start at ten, and if you defeat a low-level monster, you go up to rank nine. From there, you go up to rank six with each year of experience. But if you defeat a mid-level monster, you go straight to rank five regardless of how many years you have. Then, if you have five or more years of experience, you’ll become rank four. Likewise, if you defeat a high-level monster, you’ll become rank three, and if you have ten or more years of experience, you’ll become rank two.”

"Hmm, I see." It was a system that graded people on both accomplishments and experience, but even if someone made it to rank three simply by being strong, they would have to wait ten years before they could become rank two. If someone managed to survive that long while fighting powerful foes, they would certainly be a seasoned veteran.

"Then what about rank one?"

"Rank one and junior rank one are both only given out under special authorization by the guild. Mayor Cyrus is supposedly rank one, but I don't think there are any others in Rakana."

So it's like an honorary position. That means rank two is functionally the highest an adventurer can go.

"But there are also separate party ranks, and those have a lot of junior rank ones," Amyu added. "My dad's party is one, and so are Zamrug's Crimson Wings and Lloyd's Grove Alliance. A party has to be pretty famous to get a rank, though."

"That's complicated, but I think I get the gist of it." Basically, you received party rankings by being famous. I returned to the original subject. "So, they were debating whether to acknowledge accomplishments during the stampede, huh? There were definitely people who really stepped up and took down high-level monsters, but there were probably also people who just hid the whole time. What did the guild end up deciding?"

"Heh heh heh... Take a look at this!" With a grin, Amyu held out a small medallion. Small enough to be pinched between one's fingers, it was made from a yellowish metal and had a chain attached so it would be worn around the neck. The number five was engraved on it, alongside Amyu's name and the Adventurers Guild emblem. "All the adventurers who fought in the stampede are being treated like they defeated a mid-level monster. We're all rank five now!"

The tag seemed to authorize her as a rank five adventurer. Upon closer inspection, Yifa and Mabel had them hanging around their necks too.

"Huh. Can I take a look at that?" I borrowed Amyu's tag.

The yellowish metal was most likely brass. The engraving was more intricate than I'd expected. The rank number and guild

emblem were to prevent forgery, so they were expected, but they had even included Amyu's name. That was probably designed to prevent theft or unauthorized trading of the tags. After looking at the engraved five for a moment, I silently handed it back. Amyu immediately pouted in dissatisfaction.

"What, no reaction? You don't have any thoughts?"

"Well..." I had no choice but to explain why I felt conflicted. "Just rank five? You defeated a lesser daimon and a naga, didn't you? Those are high-level monsters. You should be rank three."

"There's nothing we can do about that," Amyu said, hanging the tag from her neck. "I wasn't really adventuring at the time, and I was only twelve. The guild isn't gonna recognize that."

"Oh, right. You have to be fifteen to be officially recognized as an adventurer by the guild." Amyu had told me before that there were younger adventurers, but you had to be an adult to actually register with the guild.

"Besides, we can just rank up later!" Amyu said with a wide smile. "Once the dungeons are back, we can defeat a high orc or something. An elder treant would be nice too since I couldn't beat that other one." Despite being ranked lower than her abilities would suggest, Amyu seemed to be in a good mood. She had been adventuring since she was a child, but she had never been able to join the guild until now, making this her first ranking. Maybe that was what she was happy about.

Suddenly, a realization struck me. "Wait, does that mean my accomplishments aren't gonna be recognized?"

"Why wouldn't they be?"

"I was only fourteen during the stampede. My birthday's in autumn. I haven't been in a dungeon since I became an adult, so am I still rank ten?"

"Look," Amyu said, clearly annoyed. "Do you really think they wouldn't acknowledge you for a stupid reason like that after all you did? People fake their age by a year or two all the time."

"Oh, good." I sighed with relief. I didn't particularly care about my rank, but being the only one stuck at a lower rank wouldn't look good. Returning my gaze to the table, I mumbled as I ate the rest of

my breakfast. “So, we’re rank five, huh? I guess I’ll need to go get my tag. Do I just pick it up from the guild? Is there a fee or anything?”

Nobody answered me.

“Uh, guys? What’s wrong?” Looking up from my food, I saw the three of them staring at me silently.

“Umm, you’re different,” Yifa finally said hesitantly. “You aren’t the same rank as us.”

“Huh?”

“Do you have any idea what you did?” Amyu asked.

“Huh?”

“Here,” said Mabel, who was sitting across from Yifa. She held out a small wooden box. “They gave us yours too.”

“This is my tag?” I took the box and found that it was quite well-made. Undoing the metal latch, I opened the lid. Inside was a single certification tag. However, it looked very different from the tags the others had. It was still made from a yellowish metal, but it was much shinier and had a different number engraved in it—one.

“One? Is this a rank one tag?!”





Just as I was wondering who it could belong to, I saw the name Seika engraved in the tag. Although it didn't have my family name, it was clearly mine. "Wait, the color is different from yours too. Is this gold?"

"Yeah." Amyu nodded, looking somewhat fed up. "Tags are usually made from brass, but junior rank one tags are silver, and rank one tags are gold."

"I-I'm supposed to go adventuring with something this valuable hanging from my neck?"

"I hear they rarely ever give them to active adventurers."

If it's an honorary rank, that would certainly make sense.

"Anyway, the chain isn't gold, and even if you melted it down, you wouldn't get enough gold for a single coin. It's not worth taking someone's life over."

"Yeah, I guess it isn't that big. Still, why am I the only one who's rank one?"

"Are you seriously asking that?"

"It's weird that you think it's weird," said Yifa.

"Isn't it obvious? You basically stopped the stampede by yourself." Mabel made a good point, and I didn't have anything to say in return.

I guess I really did go too far. An uncomfortable expression still on my face, I picked up the gold tag. "I don't really care, but shouldn't something like this be given to me personally by a guild branch leader? Party member or not, entrusting it to someone else doesn't seem smart."

"Don't you think they're busy? You kinda forced them to write that guidebook."

"Oh." Amyu was right. For the past half a year, I'd been compiling information useful for clearing dungeons in a book. After a lot of effort, I had finally completed the first volume and left the rest to the guild. As far as I was concerned, I was just returning work they should have been doing in the first place, but since the monsters were gradually starting to return, the staff all seemed busy. I could understand if they had a bit of a grudge against me.

"What? Did you want an award ceremony or something?" Amyu

said in annoyance upon seeing my frowning face.

"No, absolutely not."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I just feel like the people here have been growing careless in how they treat me lately. They're getting way too familiar, I guess."

"Doesn't that just mean you're fitting in? It's better than the academy where you didn't have any friends."

"Ugh..."

Ignoring my groan, Amyu continued. "It's kinda surprising. Rowdy oddballs seem to like you more than well-mannered noble types, even though that's totally not who you are. Weird."

Now that she mentions it, I'm pretty sure the same was true in my past life. Back when I had been an official with the Bureau of Exorcists, I had never really gotten along with the nobles around me. After returning from the West, I had found myself increasingly associating with eccentric samurai, sorcerers, mountain ascetics, merchants, and people of that ilk. I hadn't had a particularly high-class birth or upbringing in my past life, but perhaps whatever it was that drew them to me hadn't changed even after I'd reincarnated.

"Still, I think they're all grateful to you," Yifa muttered. "There were a lot of rumors circulating before the stampede, but now nobody says anything bad about you. I'm sure they gave you that because they're grateful too."

"By 'that,' do you mean this tag?"

"Yeah. You refused to have a statue built, right? So they wanted to do something else instead. I think the city council felt the same way as the guild, so they all agreed to acknowledge you as rank one."

My gaze drifted down to the golden tag on its own. "I really didn't want them building that statue. They did this instead, huh?"

Realistically, they probably should have stopped at junior rank one. Aside from me, Mayor Cyrus was the only rank one adventurer here. No matter how great my achievements, giving someone as young as me the same rank as the well-respected leader of the city ran the risk of straining relations with Rakana. The guild had likely gone back and forth on the decision. Them making me rank one at

the same time they ranked up all the other adventurers no doubt meant they had the support of the council and Mayor Cyrus.

"In that case, I guess I have to accept," I said with a faint smile. Perhaps risking drawing the attention of politicians and saving Rakana had been worth it. Having a high adventurer rank would almost certainly come in handy in the future. I stared at my name on the tag. "It doesn't have my family name, though."

"That's just how they are. There aren't many adventurers with family names to begin with, and a lot of the people who do have them prefer to keep them hidden. There also isn't any space," said Amyu.

"That's true."

"Anyway, good for you, Seika," Amyu said with a smirk. "Being rank one is pretty crazy. Since you've been acknowledged by the guild, people are gonna treat you like someone amazing anywhere you go."

"I'd prefer they didn't." Still, she had a point. People in this position usually had status and wealth. Despite just having turned sixteen this year, there would no doubt be people who humbled themselves before me just because I was rank one. "Anyway, I doubt I'll have an opportunity to use it for a while," I said, storing the tag in my pocket.

Because of everything I'd done in Rakana, just about everyone here already knew who I was, and I didn't plan on traveling to any other cities for the time being.

"I mean, if you wanna make use of it, you can," Amyu said, a puzzled look on her face. "I'm pretty sure this guild has a request board."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"We could accept a request."

"What's that?"

"You don't know? Rakana has so many dungeons it's less important here, but in other cities, there are a lot of adventurers who get by on requests alone," Amyu said as she stood up. "Since

we're already here, why not take a look?"

◆ ◆ ◆

Amyu dragged me to a large, aged notice board in the corner of the guild. Light brown pieces of paper were pinned to it here and there.

"You can submit requests to the guild," Amyu explained. "They get posted like this, then if an adventurer finds one they like, they can accept it and get a reward from the guild when it's completed. Of course, you don't get anything if you fail."

"Huh. I had no idea this existed."

"There aren't too many adventurers who accept requests in Rakana. When there are big dungeons nearby, it's more profitable to just hunt monsters." No wonder I had never heard anyone talk about the request board. "Dungeons are formed naturally, so unless the guild deems one off-limits, anybody can enter. Requests, on the other hand, are limited by rank. Especially the ones with good rewards. You don't have to worry about your rank much here in Rakana, but in other cities, it directly affects your quality of life."

"So, is rank five good, Amyu?" Mabel asked.

"I'd say it's about normal. As long as we aren't picky, we won't have trouble finding work."

"All right."

"What kind of requests are there?" Yifa asked.

"All kinds. Seriously, just about anything you can think of," Amyu replied as though reminiscing. "There are simple ones like gathering herbs or ores, then there's stuff like guarding merchant caravans or finding items lost in unusual places. Those end up being kinda costly, though, since the requester has to prepare rewards for the adventurers and pay the posting fee to the guild."

"Come to think of it, beginner adventurers exterminate slimes in the sewers a lot. Is that a request from the city council?" I asked.

"Yeah. You remember the adventurers who were guarding the academy for a bit after the daimon attack? I bet the academy put in a request with the Lodonea guild branch and hired them."

I see. So we've had more involvement with the system than I thought.

"Still, most of the requests are monster exterminations," Amyu continued.

"For gathering their materials?"

"Sometimes, but a lot of it is just periodic culling of monsters in forests so they don't get too close to roads or villages. It's usually requested by city or village representatives."

"Hmm."

"There don't seem to be many normal requests here," Amyu said as she looked over the papers pinned to the board. "Maybe it's because nearby monsters get taken out by adventurers, and herbs and ores already get put up for sale without needing to be requested. All they have are high-reward requests from distant places that are copies of requests posted at other branches. Difficult requests sometimes get posted in other cities too."

"Let's see." I scanned over the different requests. They did indeed all seem to be for distant locations. We would need a carriage to get to any of them. They offered good pay, but a lot of them seemed to be rather difficult as well. "This part where it says fifth rank or higher means you have to be that rank to accept the request, huh?"

"Yeah. The guild won't give you the details of the request if you don't meet the qualifications."

"They don't care about the number of people or the ranks of the other party members?"

"People usually assemble a party after taking a request, so the guild doesn't interfere too much. Most parties are made up of people around the same rank anyway."

"I guess that makes sense."

"Hey!" Yifa pointed at the request board like she just had a good idea. "How about we take a request?"

"Let's give it a try," Mabel agreed, nodding her head. Despite how they seemed, Yifa and Mabel liked to stay active. We hadn't gone to any dungeons since the stampede, so they were probably bored of being cooped up in Rakana all the time. I, however, was a little reluctant.

"Leaving Rakana, huh?" Nothing had come of it for so long that it was easy to forget we were on the run for destroying the imperial palace. Technically, I was the one who had destroyed the palace, and it was only Amyu who was on the run, but it didn't feel smart to leave the shelter Fiona had worked so hard to prepare for us. While I felt bad for the two of them, I didn't think it was a good idea.

"Actually, didn't you just get a letter from Fiona?" Amyu said before I could express my opposition.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"Did she write anything about pursuers?" Amyu asked hesitantly.

I was confused for a moment, then answered honestly. "No, nothing like that."

"Good." Amyu sounded relieved, then a smile appeared on her face. "Then why not? I've been wanting to go adventuring again."

I pondered what she meant for a moment. *I see. If anyone in the imperial court were trying to send pursuers after us, Fiona would've informed us in that letter. Since she didn't mention it, at the very least they aren't doing anything noticeable enough for Fiona to catch wind of at the moment. I guess a little adventuring couldn't hurt.*

"Sure. As long as it isn't too far away, we can accept a request."

Yifa's face lit up. "Yay! What should we choose, Mabel?"

"Hmm..."

I took a step back and watched as they compared and debated the papers posted on the board.

"We can basically accept any request here since Seika's rank one," said Amyu.

"Then how about this one?" Mabel suggested, pointing at a faded piece of paper in the top left corner. "It says slay a hydra nesting in the Gloom Ore Mountains." It was a pretty tricky request. Hydras were one of the more dangerous species of dragonkin, and while the distance wasn't too bad, it was in a relatively unexplored area. "This one has the highest reward."

"Wow, you're right. It says you have to be a rank two adventurer or higher, but Seika could accept it," said Yifa.

"We're not doing something like this," Amyu said with a frown. "It's too much for us to handle."

"Yeah, that's true," Yifa replied.

"It was just a suggestion," said Mabel.

"What's the problem? I can take it down." I had wanted to avoid standing out before, but now that I'd put down that enhanced wyrm during the stampede, adding another dragonkin or two to that list didn't make a difference. However, Amyu looked upset.

"You're the one who's gonna be fighting the hydra and bringing its corpse back to town. What are we supposed to do? Just follow you?"

"Oh, good point."

"We need to take a request we can all do together," Yifa said.

"We already decided that you're the healer," Amyu added.

Now that she mentioned it, we had indeed agreed upon that. I was the party's healer and porter. We needed to choose a request where they could handle all the fighting. I silently watched the three of them discuss in front of the request board.

"Humans are mysterious creatures," Yuki suddenly whispered into my ear. "Even in another world, they all try to make it on their own. They have the protection of an immense, unfailing power, yet they choose not to rely on it and instead survive by their own strength. I just don't get it."

Yuki was probably recalling my disciples from our previous world. The children I had cared for had all eventually left my estate. Each of them had lived their own lives, and not one had ever asked me to look after them until the end. Leaving home was human nature. Even when faced with someone who had transcended human lifespan and wielded extraordinary power, that didn't change. But perhaps that was for the best.

"There's no such thing as a being that never perishes," I muttered so quietly I wasn't sure Yuki could hear me. In the end, I had been defeated in that world. Not even an exorcist who was feared by the gods and had obtained eternal life could escape his fate. Perhaps it was because they knew they couldn't rely on my power forever that they sought to live by their own strength. That could be called nothing short of keen insight.

"Oh, what about this?" Yifa said, pointing at a piece of paper. I

walked over to everyone and took a look at it.

"Let's see. Exterminate fifty almiraj, huh?" said Amyu. Almiraj were rabbit monsters with a single horn on their head. Despite being rabbits, they were extremely violent and would attack humans on sight. "Wow, that's a big reward. The location is the forest near Keltz. That's not too far."

"Where is that?" Mabel asked.

"It's a pretty big city north of here. It's about three days by carriage."

"It says you have to be rank five or higher. That means we should be okay," said Yifa.

"Are you sure you don't want something harder?" I interjected. Almiraj weren't weak, but they weren't particularly formidable either. Although fifty was a lot, it was still an easy request for three girls who could defeat high-level monsters. "There are stronger monsters that are still nearby. Like this request to slay a huge boar, or this one for an evil treant. This one for gathering red-gold herbs sounds interesting. They're supposed to be pretty rare."

"That sounds like a pain," Yifa complained.

"Not feeling it," said Mabel.

"We don't need money that badly, so if we're going somewhere unfamiliar, we might as well take something simple," said Amyu. "We can hunt a few horned rabbits, then take it easy in Keltz before coming back."

Everyone was against it. It seemed like they didn't want a serious adventure. Still, I pointed at the paper. "But it says six or more people is recommended."

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that too much." Amyu brushed it off. "The guild staff decides those recommendations, but most of them don't actually have any adventuring experience, so they aren't really accurate. It's best to just look at the content and decide for ourselves."

"So you think four people will be enough for this request?" I asked.

"I don't see why not. They're just almiraj. Fifty is a lot, but I'm sure we can have it wrapped up in a day."

“All right, then. If you say so.” They were the ones who wanted to take a request, so I’d leave it to them.

“Amyu, what do we do with this request?” Yifa asked.

“It’s a request from the branch in Keltz, so we have to formally accept it there. So we should...”

Amyu explained the plan moving forward, and the four of us went to accept our first request.

Act 2

Once every few years, a massive outbreak of almiraj occurs in the forest near town. While they rarely venture out of the forest, they're known to attack merchant carriages on occasion. And though they're quick to run from the strong, they chase after those weaker than them. That means goods stop coming in and our business takes a hit! So, adventurer, would you mind hunting around fifty of those horned rabbits in the forest? You'll be handsomely rewarded!

That was the gist of the request from the Keltz Commerce Guild. It was written in quite a distinctive way. Not even in letters had I seen anything written so casually. Adventurer requests seemed to have an odd culture to them.

"Are you still looking at that, Seika?" Yifa asked, sitting next to me.

"Huh? Oh, no, I'm done." I stuffed the copy of the request form into my pocket. Amyu and Mabel were sitting in front of us, sleeping quietly.

It had been three days since we left Rakana. The carriage we were riding in had safely made it to the outskirts of Keltz. We would arrive in the city before dusk.

"We'd be in trouble if we got the request wrong, so I was double-checking just to be safe."

"Don't worry about that," Yifa said, clearly not concerned. "We're going to the city's guild branch together once we get there, aren't we? We can ask for the details then." Even if you took the paper posted on the request board, you couldn't accept a quest from another branch without visiting that branch in person. Although the forest was outside Keltz, we had to enter whether we liked it or not. "I wonder what kind of city Keltz is."

"You seem happy, Yifa."

"Yeah, I am." Yifa nodded, a smile on her face. "I've gotten to

visit so many places since leaving the manor. Lodonea, the capital, Astilia, Rakana, and now Keltz. People usually don't travel so much unless they're merchants. I was just thinking how lucky I am."

"Maybe you're right." Had Yifa been born an ordinary peasant rather than the Lamprogue family's slave, she likely never would have left the village she grew up in. She would have gotten married, had kids, and passed away without ever being able to make use of her ability to see elementals.

Of course, there are people who want that sort of quiet life. In fact, most people do. But if Yifa isn't like that, then maybe my decision to take her with me that day was the right one, even if it meant her living life on the run.

I gave a small smile. "Keltz is pretty large from what I've heard. There are vast farms outside the walls, but it's mainly a commercial city. There should be plenty of interesting things to see."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"That said, it gets heavy snowfall sometimes, so it isn't an easy place to live. Also... No, never mind."

"What's wrong, Seika?"

"It's nothing. Oh, and there's a dungeon nearby, so there should be a lot of adventurers. We might be able to hear some fun stories since their guild branch is so big."

"I wonder if it has a place to eat like Rakana's guild," Yifa said cheerfully as I looked at her out of the corner of my eye and exhaled softly.

The heavy snow wasn't Keltz's only issue. It was on the northern end of the empire—putting it close to demon territory. It wasn't so close that the imperial military had stationed troops there to guard the border, but it was the closest we'd ever been to demon territory. Realistically, it probably wasn't that dangerous. Close to demon territory or not, it was still a large city within the empire. It was unlikely any demons would show up nearby.

Still, I can't shake this feeling.

◆ ◆ ◆

“All right! On with the hunt!” Amyu’s voice rang out through the forest on a crisp spring morning, winter’s cold still remaining in the air.

We had arrived in Keltz as planned the day before, then dismounted our carriage and headed to the guild branch on foot. Amyu walked right up to the reception desk with her tag and said we were accepting the request.

The guild employee didn’t seem comfortable allowing someone who just barely met the rank five requirement take the request with only a party of four, but in the end, it was given to us. Then the guild explained where in the forest we should go and how to prove we had killed the requisite number of almiraj. We needed to bring fifty horns back, which the guild would purchase from us along with our reward, so we would make a nice profit.

The forest wasn’t that far away from the imperial highway. The empire had cleared dense forests to build the highway, which meant that there were occasional animal or monster attacks. Requests like this one were issued throughout the year to prevent dangerous monsters from approaching the road.

Despite immediately going to the forest after three days of travel, everyone seemed full of energy.

“Man, it’s cold,” I said. There were still patches of snow left in the shade of the trees. The chill was quite harsh first thing in the morning.

“Heh heh, is our spoiled noble healer cold?” Amyu asked smugly. “A swordsman can handle this no problem. Isn’t that right, Mabel?”

“I’m fine,” Mabel replied.

True enough, the two members of our vanguard didn’t seem the slightest bit bothered by the cold despite how lightly they were dressed. Just looking at them made me shiver. I almost thought I was crazy until I looked over at Yifa and saw her shivering too. That meant they were probably the weird ones.

“Anyway, what’s the plan?” I asked. “Are we just gonna wander around until we see an almiraj?”

“Doesn’t look like we need to.” Amyu’s attention was focused straight ahead—there was a rabbit with brown and white fur and a

single horn atop its head.

That's an almiraj, huh? It didn't give off the same impression as an ordinary wild rabbit. The ways its eyes were fixed on us made it seem more like a wolf or bear than a harmless herbivore.

Without any warning, the almiraj kicked off the ground. Its horn was pointed right at Amyu.

"Ah ha ha! Here it comes!" Amyu repelled its charge with the slender edge of her spellblade. A sharp, metallic clash echoed through the forest as though two blades had struck each other. It was impressive, given how difficult thrusts were to deflect. The almiraj landed on the ground, then noticed Mabel sneaking up behind it and quickly turned around. "Your throwing knives aren't gonna hit, Mabel!"

"I know," Mabel said, throwing several knives anyway. The almiraj dodged them with ease, then aimed its horn at Mabel as though it were enraged. Mabel was wearing gauntlets on both her hands today. It looked to me like she was getting ready to punch the almiraj; her usual battle-axe was still on her back and she showed no sign of reaching for it. Perhaps she had given up on being able to hit the nimble creature with it from the start. Fighting it empty-handed probably gave her the most maneuverability.

The almiraj kicked off the ground again, running at Mabel, and then—

"Ah."

It immediately turned ninety degrees and raced off deeper into the forest.

"Huh?! It's running away?!" Yifa hurriedly created blades of wind, but they missed the fleeing rabbit monster, gouging into trees or the ground instead. The almiraj soon disappeared among the trees.

"Ugh, it got away," Amyu groaned. "Horned rabbits are quick to run when they decide they're outmatched. It wasn't too strong, but that's gonna make them hard to take down."

"Hey, Amyu," I asked hesitantly. "Are they all gonna do that? How long is it going to take to kill fifty of them?"

"We'll be fine," Amyu said optimistically. "Besides, they're supposed to be everywhere, right? It'll be quick once we get the

hang of it.”

◆ ◆ ◆

After wandering around for about two and a half hours, we had hunted a grand total of three almiraj.

“I-I can’t find any...” Amyu complained wearily. The supposed outbreak of almiraj was proving rather difficult to find, and when we did run into one, it would get away if we weren’t careful. We weren’t having much luck as a result.

“They’re around. They’re just running away before we even see them,” I replied. From what I could see through my shikigami, there was a considerable number of almiraj in the area. But they noticed us before we noticed them, immediately fleeing the scene.

“I get why they recommended six or more people now,” Mabel said, sounding worn out. “This is impossible without enough people to corner them.”

“Hear that, Amyu?”

“Shut up!” Amyu shouted at me. “What good is saying that now?!” To be honest, I hadn’t expected this either. “They said it was an outbreak, so I expected a huge group!”

“Horned rabbits usually venture out alone.” I was starting to want to give up. It had become clear to me what the real purpose of this request was.

Killing just fifty monsters in a mass outbreak had never struck me as particularly effective to begin with. However, it was a different story if that monster had a habit of fleeing from strong opponents. Even skilled adventurers would take a while to kill them, meaning they would have to make repeat trips to the forest. Each time, the almiraj would flee deeper into the trees, pushing even the ones that escaped extermination further from human settlements. If the adventurers got sick of it like us and quit halfway through, that was even better—they didn’t have to pay out the reward. I had taken the city merchants to be more lax than traveling peddlers, but they were in fact quite clever.

“It’s weird,” Amyu grumbled, a glum look on her face. “They

didn’t used to run away this much.”

“Doesn’t that just mean you’re stronger?” I asked.

“Hmm... I think it’s because you have a weird aura.”

“I’d like to deny that, but regardless, I don’t think these monsters are sharp enough to pick up on it. Probably.” As we were walking through the forest and chatting, I suddenly stopped and turned to look deeper inside.

“H-Huh? The elementals are acting funny.” Yifa looked around in confusion.

I immediately sent a shikigami white-eye flying in the direction the flow of energy was coming from—then I saw it.

“Way deeper in the forest, two people who appear to be adventurers are fighting monsters. What are those? They seem to be astral-type monsters, but they look like pale rags floating in the air. They’re using ice magic.”

“Sounds like frost wraiths,” Amyu said, her voice stiff. “They’re high-level monsters, and pretty annoying ones at that.”

“So that’s what they are.” Wraiths were powerful even among astral monsters. As I recalled, frost wraiths were a type of wraith capable of using water element magic. “Looks like there are four or five of them.”

“Th-That many?”

“The adventurers seem to be having a hard time. What do you wanna do?” I asked the three. “Should we help, or should I just keep watch so we don’t get involved?”

Had we been in Rakana and adventurers we knew were in danger, there wouldn’t have been any question, but we were in an unfamiliar place. One never knew what consequences good intentions might bring. I wasn’t very knowledgeable about astral monsters either. However, the two looked like they might be in trouble.

“Obviously we’re gonna help them!” Despite all that, Amyu didn’t hesitate at all. “Adventurers help each other out!”

“Let’s go, Seika,” said Mabel.

“I wanna help too,” Yifa added.

After a moment of silence, I nodded. “All right. They’re due

north.”

“Hurry!”

We all raced north through the forest. As we ran, I felt a little foolish. Why had I even asked? Knowing them, there was only ever going to be one answer.

Finally, the two came into view between the trees. They were both wearing hooded adventurer cloaks, so I couldn’t make out their features. However, judging from their builds, it was likely that the one in front was a man and the one behind was a woman.

The man appeared to be a martial artist. He had no weapons, fending off the pale wraiths with his fists alone. It looked to be a poor matchup, as their spectral bodies immediately reformed after his fists passed through them, showering him with a barrage of ice shards.

The woman had a bow on her back so she was likely an archer, but she currently had a dagger in her hands. It seemed to be a magic item as pale blue light danced through the air every time she swung. However, it didn’t appear to be very effective against the frost wraiths—perhaps it was also of the water element.

The icy wraiths floated through the air, waiting for their chance to finish the two off. The two people must have been rather formidable to hold out for so long when they were at a disadvantage in both numbers and matchup.

“Are you okay?! We’ll back you up!” Amyu shouted.

The pair turned to face her, and they indeed turned out to be a young man and woman. They both looked fierce, yet their skin was as pale as death.

Well, I can worry about them later. Dealing with the wraiths comes first. Something suddenly occurred to me and I asked a question. “Since this is helping someone and not adventuring, am I allowed to fight?”

Amyu, who had already taken off running, stumbled a bit and turned around. “O-Obviously! If you’re gonna do something, do it already!”

“All right.” I figured she’d say as much, so I already had a hitogata floating in the air.

Summoning: Gashadokuro. A giant skeleton over nine meters tall emerged from the spatial distortion. The ayakashi sent out several hitodama that drifted around it, slowly advancing toward the frost wraiths. It looked at a floating wraith with its empty eye sockets and extended a bony hand, grabbing it—then it began to ravenously devour the monster.

"Huh?!"

"What the..."

The pair watched the hellish sight in shock. The remaining wraiths froze for a moment, then started attacking the skeleton with icicles and icy wind. However, because its body was made entirely of hard bone, the gashadokuro paid them no mind.

With its free hand, it grabbed another wraith that had strayed too close. The pale blue specter thrashed and writhed, but it did nothing to stop the gashadokuro from biting its head off. There was no sound of it tearing or chewing the spectral body. Only the dry clatter of teeth colliding against each other echoed through the forest.

"Bleh..." Yuki made a grossed-out sound from inside my hair. "Um, Master Seika, why the gashadokuro? If those things are a type of ghost, there are plenty of ways you could've sealed them."

"I wanted to test if it could absorb wraiths." Gashadokuro were ayakashi that took on the form of a skeleton, formed from the accumulated hatred of those who died and were left exposed to the elements. Perhaps due to that origin, they possessed the ability to absorb souls. Since the opportunity had presented itself, I wanted to test if it could absorb astral-type monsters.

"Well, it seems like it can."

"It looks more like it's eating someone rather than absorbing souls." It didn't do all that chewing when absorbing souls of the dead. Judging from the flow of power, a lot of energy was being lost in the process. Nonetheless, since it had ignored the nearby humans and headed straight for the wraiths, it must have preferred them. Despite being monsters, the frost wraiths seemed to be similar to vengeful ghosts.

The remaining frost wraiths had already scattered in different directions. I returned the gashadokuro to the other plane with a

hitogata gateway, then turned to the dumbfounded pair.

"I'm glad you seem to be unharmed, but you must be freezing. Wanna warm up?"

◆ ◆ ◆

I surrounded a section of the forest with hitogata and warmed it like a fireplace. The six of us—our party plus the duo we had saved—sat in a circle within the warmth.

"It's so warm."

"I'm getting sleepy."

"Having you around sure is handy."

The girls all sounded weary. Even Amyu and Mabel must have just been acting tough when they'd said they weren't cold, as they both wore content expressions.

"What odd magic," the girl from the duo said. Although her hood was still up, I could now see her black hair and eyes, shockingly pale skin, and intelligent features. She appeared to be seventeen or eighteen, though her true age was impossible to guess. She murmured quietly, holding a cup of hot water I had prepared. "It's warm despite there being no fire or sunlight. What is this?"





"It's another form of light being emitted from the talismans around us. It's part of fire and sunlight, but it's invisible to the naked eye."

"If you can't see it, how do you know it's there?"

"Excellent question." And one well worth answering. "Long ago, there were people who wondered if invisible colors existed beyond the edge of the rainbow. To test this, they placed a mound of snow just outside the red band of a rainbow and found that it melted slightly faster compared to mounds placed elsewhere. This heat-carrying light beyond red is called infrared. It can also be seen through the third eye that some snakes have."

"You can't place objects in the sky, and people can't see through the eyes of snakes."

"That depends on how creative you are."

The woman went quiet at my answer as though deep in thought. I stole a glance at the man, but he showed no intention of joining the conversation, keeping his head lowered in silence. He was large in stature and seemed to be around four or five years older than the woman, yet like her, his true age remained a mystery.

I wondered what their relationship was. They didn't appear to be a couple, and while they were likely from the same place, they didn't seem to be blood related either. If I had to guess, I would say they most resembled a master and servant. The woman with the bow conducted herself with grace for an adventurer, while the man gave off a rough and untalkative impression. There was something about them that hinted at a difference in status.

"W-Well, I'm glad you're okay," Yifa said timidly, forcing a smile.

The pair remained silent, but the awkward atmosphere didn't stop Amyu from speaking up. "Where did you guys run into those frost wraiths? Do those things appear in this forest?"

"There's a cave that turned into a dungeon deeper in the forest," the man said, seemingly judging that the woman wasn't going to answer. His voice was as deep as his looks would suggest. "There are fairly strong monsters lurking there. They chased us when we encountered them." It sounded like he was telling us as little as possible.

“That’s unlucky,” Amyu said in a relaxed tone, stretching out her legs. “Were you doing a request, or were you looking for materials and dungeon drops?”

“The latter.”

“We’re hunting almiraj for a request, but we can barely find any. It’s turned into a real pain.”

The man didn’t respond.

“So, what are you gonna do? We’re gonna be out here for a little while longer, but do you wanna return to Keltz with us? You guys seem exhausted, and there’s no telling when you might run into bandits. I’d hate for you to get robbed—”

“Please don’t look down on us,” the woman said, interrupting Amyu with a glare. “Human brigands are no threat to us.”

“All right,” Amyu said curtly as she stood up. “Then we’ll part ways here. We’re leaving, everyone.”

“Huh? We’re leaving already?” Yifa asked.

“Yeah,” Amyu said with a scoff. “Adventurers also like to keep to themselves. There’s no reason for us to deal any further with people who venture into dungeons unprepared and can’t even offer a word of thanks.”

“Hmm... All right.” Mabel stood up after a moment of hesitation. Yifa reluctantly got up as well.

“You too, Seika. Collect your talismans.”

“Sure.” Amyu had a point. There was no reason for us to be too proactive. Just as I was about to stand up—

“Wait.” The woman seemed hesitant, but she slowly strung a few words together. “I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry if I offended you.” Then she turned to me. “And thank you for saving us.”

A sour look on her face, Amyu silently sat back down. Yifa and Mabel exchanged looks, then followed suit.

I decided to break the silence. “Amyu seems like she wants to keep going, but to be honest, I’m pretty sick of hunting almiraj. I wanna head back to town soon. If you still need something from us, could you make it quick?”

“I have a favor to ask you.” The woman stared right at me, her eyes firm. “Please rescue our people.”

"Hey!" the man cried out in a panic.

"I know," the woman said, looking in his direction. "It's fine." The man fell silent.

Seems like she really is the one in charge. After a pause, I asked another question. "What do you mean by 'rescue your people'?"

"One step at a time," the woman began quietly. "I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? I'm Lulum, and this is Nozlow. We're traveling adventurers from the same remote village." The woman who introduced herself as Lulum glanced at the man named Nozlow briefly before continuing. "We want to rescue our fellow villagers who've been captured by merchants from Keltz."

"Captured by merchants?"

"Slave traders," Lulum said with an unhappy expression. "Our people are currently being held as slaves."

"Slaves are generally people who were sold off by their parents, couldn't pay back their debts, or committed a crime."

"None of those apply here. I don't know the details, but I'm certain they were kidnapped. That's the only possible answer," Lulum continued matter-of-factly. "They're locked up in a warehouse in Keltz right now. We wanted to buy as many of them back as possible, so we were in the dungeon hunting monsters that sell for a lot. Most of them weren't any trouble, but we didn't have a good way of dealing with the frost wraiths so we were in a tough spot. I'm truly grateful for you saving us."

"So, what is it you want us to do?" I asked, getting the conversation back on topic.

Lulum steeled herself. "I'd like you to help us rescue our people from the slave company in Keltz."

"Rescue them how?"

"A summoner of your level should have no problem with merchant security. You should be able to shake off the city guard too." She didn't say it outright, but it was clear she intended to use force. She continued on as though trying to justify it. "Our people are being sold for a high price. To be honest, hunting monsters would never earn us enough money. On top of that, wandering adventurers like us would never be recognized as customers. They're

going to be taken to the capital soon, and then we'll lose our chance to rescue them." Lulum leaned forward. "Of course, we'll repay you in any way we can, so—"

"Do you hear yourself?" I cut Lulum off. "There's no way we're helping with that."

Lulum's eyes went wide, and she pursed her lips.

"Slave trading is legal in the empire," I continued. "You expect us to disrupt legitimate business and steal their merchandise? We aren't gonna help you break the law."

"A-Are you saying this country allows kidnapping?!"

"Kidnapping is illegal. If it happens within the empire or its vassal states, that is. If you think your people have been illegally enslaved, then take it up with the lord of Keltz. That's the correct way to do things. Any decent lord would help you out—provided you can offer proof they were unjustly enslaved. If you're turned away, then you can also hire a lawyer and take them to court. It'd be cheaper than trying to buy them back. Of course, it requires you to win in court."

Lulum pressed her lips together and looked down, saying nothing.

"Come to think of it, you said you'd repay us any way you can, right?" I suddenly remembered. "How did you intend to do that when you don't have any money?"

"We still have things of value." Lulum pulled a small pouch out of her pocket and poured its contents onto her palm. Exquisite gold jewelry and several gemstones fell out and she presented them to me. "There's more where this came from if you help us out."

I looked at the precious goods coldly. "Unfortunately, we aren't pressed for money at the moment. Besides, even to my layman's eye, this stuff is clearly worth a lot. Couldn't you exchange it for money and at least a few of your people back? Granted, it's such a hefty sum people would probably ask how you got it."

"It's difficult for us to convert it into money due to certain circumstances, so we can only offer goods." Lulum implored me more desperately this time. "Please, we can't depend on the empire's laws as traveling adventurers. We can only rely on your strength. Our people haven't done anything wrong. They don't deserve to be enslaved. It isn't right. Surely you understand that—"

"Not happening," I said firmly. "If we're going to talk about right and wrong, think about the merchant who's being robbed. If these slaves are expensive, it probably cost a lot to acquire them. He may well go bankrupt if he loses them all. Is that right to you?"

"I-It's what he gets for buying people who were kidnapped!"

"He might have a wife and children. Is it still justified if those innocent people end up on the street?"

"Well..."

"I'll be blunt—I don't want any part of whatever you're plotting. All the more so if you're gonna try to bring morality into it." Then I delivered the finishing blow. "I'm not helping demons."

Lulum's eyes went wide and her breath caught in her throat. Nozlow immediately tensed up.

"Huh?"

"Wh-What do you mean?"

Mabel and Amyu didn't seem to have realized it and looked back and forth between me and the pair in confusion.

"S-Seika, um..." Yifa, however, didn't appear quite as lost. Perhaps the behavior of her elementals had given her an idea as to what was going on.

Ignoring the three of them, I looked straight at the demons who had introduced themselves as Lulum and Nozlow. "I felt something off about your flow of energy from the start, but I've never heard of a demon that could disguise itself as a human. Even up close, nothing about your appearance or behavior seemed off. Which means you're divine demons, aren't you?"

The pair didn't respond.

"If you're a race that naturally resembles humans, then it would be possible for you to claim to be adventurers and sneak into a human country. Though, as I recall, divine demons are supposed to have black markings running along their bodies. Are you hiding them with dye or something?"

Nozlow's body shifted, then a moment later, he had closed the difference between us, his hand poised to strike. It happened in less than the blink of an eye. An ordinary human's life likely would have been ended before they even realized what had happened. However,

his strike never came.

Nozlow's gaze shifted to the side and he stopped in place, immediately crossing his arms above his head to block Mabel's battle-axe. The attack fell on him like a massive boulder and the sound echoed through the forest.

"Y-You little..." Nozlow growled.

"Hmm."

Nozlow had stopped a blow capable of splitting a living mail in two. The gauntlets he was wearing seemed simple, but judging from the sound the axe made against them, the arm portion must have been reinforced with steel. Nonetheless, for him to have blocked Mabel's attack, it was clear he was a skilled martial artist. Even the expressionless Mabel appeared to be taken aback.

"Nozlow!" Lulum shouted, standing up and drawing the bow on her back. Mabel responded by immediately distancing herself from Nozlow. I could sense energy in the arrowhead when Lulum nocked an arrow. Mabel quickly grabbed a throwing knife from her thigh. Just as the two of them were about to let loose—

"Calm down."

A skeletal fist came crashing down between them. The skeletal hand had emerged from a spatial distortion created by my hitogata. The massive eye sockets of the gashadokuro loomed on the other side, drifting in and out of view as hitodama flickered around it. I turned away from the divine demons and spoke to Mabel.

"I'm fine, Mabel."

"B-But—"

"Don't worry about me. You can lower your axe." Though Mabel's expression was still tense, she finally lowered her weapon. "You sure do react quickly," I said with a smile. "It's hard to believe you're a heavy warrior wielding a battle-axe."

"Then let's call me an assassin."

"You're really stuck on that, huh?"

"U-Um, what's going on?" Amyu asked in confusion. "Are they really demons?"

"Yeah." I nodded, looking at the demons as I explained. "I think their response is proof enough. And I'm sure their captured friends

are demons too. That's why they can't go to the lord or lodge a formal complaint. It'd be difficult for them to exchange their valuables for money too. They can't risk being exposed."

Although they closely resembled humans, divine demons were considered to be one of the races most hostile toward humanity. It was unlikely things would end peacefully were their identities to be revealed. Seeing that Lulum and Nozlow were just standing there silently, I scoffed and continued.

"You seriously claim you're in the right? Though humans and demons may be enemies, there's still unofficial trade through merchants. Even so, a human wouldn't dare venture into demon territory to kidnap a divine demon. The kidnappers these two speak of are no doubt their fellow demons."

"R-Really?" Amyu glanced at the pair, but Lulum and Nozlow maintained their silence, their expressions grim.

"Of course, any human merchant engaging in the demon slave trade is just as bad, but at the very least, this isn't a situation where humans bear all the responsibility," I added before turning to the pair. "Don't blame humans for the acts of demons. Frankly, I should tie you up to turn you over to a knight patrol, but I try to help my acquaintances when I can. Us exchanging words like this is a bond of sorts. I won't ask why you came to the empire. I'll let you go, so give up on your people and leave this land."

If I want to be thorough, I should probably dispose of them. If they're demon spies, it's likely they're looking for the Hero. She might not have given herself away, but leaving any demons who've seen Amyu alive could come back to bite us later. Still, turning around and killing them after I just saved them doesn't really sit right with me. This is the best compromise I can offer.

Silence fell over the area, and it was Nozlow who finally broke it.

"Let's go, Lulum," he said, grabbing his things and shooting me a resentful glare. "We never should've relied on a human."

"Indeed, and as a human, I shouldn't have saved you to begin with," I said cynically. "We were doing the wrong thing from the start."

"Hmph."

"W-Wait!" Lulum grabbed Nozlow as he turned around.

"I'm sorry for attacking you. Please, hear me out," Nozlow pleaded.

"You're a persistent one. Still not giving up?"

"I'm searching for someone!" Lulum shouted. "A divine demon and her child."

"Lulum!"

"Be quiet, Nozlow! She was very dear to me, but sixteen years ago, she disappeared alongside her newborn child. All I knew is that she went to a human country. We've been traveling in search of her ever since. We happened to hear that a slave trader in Keltz obtained a bunch of divine demon slaves the other day. The person we're looking for might be there. And if she is, I want to save her. Her child too, if they're still together."

A hint of desperation sneaked into Lulum's voice. "Divine demon slaves fetch a high price since humans and demons aren't at war right now. They're going to be sold in the capital, not this border city. Since they aren't being put up for sale, we can't even see them to know who's been captured. If they're sent to the capital, we may never get the chance. Once that happens, we won't be able to follow them. Please. We can give up on rescuing everyone else, but I want to at least know if the person I'm looking for is there. We'll be able to buy back one or two slaves, so please, help us out." Lulum sounded like she was barely eking out the words. "You understand don't you? Surely even you have people who..." Lulum's voice faded and I couldn't make out the last of what she said.

Silence once again fell over the area as I thought to myself. I didn't know if what she was saying was true or not, but the way she was speaking felt genuine. Assuming I believed them, it meant they came to the empire simply because they were looking for someone. If they weren't spies, then they weren't particularly dangerous—but I didn't know that for certain. It was entirely possible it was all a lie. Did I have a reason to help them?

"H-Hey, Seika. Can we help them?" Yifa's quiet voice broke the silence as I was thinking. The unassuming girl continued timidly. "Just seeing if the person they're looking for is there shouldn't cause

trouble for anyone, right? Would it be okay if we can get them to promise not to do anything reckless?”





All eyes were on Yifa, which made her uneasy, but she spoke her mind nonetheless. It suddenly occurred to me that she had known they might be demons all along yet had still wanted to save them. After thinking silently for a moment, I abruptly turned to the demons.

"Fine. We'll check out the slave trader."

Lulum's and Nozlow's eyes went wide with surprise, and I sighed quietly. Now I had a reason. Yifa so rarely expressed her desires, I could at least do as she asked this time around.

I heard Yuki sigh on top of my head. "For all your talk, you can't help but extend your kindness to the inhuman too." I decided to ignore the whispering in my ear for the time being.

I gave the speechless demons one final warning. "However, you have to behave yourselves. And once this is over, you owe Yifa a thank you."

Act 3

Keltz was situated in the northeastern reaches of the empire, yet it had somehow become a commercial city. There were several reasons for that.

First, grains were grown in the north, making it easy to purchase crops. Second, the nearby imperial military base provided a fixed demand for various goods. Beyond that relatively conventional economic base, it was also near demon territory. Though humans and demons were at odds, they engaged in varying amounts of trade depending on the race. Resources were gathered in demon territory, and demon textiles and metalwork circulated through the empire in limited quantities.

As a result, Keltz was home to several branches of large trading companies. At the same time, it played host to an even greater number of small companies, the likes of which I'd never even heard of in Lodonea or Rakana. The slave trader Lulum had mentioned seemed to be running one of those smaller-scale companies.

It was the day after all the commotion in the forest, and the six of us were walking through Keltz's commercial district. Lulum and Nozlow were silently walking next to me, their hoods pulled up. Much to my surprise, the two demons were staying at an inn. Of course, when I thought about it more, it would've been hard for them to obtain traveling supplies if they couldn't enter cities.

Furthermore, they wouldn't be questioned about their background in a city full of adventurers. Even with their black markings concealed, they had to wear hoods to hide their unusually pale skin. This certainly made them seem suspicious, but many human adventurers also dressed strangely, so it didn't draw too much attention. It was only possible because they were divine demons who closely resembled humans—had they been beastfolk or devils, they would have had trouble even making it through the

gate.

As I thought to myself, I turned toward the two demons. “Hey, where exactly is this Elman-Neg Company?” They’d said it was somewhere in Keltz’s commercial district, where the streets were lined with trading companies, but I hadn’t gotten the details on its exact location.

“It’s just a little further,” said Lulum, her expression firm. “There’s a large sign out front, so you’ll know it when you see it.” She hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth again. “So, what’s your plan?”

“Hmm?”

“How are you going to get a slave trader to speak to you?” Lulum continued. “You’re just an adventurer. I’m not sure just going there and asking will get you a meeting.”

“I have an idea.” It wasn’t a guaranteed plan, but it was worth a shot.

Lulum looked doubtful but fell silent, perhaps thinking that further inquiry would be a waste. After a bit more walking, we finally saw the sign—the Elman-Neg Company. It was a modest, two-story building, but the fact that they could rent an entire building suggested they were doing well. At the very least, it didn’t seem to be the sort of place an ordinary adventurer could waltz into unannounced.

“Let’s just try going inside for now.”

“A-Are you sure?” Lulum appeared even more worried, but I ignored her and started walking.

“You guys try to stay quiet. We don’t want your secret getting out.” As soon as I finished speaking, I pushed open the heavy wooden door.

The interior was impressive as one would expect from a well-off trading company. Though the various furnishings were few in number due to the limited space, every piece appeared to be expensive. A young receptionist was sitting alone at the front counter. Her expression immediately turned into a frown upon seeing six shabby-looking adventurers suddenly enter.

Faking a smile, I called out to her. “Hey there. Sorry for the

sudden intrusion, but I need a slave. Could you get the owner?"

The receptionist scowled at me. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"Then I'm going to have to ask you to leave. This isn't a street vendor."

"Hold on just a second," I said to the displeased receptionist. "I'm a customer. I have money."

"I'm afraid we don't sell any cheap slaves here."

"I'll say it one more time—get the owner."

"Please leave. The representative will not be meeting with you."

"Representative?" I made a blank expression for a moment before bursting into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha! Sorry, now that I think about it, this is a trading company, isn't it? It's just so much smaller than the ones I'm used to that I forgot." The receptionist gave me a puzzled look and I leaned in closer, holding my golden tag above the counter for her to see. "This is who I am. Call your representative."

The receptionist looked at the tag and her brow furrowed for a moment, then her eyes went wide. "A-A rank one adventurer?! From the Rakana branch?!"

"Now, can I speak with your representative?"

"O-One moment, please!" The receptionist retreated to the back before she even finished speaking. An awkward atmosphere fell over the room as she left us on our own.

"Seika, what was that?"

"Acting, obviously. You know that," I awkwardly replied to Mabel's monotone question. *I figured I should assert myself a little since I'm about to negotiate, but maybe there was a better way to handle that.*

"Heh heh..."

"You're gonna ruin it if you laugh at me, Amyu."

"Mm, ahem." Amyu tried to play her laughter off as a cough.

"Ah ha ha... That kind of thing really doesn't suit you," Yifa said, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"You don't have to be so blunt." I was losing the will to go on.

"I didn't realize you were such an incredible adventurer," Lulum said, her surprise evident in her voice.

"It happened pretty recently," I replied sourly. "I didn't expect this tag to be so effective." Amyu had told me I'd be treated like a big shot anywhere I went, but to be honest, I hadn't really believed her. "We're gonna say you're members of my party. Don't blow your cover."

Lulum silently nodded as a figure emerged from behind the reception counter.

"Thank you all for your patience." The slender man had a merchant's smile on his face, a short beard on his chin, and was wearing expensive-looking clothes. "I apologize for my employee's rudeness. I'll have a word with her later."

"It doesn't matter," I said, adopting an arrogant tone. "I'm looking to buy a slave. Show me your best."

"My, my. I'm honored you chose our establishment among all the slave traders in Keltz. The patronage of a rank one adventurer is certain to boost our reputation. Right this way, Mr. Seika." The receptionist must have told him the name on my tag.

Tilting my head, I narrowed my eyes. "Why don't you introduce yourself first?"

"Oh, pardon me. I must be nervous. It's my first time doing business with a rank one adventurer, you see," the man said in a troubled tone, his hand on his forehead. He turned to face me, his suspicious smile deepening as he introduced himself. "Forgive my late introduction. I am this establishment's representative, Elman Rod Trivas. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Seika."

◆ ◆ ◆

We were led to a drawing room on the second floor. It looked as though it was used for negotiations as the furnishings were opulent and every nook and cranny was well maintained. Though Elman had only spoken to me, he had extra chairs brought in for the rest of the party members.

"Now, let us get right into it. What sort of slave are you looking for?" Elman asked with a grin, taking a seat directly in front of me.

I could feel Lulum and Nozlow tense up to either side of me. It

was a three-person sofa, so, given their personal interest, I'd had them sit close to me. However, the clear displeasure they were giving off made me wonder if that had been a mistake. Lulum aside, if Nozlow suddenly attacked Elman, I wasn't certain I could stop him at this distance. That said, Elman's side was equally questionable. I addressed the elephant in the room.

"Before we begin, who is he?" I looked at the person sitting next to Elman.

"Eek!" He was a timid, gloomy-looking man. He was clearly younger than Elman, but not young enough to be an apprentice. He didn't look the least bit like a merchant, so I had no idea what he was doing here.

"Pardon me. This is our company's vice-representative, Neg," Elman said, his smile not leaving his face.

"Vice-representative? Him?"





"Yes. This is an important discussion, so he'll be joining us." Elman spoke with confidence, but I found it hard to believe.

He won't even look me in the eyes. This guy is the company's vice-representative?

"B-Brother..." Neg implored Elman to listen to him.

"He's also my younger brother."

"H-Hey, brother..."

"Neg, this is an important customer. Please be quiet for now."

"B-But..."

Just then, I felt a surge of energy at my feet. A chill filled the air and a pale ghost clad in rags passed straight through the drawing room table.

"A-A frost wraith?!" Amyu shouted in shock.

And that wasn't all. A dim red specter shrouded in heat emerged from the depths of the bookshelf. A light green specter cloaked in wind came out of the window. Another specter surrounded by earthen dust appeared from the armor display, and so on and so forth. All around the drawing room, frost wraiths, flame wraiths, wind wraiths, ground wraiths, and other various high-level astral monsters materialized one after another.

"Oooooo..." Finally, a ghostly figure clad in pitch-black rags floated behind Neg. It was clearly more powerful than the other wraiths.

"A wraith lord!" Lulum muttered next to me, her breath caught in her throat.

As I recalled, wraith lords were a superior variant of dark element wraith. They used powerful dark magic, and physical attacks had little effect against them. In addition, because they could pass through objects, they could attack from any angle. It was said that if you encountered one without proper preparations, you had to be prepared to die at any moment.

However, ghosts typically hated daylight, and wraiths were no exception—they were only supposed to appear in dungeons like deep forest, caves, or ruins. I didn't know what they were doing here, but they were clearly a threat, so it was probably best for me to seal them. As the others around me stiffened up, I began

chanting a mantra under my breath.

"Please, be at ease," Elman said calmly. I cut off my spell without thinking.

"Explain."

"These monsters serve Neg." His words were difficult to believe. Elman glanced at Neg, whose eyes were darting around nervously, then explained. "Astral monsters have always been drawn to him, but rest assured, they're all obedient."

"These things obey him?"

"Indeed. As you can imagine, this line of business has put me in danger on occasion, and it's Neg's wraiths that have always guaranteed my safety."

I looked around at the wraiths, and sure enough, they didn't seem to be attacking. Returning my gaze to Neg, I watched as he continued glancing at his older brother.

There was a profession known as tamer that could control monsters, but because they relied on skillful training, the variety of monsters they were able to tame was limited. I had never heard of anyone successfully taming astral monsters. Given that he lacked a grimoire, it was unlikely that he was a summoner who bound monsters through magical contracts, and he wasn't a necromancer who manipulated corpses by placing souls inside them either. At any rate, he seemed to possess a rare ability.

"U-Uh..." Neg was also acting suspiciously, looking back and forth between me and Elman.

"Neg, we're in the middle of negotiations. Please call back your monsters," Elman said.

"B-But brother! They..." Neg's eyes were aimed at Lulum and Nozlow. While the wraiths were keeping their distance, their attention seemed to be focused on the two divine demons. A few of them were also near Yifa, so it was possible they were drawn to her magical power like elementals.

"Goodness me," Elman said in a troubled tone. "My apologies, Seika. Would you companions happen to have demihuman blood by any chance? When someone with strong magical power is present, the wraiths get confused on occasion and behave rudely like this."

"Yeah, three of them have elven blood." For now, we'd just go with that excuse. Rakana was home to plenty of demihumans, so it shouldn't be particularly strange. "Anyway, enough about that. Clear these ghosts out."

"Certainly. Neg, hurry it up."

"B-But, brother..."

"Neg!"

"Ugh... O-Okay..." Neg hung his head at Elman's rebuke, and the wraiths disappeared through the second-story floor. Sensing its master's fear, the wraith lord had been exerting immense pressure, but it too faded and sunk through the floorboards. It seemed like they ordinarily stayed in the darkness beneath the floor or underground.

"Goodness, I cannot apologize enough for that disturbance," Elman said with his hand on his forehead, and everyone caught their breath.

"Now I get it," I mumbled under my breath. I finally understood why Elman had the ghost user join this meeting. He was probably there to ensure that adventurers didn't get violent during negotiations. His name being attached to the company and his position as vice-representative were no doubt just excuses for him to be present during business discussions. I considered calling him out on it, but he could simply feign ignorance, so I held off. Instead, I decided to call him out on something else. "He's not actually your brother, is he?"

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

"You look nothing alike, for one." Elman's hair was brown, while Neg was blond. Their builds and features were completely different as well. "On top of that, you're a former noble, and one born to a marquess's family. There's no way one of your siblings would be so antisocial." I had heard the name Rod Trivas before. Though it was in a remote region, the family governed a large swath of territory. Renowned noble families placed great importance on education and upbringing. Neg, who didn't seem to know a thing about etiquette, didn't strike me as someone from a noble background.

"My, my, how astute you are. Are you familiar with the Trivas

name? I usually only bring it up as a bit of self-deprecation to gain the trust of nobles." Then Elman gave a troubled look. "Nobles often have half siblings, so it's not unusual for appearances to differ, but as you've correctly discerned, we aren't blood related. We're what you might call sworn brothers. I struggled quite a lot after fleeing my family home. Even securing daily meals was a challenge. That was when I met Neg and we went into business together."

Although Elman sounded as shady as ever, I felt a sense of truth to his words. I had thought he was lying about the sworn brothers thing as well, but perhaps it held a modicum of truth.

"Of course, now that I think about it, I shouldn't be surprised you know of my family. Our situations aren't so different, after all."

"Hmm? What do you mean?" I asked.

"I've heard rumors about you," Elman said with a smile. "Rakana's second rank one adventurer after Chairman Cyrus. The prodigy who fled his noble family and quelled the largest stampede in history. Only positive things, I assure you."

It seems like he's known about me all along. Oh well. I'm aware that I've made enough of a name for myself to be talked about, so I'd expect a merchant to have that information.

"Huh?! Y-You were a noble?" Lulum whispered in a low voice.

Pretending not to hear her, I responded to Elman. "You know of me, huh?"

"But of course. I believe you were born to an accomplished family of magic researchers. Lam— Ah, pardon me. You didn't give your family name, did you?"

I wasn't sure if it was because nobles who fled their homes wanted to keep their families hidden, or if it was because my family name hadn't been written on my tag, but Elman was considerate enough to not say it. While I hadn't particularly been trying to hide it, now that I thought about it, not announcing it might be for the best. I was on the run, so I didn't want to get Luft or my father involved.

"I did not," I declared, deliberately wearing a displeased expression. "I don't mind the rumors, but enough about my family. It's an unpleasant topic."

"Certainly." The slave trader nodded, his smile still on his face as though he couldn't see my scowl. He continued just as cheerfully. "We've gotten rather off course, haven't we? Let's return to the topic at hand—what sort of slave are you looking for?"

"I'm not really sure how to answer that," I said with a scoff, leaning back on the sofa. "Explaining it would be a pain. I'll decide what I want. Just show me what you have." I hadn't thought that far ahead, so I tried to cover for it by taking an arrogant attitude. We needed to see all the divine demons slaves they had. I couldn't let him bring only a few random ones.

"I'm afraid that's not feasible." Elman, however, was insistent. "As you can see, we only have a small trading house. We entrust the management of our slaves to several different traders across the city. It would be rather difficult to show you all of them, but rest assured, we offer a great diversity of quality slaves, and I'm confident in my ability to discern the finest among them. I'm certain I'll be able to meet your expectations."

"Then let's see..." Hearing all that made it even more difficult for me to demand to see them all. I reluctantly came up with some conditions. "I want a strong slave."

"A strong one, you say?"

"Yeah. As you know, the dungeons around Rakana are currently gone due to the stampede. As a result, I've been bored out of my mind. I came all the way out here because I heard there were dungeons in the area, but none of them seem particularly promising."

"Ah, that's quite the conundrum."

"So I was thinking, if there aren't any monsters, why not just fight a person? I want a hardened slave who can withstand my magic and fight back. We're gonna fall out of practice without anything to fight."

"Hmm, that may prove difficult." Elman fell deep into thought. "While we do have former adventurers and slaves with knowledge of martial arts among our selection, I don't imagine any of them would be a match for a high-ranking adventurer."

"Don't play dumb with me, Elman." I pressed the attack, the

corners of my lips curving into a smile. “I heard your company got its hands on some demon slaves.”

Elman’s expression immediately went stiff. “I beg your pardon. Where exactly did you hear that?”

“Who knows? I’ve forgotten.” Keeping an eye on the nervous divine demons to either side of me, I continued calmly. “I don’t remember everyone I hear rumors from. That said, information leaks are hardly an uncommon thing. I imagine there were more than a few people involved in their transport.” Lulum herself had heard about it from a guard who inspected cargo in a city on the way here. With customs duties and other regulations in place, it was impossible to conceal a large number of slaves.

Elman resigned himself to his fate. “Correct you are. Goodness, you’ve certainly cornered me. I had hoped to keep it as discreet as possible until they were transported to the capital. You never know what might happen.”

“So, do you have them or not?” I didn’t waste any time. “I imagine you’re planning on taking them to the capital to be auctioned off. I’ll buy them here and now for the asking price. You’ll save on transportation fees and avoid the risk of bandits. I think it would be mutually beneficial. Of course, that’s assuming they’re powerful demons. I don’t need any race weaker than humans.”

“You have nothing to fear,” Elman said with a quiet chuckle. “We only deal in quality slaves. That applies to demons as well.”

“Then you have them?”

“Are you free now, Seika?” I nodded, and the slave trader stood up and fixed his collar. “Then I believe it would be faster for you to see them in person.”

◆ ◆ ◆

Elman took us to a section of the city near the gates, where massive warehouses lined the streets. They seemed to be where large companies stored their goods.

“This way, please,” said Elman, leading the way. Neg wasn’t with him—he’d left the ghost user back at the trading house. If nothing

else, he seemed to be treating us as legitimate customers. Though it could also have simply been that there wasn't enough room in the carriage.

We followed behind Elman and eventually arrived at a relatively small warehouse.

"Who goes there?! Oh, it's you, boss." A hulking figure holding a spear sharply demanded our identity but quickly backed off upon seeing Elman's face.

"Good work," Elman cheerfully said to the lookout.

"Thanks. What brings ya here today? Who're they?"

"Customers. They want to view our merchandise. Please show them inside."

"You got it." The large man pulled out his keys and opened the door to the warehouse.

My nostrils were immediately assailed by a foul stench, and I couldn't help but grimace.

"Uh, this way." The lookout awkwardly called out to us and headed inside.

"My goodness, it smells terrible, doesn't it?" said Elman next to us, his voice as cheerful as ever. "Our slaves are expensive, so they're treated relatively well, despite how it might seem. This isn't normally somewhere we take customers, so you'll have to forgive me. Now, let us be on our way." Elman entered the warehouse and the rest of us reluctantly followed.

There were rows of wood-framed cages with iron bars inside, but they were all empty.

"We're currently renting out the entire warehouse for the demon slaves. The merchandise is a little further inside," Elman explained, seemingly picking up on my confusion.

Finally, the lookout stopped. "They start here."

There did indeed appear to be someone sitting inside the cage, but the warehouse was dark and the light coming in through the window from the cloudy sky outside wasn't enough to make out the person's features.

"We should have brought a light. I believe there was—"

"No need," I said, floating a lit hitogata in the air. A dim light

illuminated the person in the cage.

"Are you a mage? That sure is handy."

Ignoring the lookout, I observed the person inside the cage. She appeared to be a young girl, confused by the sudden light. She was around our age and was wearing simple clothes, with handcuffs around both wrists and a metal collar with a strange flow of energy running through it around her neck. Her hair and eyes were pitch-black, and she had beautiful features, but her skin was deathly pale with black markings like tattoos. There had been a similar looking man among the group of demons who had attacked the academy.

"A divine demon, huh?"

"Indeed," said Elman, his voice brimming with confidence. "We have around fifteen in total. What do you think? She may appear to be a frail maiden, but she has the strength to twist a grown man's arm, and they're naturally capable of using magic strong enough to overwhelm a mid-level monster. Even among demons, they're a particularly powerful race."

"How did you acquire them?"

"Forgive me, but that's a trade secret. I'll just say we have some connections on the demons' side."

"Connections with kidnappers?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

Looking away from Elman's untrustworthy smile, I turned to the girl. The person Lulum was looking for already had a child sixteen years ago. Taking that into account, she seemed too young, but because divine demons had significantly longer lifespans than humans, I couldn't judge her on appearances alone. I glanced over at Lulum and Nozlow, and though they wore stern expressions, they didn't do anything else. *Does that mean she's not the one?*

"Would you like to take a closer look?" the large man asked. He pulled out his key ring and began unlocking a padlock on the cage.

"Are you sure you should do that?" I couldn't help but ask.

"Heh heh, don't ya worry 'bout a thing." The lookout opened the cage, then went inside and grabbed the girl's handcuffs. "Stand up!"

"N-No! Stop!" The girl tried to resist. It seemed like she really was stronger than her physique would suggest, as she was given the

lookout a hard time. But then the flow of energy in her collar increased. A curse mark appeared at the base of her neck and the divine demon girl began groaning in pain. “Agh! Gah...”

“Sheesh, behave yourself.” The lookout grabbed the limp girl’s wrist and pulled her out of the cage.

“What was that?” I mumbled.

“It would appear she triggered her slave collar,” Elman said nonchalantly.

“What’s a slave collar?”

“A collar that prevents slaves from resisting. It’s a magic item that causes a slave pain in the event that they attempt to escape, defy their master, or forcibly remove the collar. It’s the reason we can safely handle divine demons.”

“It makes ’em even more obedient than normal slaves, so I appreciate it. I usually gotta bang on the cage when there’s a rebellious slave,” said the lookout.

“Hmm. This is the first I’ve ever heard of such a thing.”

“It’s an expensive item, so they’re only used on particularly dangerous slaves. It wouldn’t be profitable to put them on everyone.”

That makes sense. It seems like a pretty complex cursed object. I doubt it’s easy to mass-produce.

“So, what do ya think, sir?” The large man held the girl up by the handcuffs and pushed her toward me. Her thin clothing clung to her skin, exposing the contours of her body. “I dunno what ya need such a dangerous slave for, but she’s top-quality. You could send her to an arena or use her as a bodyguard. She’s got a nice face and some decent meat on her bones. Her skin’s a little creepy, but maybe you’re into that. Do ya wanna see her naked? Would that be okay, boss?” The man put his hand on her clothes and lifted the hem, showing off the black markings on her pale thigh. Her eyes vacant, the divine demon showed no sign of defiance.

I sighed. We were just here to look for somebody—I didn’t actually want to buy any slaves. Slave or not, I felt bad for the poor girl. I could also feel Amyu and the others staring at me. Just as I was about to decline, the sound of something shattering echoed

through the warehouse.

Everyone looked around in confusion, trying to figure out what caused it. I alone knew what had happened. I focused my consciousness into the vision of a rat shikigami at my feet. Nozlow's face was twisted with fury beneath his hood, and some sort of dust was falling from his clenched gauntlet. It seemed he had crushed a rock or something he had picked up.

"Calm down, Nozlow," I said, narrowing my eyes.

Nozlow suddenly snapped to attention and looked at me. "Wh-What are you—"

"Come to think of it, your father was killed by a divine demon, wasn't he? Still, try to hold it in. We'll find a sturdier slave your fists won't crush easily. So don't do anything unnecessary," I said, casting Nozlow a sidelong glance.

The divine demon martial artist nodded after a moment of silence. "All right."

"On that note, show us the others, Elman."

"As you wish. Put her back in the cage."

"You got it, boss. Lucky you—you were too fragile to get bought. Back in you go. His pops was killed by a demon, huh? That's not too common these days. I only heard stuff like that from my great-granddad."

The large man guided us through the row of cages. They all had divine demons inside, and each one was wearing a slave collar. However...

"They're all women and children."

"My apologies, but that's all we have," Elman said with a bitter smile. "There aren't many people capable of capturing an adult male divine demon."

"Capturing? So they really were kidnapped from demon territory."

"Oh dear. For what it's worth, we haven't violated imperial law."

"Hmph." Snorting softly, I took a slight step back and looked at the cages with a tense expression, then whispered to Lulum. "Did you find her?" Lulum silently shook her head. Finally, we reached the end of the warehouse. "Hmm? Is that all?"

"Yes. Did any of them strike your fancy?" Elman asked with a

bright smile.

As I frowned, Lulum suddenly leaned in and whispered in my ear. “There are more. Upstairs.” The back half of the warehouse had an upper floor. There were no doubt slaves up there as well.

“If I remember correctly, you said there were fifteen in your warehouse, Elman. We’ve only seen eleven. Are the others upstairs?”

“We do have a few more, but I’m afraid I can’t show them to you,” Elman said regretfully. “I’m ashamed to admit it, but we made a slight error and were unable to secure enough slave collars. As a result, we had to get rough with some of the slaves. They aren’t in proper condition to be sold at the moment.”

“Were they injured? That doesn’t matter. Show them to me.” I started heading to the stairs, but the large man blocked my path.

“Hold on there, sir. Ya can’t go off on your own.”

“Move.”

“No can do. The boss says ya can’t see ’em, so I can’t let ya pass.”

“Elman.”

“I beg your pardon, but my pride as a slave trader is on the line here. Furthermore, you won’t find any strong slaves up there. I’m afraid I can’t grant your request,” said Elman.

“All right, then.” I considered forcing my way past but decided against it. All the slaves here were kidnapped from demon territory. The person Lulum was looking for ventured into human lands sixteen years ago, so it was unlikely she was among them. There was no need to cause a scene. Still, I tried pressing the matter a little further. “When will I be able to see them? When you have slave collars ready?”

“We’re in the process of acquiring them, but I can’t say for certain when we’ll be able to obtain such a precious magic item.”

“Doesn’t that mean you’ll never be able to sell them?”

“We have a backup measure in place. We’ve requested that the Lugrock Company perform an operation to fully enslave them.”

I immediately narrowed my eyes upon hearing that name. Through the rat’s vision, I could see Mabel’s breath catch in her

throat and her eyes go wide behind me. Elman continued, showing no sign of noticing the change in our expressions.

"They've been handling powerful slaves for a long time, and rather than use magic items, they utilize surgery that takes away their free will. They recently went public with the practice and began offering the operation as a new business. I'm uncertain what caused the shift, but it was a fortunate windfall for us, so I wasted no time in writing a letter. If the deal goes through, Lugrock will be sending a doctor here to perform the surgeries. Though it's by no means cheap, I must admit, I'm looking forward to seeing how the merchandise turns out. If you're interested, you might consider remaining in Keltz until then."

"I'll think about it." *That wasn't a name I expected to hear again. It's been two years since the tournament in the capital, huh? Looks like they've started up another shady business.*

"So, what will it be, Seika?" Elman asked with a smile. "Did any of the merchandise interest you? They may only be women and children, but they can still put up more of a fight than your average human warrior. If I may make a recommendation, I would suggest numbers three and four, and certainly number eight."

"Hmm..." *This is it. There's no point staying here any longer. Now that we've confirmed the person they're looking for isn't here, we should go. That was our promise,* I thought to myself. However, when I looked over at Lulum and Nozlow, they didn't seem like they were ready to leave. Instead, their expressions suggested they were ready to kill everyone here and rescue the slaves. I didn't blame them, but neither could I allow that.

We were in a human country, governed by human laws. It wasn't a place where a demon could simply act on their whims. On top of that, escaping with so many slaves would be impossible. If things went poorly, their slave collars could kill most of them before we even made it out of the city. The two divine demons knew this, of course. That was why they were holding themselves back.

Yeah, it's time to go. I opened my mouth to speak. "Sorry, Elman, but your slaves—"

At that moment, I felt someone tug on my coat. I turned to see

Mabel looking at me pleadingly, silently pulling on the hem. “What, Mabel?” I asked after a pause.

“Seika. Please.”

“What...”

“Please.” With that, Mabel hung her head. I understood what she was trying to say. With a small sigh and an awkward smile, I patted her head.

“You too, huh? All right, fine.” I turned back toward Elman. “Sorry, Elman, but I can’t rely on your eye for slaves. Humans are one thing, but I can’t imagine someone with no combat experience being able to judge a demon’s strength.”

“Then is there one you’ve decided upon yourself?”

“No, I can’t judge a demon’s strength that easily either.”

“I take that to mean you aren’t interested in any of them?”

“Divine demon slaves are rare. I don’t want to miss this opportunity.”

“Huh? Th-Then what are you proposing?” Unable to pick up on my intentions, Elman showed signs of unease for the very first time.

Noticing that, my lips curved into a smile. “I want all of them.”

“Pardon?”

“I’m saying I’ll buy them all, including the ones upstairs. I’ll just see how strong they are for myself.” I felt a slight sense of satisfaction as I spoke my final words before the stunned onlookers. “How much? Bring me a quote.”

◆ ◆ ◆

“That’s expensive,” I couldn’t help but mutter, taking one glance at the numbers written on the parchment in my hands.

We had returned to the trading house, where Elman told us to wait in the lobby while he prepared an estimate. It was completed just before sunset, and I was the only one who headed to the drawing room. Everyone else remained waiting in the lobby.

“Huh? Expensive? W-Well, I...” Sitting across from me, Elman seemed flustered, as though he hadn’t expected my reaction. “I thought I was offering you a good deal. In that case, I suppose I

can lower the price a little more."

After a long sigh, I looked up at Elman. "That aside, it sure took you a while to make this estimate."

"W-Well... My apologies." Elman averted his eyes for a moment, then gave me a deferential smile. "It's been some time since we've dealt with divine demon slaves. I had to discuss with the vice-representative and calculate a price for each one."

"Discuss? With him?" I raised my eyebrow. "Is there any point in doing that?"

"O-Of course. Neg and I started this business together," Elman said with an insincere expression. Despite that, there was a hint of honesty in his tone. I tried to recall the timid ghost user. He lacked a merchant's demeanor so it seemed pretty clear to me that he was just a bodyguard, but perhaps he was unexpectedly good at calculations.

Finding it a tad suspicious, I asked a question. "Actually, why are you just now figuring out the prices? I would've assumed a merchant like you would have had something in mind after I offered to buy them for asking price."

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but because we originally intended to auction them off, we hadn't considered their pricing."

"Still, there has to at least be a market price. Although you said it's been a while, surely there are previous prices you can reference."

"I'm afraid there really isn't a suitable market price for unique slaves like these. In addition, the divine demon we sold in the past was a fully grown man, so we can't simply charge the same amount."

"Fine, whatever," I said, standing up from my seat with the parchment still in my hand.

"S-Seika?" Elman leaned forward slightly, his voice uneasy. "As I said, if the price is too much, we could lower it a little more."

"Elman." I looked down at the slave trader. "When is that doctor from Lugrock supposed to arrive?"

◆ ◆ ◆

By the time we returned to the inn, the sun had descended, and so had the mood in the room. Lulum and Nozlow were with us to discuss our next move, yet not a single person was speaking. Everyone was probably at a loss because the price for all the slaves was more than they'd expected.

"What should we do?" Amyu asked glumly. "We can't afford that."

Nobody answered. She had just stated the obvious. They were more expensive than normal slaves, and there were fifteen of them. It wasn't a sum that could be easily prepared.

"M-Maybe if we all take out a loan from the guild..." Yifa suggested hesitantly.

"Taking our accomplishments during the stampede into account, they might be willing to lend us this much." However, I added one more thing, my voice devoid of emotion. "But we don't have any obligation to go that far. We have our own lives to worry about. There's no reason for us to go into debt and risk our own credibility just to help demons."

Yifa looked down and fell silent. She was likely aware of how unreasonable a request it was.

"I agree. You've done enough," Lulum said quietly. "This is our problem. We can't ask you to pay for everything too."

"Yeah. We'll figure out what to do from here. You've all helped us plenty. Thank you, but you don't have to worry about it anymore," Nozlow added.

"Although it's not much, I'd like you to have these gems from our hometown. I'm sure they'll fetch a good price."

"That's fine and all, but what are you planning on doing now?" I asked as Lulum rummaged through her pockets. "Are you going to give up on saving your people?" Seeing Lulum's hands freeze, I asked another question. "You're not considering taking them back by force, are you? It'd probably be easier now that you know the warehouse's layout and where the lookouts are, but that isn't why I took you there."

"Then what should we do?" Lulum asked without meeting my gaze, her expression tormented. "Are you telling me to abandon them? You saw how they were being treated."

I didn’t respond.

“The person we’re looking for wasn’t there. They were strangers—I doubt those captured divine demons have any connection to us. But we still can’t ignore them. What would you do in our position? Would you be fine with it if you went to demon territory and saw humans being treated the same way?”

“We’re just rescuing our people who were kidnapped. Nothing more,” Nozlow said slowly. “I’m sure it’s a common dispute in human countries. We’ll return to being strangers, and you can simply turn a blind eye.”

“Sorry, but conflicts between humans aside, I can’t sit idly by when the inhuman are causing trouble in human lands.” If you ignored animals or ayakashi that attacked humans, the consequences would eventually reach you. Unlike the stampede, it was a simple feat for me to erase two unknown divine demons. I had no reason to hesitate. “Don’t. Unless you want to fight me.”

The divine demon pair fell silent, sad looks on their faces. They could probably tell the difference in our strength from what I had done in the forest. On top of that, they still had someone they were looking for. They couldn’t afford to take risks here. Still, that didn’t change their feelings.

“I’m a rank one adventurer,” I said, sighing as the silence dragged on. “That means I can take requests with high rewards.” I hesitated a moment, then continued. “As I told you before, I try to help my acquaintances when I can, and we do share a bond, however tenuous. I assume you two are pretty strong since you’re divine demons. I’ll accept as many profitable requests as we need, so why don’t we save up and just buy them back?”

Lulum and Nozlow raised their heads in shock.

Casting my gaze down, I explained. “We have at least a month until Lugrock’s doctor arrives. The slaves aren’t being sent to the capital until after that, so they’re being set aside until then.” Elman had readily accepted when I’d told him that I wanted to buy them, but I needed time to get the money. It was enough money for a person to live comfortably for the rest of their life—even solely in gold coins, it would be a considerable amount. Not even a wealthy

noble from the capital would be able to prepare such a sum in a day or two. “If we spend the whole month completing requests with large rewards, we should be able to manage. I don’t want to take on debt, but I don’t mind doing that much.”

“Wh-Why?”

Ignoring Lulum’s question, I looked at Mabel next to me. “Is that all right with you, Mabel?”

Wide-eyed, Mabel nodded blankly as soon as she heard her name. “Y-Yeah.”

I relaxed a little and smiled. “Good grief. You know Lugrock doesn’t concern you anymore. You don’t have to worry about them.”

“S-Still, I don’t want anyone else to end up like my brother.” Mabel looked at the ground, and just as I was about to pat her head, she suddenly looked back up. “Are you sure, though? You didn’t seem like you wanted to get involved.”

“I wouldn’t have done all this if you hadn’t asked, but it’s no big deal. The rest depends on them.” I looked over at the speechless Lulum and Nozlow. “So, what’s it gonna be?”

“If it allows us to rescue our people, then we couldn’t ask for anything more.” It was Nozlow who finally spoke. The divine demon looked me right in the eyes. “Please, help us.”

The mood in the small room heated up. Amyu and Yifa looked relieved as well.

“Seika, was it? Thank you.” Lulum meekly expressed her gratitude, then directed a gentle smile at Mabel. “You too, Mabel. I’m not sure what happened, but it seems like we’ll be able to rescue our people thanks to you.”

“It’s fine.” Though Mabel shook her head, she looked somewhat happy.

“Eh heh heh, then let’s all do our best!” said Yifa.

“We’ll head to the guild first thing tomorrow morning. I’ll pick out a good request,” Amyu added.

“You’re just gonna choose another annoying request,” Mabel retorted.

“It’ll be fine this time!”

Lulum quietly scooted over to me as I watched the girls. I shot

her a quizzical look and she whispered to me. “You wouldn’t happen to be way older than those girls, would you?”

“No, we’re around the same age. Why?” Despite being startled for a moment, I answered her calmly.

“It just sort of seemed that way,” Lulum said, struggling to find the right words.

Nobody had ever questioned my age since I’d reincarnated, though that wasn’t so unusual. There was never any cause for doubt, as humans could judge ages based solely on appearance. However, it was possible that logic didn’t hold true among long-lived demons. Even if two people looked similar, their ages could vary drastically. Her question was likely the result of a simple difference in culture rather than my reincarnation being exposed.

“Do I look that old to you? I’m hurt,” I joked.

“I’m talking about what’s on the inside, not your appearance.”

“What’s on the inside varies just as much as appearances. Those girls are who they are, and I am who I am.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” Lulum played it off with a smile. “My mistake. Now that I think about it, my race has people like that too. Some people just seem old.”

“Rude.” *Stop calling me old.*

Chapter 2

Act 1

The next day, the six of us headed to the forest near Keltz—the same forest where the almiraj were.

"Hey, are you sure about this?" Amyu asked the two divine demons. "Shouldn't we be doing a request with a bigger reward than hunting almiraj?" The first request Lulum and Nozlow had chosen was the almiraj hunting request we had given up on the other day.

"It'll be fine," Lulum said with a slight smile. "It was nearby, so we'll be done in a day. In terms of efficiency, it's not bad."

"That's what we thought at first too..."

"Just watch."

An almiraj appeared in front of us. The rabbit monster shook its horn as it glared at us and Nozlow took a step toward it. The almiraj suddenly kicked off the ground, aiming its sharp horn at Nozlow and lunging forward. Slowly raising his fist, he seemed poised to avoid the almiraj by shifting his stance slightly.

"Hrmph!" Just as the rabbit's small body passed by him, Nozlow's hand shot out too fast for the eye to see and broke off the almiraj's horn with a knife-hand strike. The rabbit monster let out a dull cry and fell to the forest floor, then quickly fled, weaving its way through the trees.

"Aw, man..." Amyu groaned. "That was pretty crazy, but it got away."

"No." Nozlow picked up the horn rolling through the undergrowth and showed it to us. "That's one down."

"H-Huh?! You can do that?" Amyu was at a loss. "I guess we only need the horn as proof, but isn't that cheating?"

"It doesn't really matter," Nozlow explained indifferently. "The

point of this request isn't to reduce the number of monsters. There's no need to kill fifty of them as long as we drive them away from the highway. An almiraj with a broken horn isn't gonna show its face around humans for a while, so it's not an issue."

"I-Is that really okay?"

"Monsters are part of nature too. In our hometown, we're taught as children not to take too much or you'll face retribution."

"Hmm..."

"As long as it accomplishes the requester's goal, what's the harm? Don't think about it too hard," I said. "Besides, it's probably gonna get harder from here."

◆ ◆ ◆

A few hours later, the number of almiraj attacking us had drastically decreased, as expected. They had grown wary of us just like they had before.

"O-Of course it turned out like this," Yifa said in exasperation.

"Shh!" Lulum suddenly stopped walking. After checking that everyone else had stopped too, she pointed beyond the trees.

"Ah..." Yifa quietly voiced her surprise. There was a single almiraj far in the distance where Lulum had pointed.

It was so far away it was surprising Lulum had even noticed it. It just happened to step perfectly between the trees such that its brown fur was barely visible. Given the distance, it likely hadn't noticed us. Lulum slowly grabbed her bow off her back and I couldn't help cocking an eyebrow.

Shooting at it from this distance isn't realistic. And she's using a shortbow designed for ease of use rather than power. She might hit, but without proper force and accuracy, it's gonna get away.

Indifferent to my doubts, Lulum nocked an arrow and took aim. I suddenly felt energy coming from the arrowhead, but before I could identify what it was, Lulum released the arrow. Perhaps the bow was stronger than I'd expected, as the arrow flew almost perfectly straight, striking the almiraj in its hind leg.

I heard it cry out in pain through a nearby shikigami. I thought

the almiraj was going to run since it was far from a fatal wound, but a moment later, an abrupt flow of energy appeared around the arrowhead and a water spell activated. Water covered the almiraj's small body in an instant, soon turning it into a ragged chunk of ice. The almiraj toppled onto its side, unmoving.

"Was that arrow a magic item?" Amyu muttered in astonishment after watching the events unfold. "Are you an enchanter?"

"Yes. Neat, isn't it?" Lulum almost sounded boastful.

Enchanters were mages who imbued their magic in objects—in essence, they were like magic item craftsmen. There were all sorts of useful cursed objects like crystal balls for measuring magical power and talismans for warding off disasters that were known as magic items in this world. As a result, they weren't a particularly uncommon type of mage, though it did surprise me that a demon would be an enchanter. They could use magic from birth, so I imagined them using a bit more extravagant magic. That said, there were demon-made magic items in circulation within the empire, so it was only natural for there to be demon enchanters as well.

"That arrow was incredible. I didn't know demons had magic item craftsmen too," said Amyu.

"Every race has magic item craftsmen. What, did you think we were all savage brutes?"

"No, I just imagined divine demons using crazy incantationless magic. It's a little more plain than I expected."

"P-P-Plain?!" Lulum's mouth hung open in shock as Amyu basically said what I was thinking. "I don't know about human countries, but where I'm from, enchanters are highly respected! And I'm no exception, of course."

"Heh."

"Nozlow, did you just laugh?"

"N-No." The divine demon martial artist faltered before Lulum's stern glare.

"Hey, sorry to interrupt, but it looks like there are a lot of almiraj around here," I cut in.

"I know that," Lulum said with a huff. Her gaze swept across the forest, and somehow it seemed like she could see all the almiraj

hiding in the trees and underbrush. “I only have so many arrows, so let’s try to herd them all together. Will you help me?”

◆ ◆ ◆

“Hrah!” Another few hours later, a spear of wind from Yifa’s elemental magic broke an almiraj’s horn off at the base. Although the wounded rabbit fled, we were finally done.

“Woo-hoo! That makes fifty!” Amyu cheered, her voice exuberant. “I didn’t think we’d actually finish in a day.”

I looked up and saw the sun still high in the sky. We had enough time left in the day to return to the guild, report the completion of the request, and then pick out our next job.

“I feel like I barely did anything,” Mabel said, her expression oddly unhappy.

“Yeah, you were pretty useless this time around,” Amyu replied.

“Shut up.”

“That’s not true, Mabel. You protected me.” Yifa tried to comfort her.

“Having a party of six really makes a difference. You guys helped a bunch,” Amyu said to Lulum and Nozlow.

“Party...” Lulum mumbled quietly, then shook her head. “No, you’re the ones helping us.”

“Oh, right. Still, completing this request is a weight off our shoulders too. I didn’t like giving up halfway,” Amyu said with a grin. “Let’s go for something with a bigger reward next. We’ve got six people now.”

“Sure.” Lulum gave a smile of her own, caught up in Amyu’s good mood. Then her expression suddenly turned to one of confusion and she looked at me. “You didn’t do anything this time.”

“Hmm?” I mumbled.

“You’re a summoner, but you didn’t summon anything. We could’ve cornered more of them at once if you used a large monster.”

“I’m not a summoner. And this is what we do when I adventure with them.”

"Huh?"

"Seika's the healer. We're the ones who fight monsters," said Mabel.

"Huh?!"

"He also gives us light in dungeons," Yifa added.

"He's a porter too," Amyu followed up. "But that's it. We agreed that he's not using any of his weird magic on adventures."

"Wh-Why?" Lulum sounded baffled. "It's not my place to say this, but isn't that a waste? He's so strong..."

"No, it's what we agreed on," I said with a smile. "It's not good to always be giving, and it's not good to always be receiving either."

"Yeah," Lulum mumbled quietly as though something was on her mind. "Maybe you're right."

◆ ◆ ◆

After turning in the fifty almiraj horns and collecting our payment, we quickly moved on to the next request. Said request took us to a valley not far from a certain village.

"Here it comes!" Just as Amyu shouted, a massive boar, snorting in anger, stamped on the ground.

I looked at it calmly. *That thing is giant. It's the size of an entire hill. It's around as large as the elder newt that showed up at the Lamprogue manor, but in terms of height, it's way more intimidating.*

We had taken a request from the nearby village to hunt a huge boar. Boar-type monsters had apparently been proliferating in the area the past few years, likely due to the appearance of a boss, causing issues for hunters and lumberjacks who entered the mountains. It was believed to just be a large boar at first, but testimony from adventurers who had fled confirmed it as a more powerful huge boar, leading to the request being sent to the Keltz and Rakana guild branches.

Huge boars were high-level monsters, without a doubt. Only rank four adventurers or higher could accept the request. It was by no means an easy foe, yet I wasn't particularly worried.

"Stand back." Nozlow stepped forward and stared down the boar

as it barreled toward us, kicking up full-sized rocks like they were pebbles. The divine demon martial artist had taken down several mid-level savage boars on the way here, but I had to wonder how he was planning on dealing with the massive beast. Nozlow pulled one foot back and lowered his center of gravity, his fist ready by his hip. The huge boar, picking up speed as its hooves practically gouged out the earth, likely didn't notice the powerful energy surging around him. Finally, the moment the two titans clashed—

"Hrmph!" A straight punch with the force of a ballista met the huge boar's snout. The impact sent shock waves through the ground, kicking up dust in a circle around Nozlow's feet.

The huge boar squealed, staggering back in fear after its full-speed charge was completely halted. However, it wasn't finished yet. Shaking its head, the boar's eyes filled with rage and it pointed its sharp tusks at the much smaller demon. Yet just before it moved to attack, it suddenly stopped.

Mabel had jumped off Nozlow's shoulder into the air above the boar, distracting it. Her battle-axe was already raised over her head. The huge boar was likely confused. An object's weight could be estimated from its size, even without directly touching it. Nozlow hadn't budged when Mabel had jumped off his shoulder, and she had leaped high into the air—she was clearly lightweight, meaning she wasn't a cause for concern. That was why it made no attempt to avoid the battle-axe being brought down on its head.

A loud, dull impact echoed through the valley. Perhaps reeling from the impact, Mabel let go of her axe, which had sunk so deep into the boar's head that it was nearly buried. Enhanced by gravity magic, it had smashed clean through the huge boar's thick skull. The monster slowly lurched to the side before finally toppling over. By the time it shook the earth, Mabel had already jumped off of its corpse and landed on the ground.

"Phew." Mabel took a deep breath, her job finished. Although her expression was unchanged, she seemed pleased with herself.





“I’m not sure how you acquired such skill, but that was impressive,” Nozlow said, walking up to Mabel. She looked up at the much taller divine demon, a bold smile on her face.

“Back at you.”

The rest of us simply watched the situation unfold. The request was finished before we knew it.

“I didn’t even get to do anything.”

“Me neither.”

Amyu and Yifa grumbled, their expressions unsatisfied.

Lulum gave an awkward smile. “Nozlow is more than capable of taking down a huge boar by himself, though I’m sure Mabel is as well. Anyway, that’s another request down,” she said, a happy look on her face.

◆ ◆ ◆

After delivering the huge boar’s tusks and receiving the reward, we promptly took on our next request, which brought us to a forest near a large plantation.

“Eww, what is that thing?” Yifa asked, clearly grossed out.

Standing in our way was the quintessential plant-type monster, the treant. However, it was no ordinary treant. While it used its roots to move like any other, it had an extremely unsettling appearance. Its trunk was black, tinged with purple, and several twisting, vine-like branches extended from its body, dripping some sort of sludge that resembled slime mold. Its cavernous mouth and eyes looked far more sinister than those of a normal treant. It was a superior variant known as an evil treant, capable of using dark element magic.

“Boooo...” Its hollow mouth let out a threatening groan—or perhaps it was a cry of joy at finally encountering prey. Either way, it was the target of our extermination request.

The client was the manager of the nearby plantation. He had apparently learned of the monster’s presence from a forest keeper he had met by chance. Although it had yet to cause any harm, the existence of a terrifying monster nearby was enough cause for concern that he had immediately placed a request with the guild for

its extermination. The plantation must have been profitable, as the reward was quite handsome.

Evil treants were high-level monsters, meaning the request could only be taken by adventurers of rank four and above. Even when the reward was high, such requests weren't always completed quickly. Several other parties had already taken it on and either failed or never returned. Despite that, I wasn't particularly worried this time around either.

"Booo!" The evil treant stretched out its branches like tentacles. For a tree, it was surprisingly nimble.

"Hup!" Amyu dodged to the side and cut off a branch in one fluid movement. Another branch extended over her head, headed toward our back line, only for her to stop it with a spear of ice from below. She sliced branches attacking from the left and right with blades of wind, then struck the follow-up with a stone projectile. Both her swordplay and her magic were immaculate. She single-handedly carried out the duties of the vanguard, normally performed by several people. The attacks of a high-level monster were being repelled entirely by a lone swordswoman.

"Ah ha ha! This is pretty tough!" Despite what she said, Amyu showed no sign of needing assistance from her fellow front liners, Mabel and Nozlow. She was handling herself perfectly fine—it was readily apparent how talented she was.

"Booo!" The evil treant thrashed around in frustration, then opened its pitch-black, cavernous mouth wide. "Boooooooooooo!"

"Eek!" Amyu suddenly cowered in fear. Though she managed to fend off the oncoming branches, she wasn't as energetic as she had been just a moment ago and was gradually being pushed back.

The evil treant had howled. I had never heard of a treant doing such a thing, but the effect was exactly as I had seen before. Yifa and Mabel seemed to be frozen with fear as well. The monster appeared pleased with itself. The black tree's rootlike feet wriggled, and it opened its large mouth once again as it approached us.

"Boooooooooo!"

While Amyu and the others all retreated, Lulum had an arrow nocked in her shortbow.

"What a loud tree," she said in annoyance. Lulum released the small arrow with a satisfying swish. It flew right into the monster's cavernous mouth, bursting into scarlet flames from within.

"Booooo?!" The evil treant shrieked and thrashed about, but it lacked any means to extinguish the fire blazing inside it. Finally, the unsightly tree came to a halt, its trunk creaking as it slowly toppled to the forest floor.

The fire burning the monster's corpse weakened and faded away little by little. It was clearly an unnatural phenomenon. The arrowhead had likely been enchanted with some sort of delayed fire-retardant effect. Magic items could be imbued with incredibly complex effects depending on the caster's skills. To take down a high-level monster in a single shot, the arrowhead must have been of exceptional quality. It showed how capable an enchanter Lulum was.

Amyu had watched it all play out in stunned silence, and Lulum called out to her with a smug smile on her face. "Well? Still think it's plain?"

"N-No." Amyu shook her head. "How did you move normally just now? Do howls not affect divine demons?"

"They aren't completely ineffective, but they have to be pretty strong to do anything. *You* looked pretty scared, though."

"I-I can't help that!"

"Heh heh, humans are so delicate. You're so good with the sword and magic you probably could have taken it down by yourself if you hadn't been playing around in the beginning."

"Hmm... Yeah, maybe. I've beaten high-level monsters before," Amyu said with a nod as Lulum gave her an awkward smile.

"It's already over?"

"I-I didn't do anything this time either."

Mabel and Yifa grumbled, their expressions hard to describe.

"Who cares? It's best to get it done as fast as possible," said Amyu.

Having finished peeling the bark off the burnt treant, Nozlow

stood up. “Next.”

◆ ◆ ◆

After turning in the evil treant’s bark and accepting the reward, we once again immediately took on another request. This time, it brought us to a steep, rocky mountain.

“I-Is that them?” Amyu peered inside a large vertical pit near the mountain’s summit and pointed. Plants with swaying, bright red leaves grew from the bare rock.

“Wow, they really are red.”

“Those are the red-gold herbs?”

Yifa and Mabel joined her in looking down the pit. We seemed to have found the herbs we needed to gather. The request we’d taken on this time involved collecting a plant I had never seen in my previous world known as red-gold herbs. They were apparently used in magic potions.

Consuming things filled with cursed energy, such as the flesh of ayakashi or fruit from spirit trees, generally never ended well, so in my previous world, anybody knowledgeable enough avoided it. In this world, however, certain monsters and plants were used in food and potions. The people here were quite brave.

That said, red-gold herbs themselves weren’t dangerous. I had thought the reward was oddly high for such a safe request, but it turned out there was a reason for that. They were rather difficult to obtain. On top of the potential for monsters to show up along the way, they only grew during a certain time of year. It was no surprise that the apothecary had decided to submit a request to the guild rather than gather them personally.

“The question is, how do we get them?” Lulum sighed. “We should’ve at least brought some rope with us.”

“We’ll just have to climb,” Nozlow said, dropping his supplies. “We don’t have time to head back to town. It’s the only option.”

“You want us to climb down this hole?” Amyu asked, looking down into the pit. It was so dark it was impossible to know how deep it was. Even a demon probably wouldn’t survive the fall.

Undaunted, Nozlow stepped to the edge of the pit. “I’ll go alone. You all wait here.”

“U-Um, hold on,” Yifa interjected. “I don’t think you need to do that.”

“Huh?”

Yifa passed by the confused Nozlow and sat at the edge of the hole. She extended her hand toward the red herbs growing on a distant rock, and a blade of wind created by her elementals shot forth. It cleanly cut through several stalks of red-gold herb that scattered through the air and began falling into the abyss. Then a whirlwind formed around them, lifting the herbs into the air and out of the pit. They soared over our heads and landed softly in a grassy meadow behind us to a collective sound of awe from the group.

“E-Eh heh heh,” Yifa giggled.

“That was impressive.” Nozlow complimented the bashful Yifa, then Lulum asked her a question in a gentle voice.

“Your magic is quite odd. Is it the same type of magic that elves use?”

“Um, yes. One of my distant ancestors was an elf, apparently.”

Amyu and Mabel were talking nearby.

“You can’t do that, Amyu?” Mabel asked.

“No way. I could cut them, but I don’t have a way to retrieve them. Yifa’s magic works differently from the magic theory they taught at the academy.”

“Then I’ll get some more!” Yifa said, in high spirits. She began harvesting herbs off the stone wall one after another. We would have the necessary amount in no time.

◆ ◆ ◆

“Will you let me do something already?” I said in front of the guild request board, prompting everyone to look at me in surprise.

When it came time to choose another request after delivering the red-gold herbs, a thought crossed my mind, and I couldn’t help but speak out.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Amyu asked in

confusion.

"Are you seriously asking that? All these requests, and I haven't done anything but carry monster corpses. You guys haven't even gotten hurt for me to heal you."

"What's wrong with that? It's the same thing we've been doing."

"No, it isn't. There's a lot more to look out for when exploring dungeons, like maintaining visibility and making sure there aren't any monsters hiding nearby. With requests, we just head straight for the goal and complete it, then it's over. All I'm doing is walking."

"Hmm..." Amyu had an annoyed look on her face, but I wasn't finished complaining.

"You guys get all excited at the tavern, but I don't have anything to talk about since I haven't done anything."

"Yeah! It may not seem like it, but Master Seika gets lonely easily!" I ignored Yuki's harassment in my ear and continued.

"Let me tackle the next request."

"Then you can choose this time," Mabel said, looking at the others for confirmation.

"I guess that's fair. You're the one who always takes the requests, so we can let you choose this time around," said Lulum.

"You're the one helping us, so we won't complain," Nozlow followed up.

"Y-Yeah! Which one do you wanna do?" Yifa asked.

Now I felt like they were being overly conscientious of me, but I decided not to worry about it. "Actually, there's one I've had my eye on for a while." With a daring smile, I reached for a paper pinned to the corner of the request board. "Let's go with this."

◆ ◆ ◆

And so, we arrived in an underground dungeon. It was a somewhat unusual dungeon that could only be entered through a well in an abandoned village. It seemed to be an ancient, subterranean stream, the tunnel stretching endlessly. Although there weren't any particularly dangerous monsters, up until recently, adventurers from a nearby village had been visiting periodically to

earn a little money. However, that appeared to no longer be the case, as the path here had fallen into disrepair.

"Are you sure about this request?" Lulum suddenly asked as she walked next to me.

"No need to worry," I answered with a smile. "The reward might not be that high, but I'll get it done fast enough that it's not a waste of time. There's no risk of getting lost here either. I'll make sure we're back in Keltz by tomorrow, so bear with me for a bit."

"That's not what I meant." Lulum shook her head. "The target is kind of a troublesome monster. I'm not sure Nozlow and I would be able to beat it. I know how strong you are, but still..."

"Troublesome, huh? Now I'm even more interested," I joked.

This time around, the request was to exterminate a powerful monster that had started living in this dungeon. Because it was eating other monsters and was too dangerous to exterminate, it was causing problems for the adventurers who used the dungeon to make money. Though it was only a small dungeon, it was still a precious resource. If the core were to be destroyed, it would be a major loss. That said, I hadn't chosen this request because I was interested in helping people—I was simply curious about the monster.

At that moment, the light from my hitogata reflected off of a silver surface. I stopped walking and moved the surrounding hitogata forward, illuminating a massive silver orb. It looked like it was around four or five meters tall. The orb had no legs or face and flattened out where it touched the ground, like a drop of water on a leaf. There was a sharp, circular protuberance on top that resembled a crown. Then the silver surface faintly wobbled—it was alive.

"Th-That's..."

"A mercury slime king. Ha ha, it's pretty impressive." It was a superior variant of slime said to have a metallic body. It was a monster I had been interested in ever since I'd read about it in a book. I turned around to face my frozen party. "You guys just wait there for a minute," I said, stepping up to the massive metal slime.

Getting a closer look, I couldn't help but marvel at its existence. It really did look just like living mercury as its name suggested.

Despite the name adventurers had given it, I suspected its properties were actually closer to iron than to mercury.

The mercury slime king's droplet-like body squirmed, crawling along the ground. A blackened helmet rolled beneath it. Judging from its shape and color, it appeared to be the head of a superior variant of living mail known as a cursed mail. Its torso was gone, and the sword and shield it armed itself with had been entirely eaten.

I nodded to myself. "As I thought. It's consuming iron."

A pseudopod like a tentacle stretched out of the giant slime's body. The slime raised it over my head, and it quickly grew thicker.

I nodded again as I watched. "Hmm, so that's how it attacks." As I mumbled, I had already finished making hand signs.

This thing's body probably isn't mercury. I bet it's a magnetic liquid that contains particles of iron or nickel. Honeybees have minerals in their abdomens that respond to magnetic fields, and other animals, like migratory birds and whales, also have organs that sense magnetism. This slime's body might be something similar. There's a basis for this theory—the crown-like protrusion on its head is likely formed in the shape of the magnetic field. When iron filings are attracted to a magnet, they create a similar shape. No, there's no doubt about it now.

The thick pseudopod came swinging down at me like it was trying to crush a fly, but I wasn't concerned.

Phase of yang: Magnetic Force Cloud. A hitogata floating above the mercury slime king unleashed the spell, creating a powerful magnetic field. If its body reacted to magnetism, it wouldn't be able to resist the field my Magnetic Force Cloud created. Helpless against it, the metal slime would then be drawn toward the hitogata, crown-like protrusions forming all over its spherical body. At least, that was what was supposed to happen.

"Huh?" Despite being in the middle of the powerful magnetic field, the mercury slime king showed no sign of faltering. The thick pseudopod was still about to fall on me.

"Seika?!" Yifa's cry echoed through the dungeon alongside the sound of liquid splashing.

The mercury slime king crawled forward to retract its pseudopod back into its body, but it seemed somewhat puzzled, perhaps because the person it was supposed to have crushed was nowhere to be seen. After teleporting away, I scratched my head near the wall of the dungeon.

"That's odd." It didn't react to the magnetic field. That meant it might be mercury after all. Only a few metals, such as iron and nickel, were magnetic, and mercury wasn't one of them. "So is its metallic body just to maintain its weight? Is the crown purely decorative?" My expectations seemed to have been way off the mark.

"Hey! Are you okay?!" Lulum asked.

"If you need backup, say something!" shouted Nozlow.

"I'm fine. Just a slight miscalculation on my part," I replied to the concerned divine demons behind me.

Finally locating me, the metal slime extended a pseudopod once again. This time, it swung it sideways like a whip. Taking a deep breath, I made a hand sign with one hand and directed a floating hitogata at the oncoming mercury arm. "Let's see if this works."

Phase of metal: Mercury Amalgamation. A silver wave that closely resembled the monster's body color surged toward the mercury slime king. The silver liquid summoned by the spell clung to the massive slime's body and began to harden. Mercury Amalgamation was originally a spell used for restraint.

However, it didn't seem to be effective against the slime. The liquid covering it simply sank into its body and didn't appear to hinder it in the slightest. After absorbing every drop of the liquid surrounding it, the mercury king slime suddenly extended several pseudopods, spreading them over a wide area. Finally losing its patience, it sent them all toward me at once.

That was when the change occurred. One of the pseudopods, unable to support its own weight, abruptly fell to the ground. One after another, all of its pseudopods broke off, leaving scab-like formations bubbling up and peeling off where they had once been.

The transformation quickly reached its main body as well. Silver scabs broke out all over the surface of the spherical monster, then

flaked away. The mercury king slime writhed in agony as its body hardened and broke off, powerless to stop the transformation that had occurred within it. The scabs ate deeper and deeper into its body, eventually turning the giant silver sphere into a dried-out, cracked lump. The mesmerizing liquid metal it had once been was nowhere to be seen.

I picked up a piece of the broken slime, then casually walked back to my dumbfounded party. "Request complete. It was a little trickier than I expected, thanks to that miscalculation, but we'll be back in Keltz by tomorrow, just like I promised."

"U-Umm... I'm glad you're safe," Lulum said, her confusion still evident in her voice. "What just happened?"

"It's hard to explain."

Metals such as mercury that were liquid at room temperature formed alloys and quickly hardened when mixed with particles of metal like copper or silver. Mercury Amalgamation used that property to restrain enemies or repair broken buildings. By forcing the slime to absorb a large amount of metal powder, I had caused its entire body to harden. The mercury king slime seemed to indeed be made of mercury or a similar metal like gallium, and it hardened as I'd predicted. Nonetheless, explaining all that would take a while.

"I'll tell you about it once things settle down. For now, let's focus on getting out of the dungeon. I'd rather not deal with any more monsters."

"Seika, are you all right? Did you get hurt?"

I responded to Yifa's worried expression with a smile. "It's no big deal. You know I wouldn't get hurt from something like that."

"Yeah..."

"Hey, is this gonna be okay?"

"I said I'm fine. Don't tell me you're worried about me too, Amyu."

"No," Amyu said, her face scrunching up in disgust. "I knew you'd be fine. What I'm worried about is that." Amyu pointed at the piece of the mercury slime king I was holding.

"What about it? It's a little gross, sure, but we need it for the reward."

“We have to bring part of the mercury slime king back to prove we completed the request,” Amyu said with a slightly uneasy expression. “Do you think the guild is gonna believe that lump of metal was part of the slime when we turn it in?”

“Oh.”

I tried to turn it back to normal after that, but I was unsuccessful. In the end, I created a small bottle of mercury with a spell, and we turned that in instead. While we managed to get paid without incident, I was nervous we’d be discovered the entire time. I would have to think things through more carefully going forward.

Mercury Amalgamation

A spell that hardens the target via amalgamation. When particles of metals like silver, copper, zinc, and tin are mixed with liquid metals such as mercury, an alloy will form and quickly harden. Although originally intended to restrain opponents or repair buildings, Seika mixed in an excessive amount of metal powder to forcibly harden the liquid metal making up the enemy’s body.

Act 2

After that, we continued completing requests. We had grown quite famous within the guild by flawlessly completing only the most lucrative jobs. However, the extra attention wasn't ideal since we had Lulum and Nozlow to worry about. Not to mention that most of the rumors revolved around me, the rank one adventurer, so I was ignoring them for the time being. We'd managed to save up a decent amount of money, but there was one problem.

"Hmm..."

Everyone wore grim expressions as we gazed at the guild request board. The reason was simple—there were no good requests left. There hadn't been many highly profitable requests to begin with, and after taking every well-paying job we could find, all that remained were less appealing requests that either offered low rewards or were in distant locations. However, there was one exception.

"Guess this is all that's left." Mabel pointed at an aged piece of paper stuck inconspicuously in the top left corner of the request board. It was the request to defeat the hydra in the Gloom Ore Mountains that we had first seen back in Rakana.

Nobody had said it out loud, but we had all been thinking the same thing. If we completed that request, we'd obtain the necessary funds in one fell swoop. It was far enough away that the round trip would take us around ten days, but we would barely make it back in time. No matter how many smaller requests we took on, we'd only be making just enough to get by each day. It was the only option remaining to us.

Lulum reached out and tore off the request form. It had been there for so long that the letters had faded.

"Nozlow and I can't defeat a hydra by ourselves," she muttered slowly. "The requests we've taken so far have all been things we

could've handled on our own. You guys have nothing to do with our situation. There's no reason for humans to help divine demon slaves. That's why we've only taken requests where it wouldn't matter if you walked away—but that's no longer enough. We won't be able to save our comrades." Lulum looked directly at us. "So please, lend us your strength. Help us rescue our people," Lulum said, bowing her head.

The silence only lasted for a moment.

"You're saying that now?" Amyu asked with a grin. "We're not backing out now that we've come this far. We're in it until the end."

"Y-Yeah!" Yifa agreed. "We're almost there. Let's all do our best!"

"We can beat a hydra," Mabel followed up.

"You guys..."

"Thank you. I've never been so grateful to a human before."

The emotion was evident in both Lulum's and Nozlow's voices.

"Guess we should hurry up and arrange a carriage," I said with a smile. "It's a request from another branch, so we need to make sure nobody beats us to it."

The adventurers of the party formed by a chance encounter were nearing their end.

◆ ◆ ◆

With that decided, we quickly requested a carriage and began to prepare for our departure. We couldn't afford to waste time, so we'd be leaving Keltz the next morning. That said, with all the adventures we'd been on, everyone was accustomed to preparing to travel by now. After I finished purchasing and packing what I needed, I lay down on my bed at the inn, the light of the setting sun streaming in through the window.

"Phew."

"It seems like you're taking on a formidable spirit this time," Yuki said, poking her head out of my hair. "Are you planning on doing everything yourself?"

"No." I shook my head. "I'll do as little as possible, just like I have been. At the end of the day, this is Lulum and Nozlow's problem. I don't want them to feel like they owe me too much. Same with

Amyu and the others—they're really excited."

Yuki sighed. "Are you sure? They aren't particularly reliable. I'm worried."

"It's just a dragonkin. They'll have my support, and I can rescue them if it comes down to it. Of course, knowing them, I doubt that'll be necessary." At least from what I'd seen so far, our party was well synchronized for how hastily constructed it was. Everybody was fighting well, and they were all individually talented, so I figured they could probably handle a dragonkin even without me. I let out a short sigh. "Monsters are no big deal—you just have to defeat them. If only everything in life were that simple."

"You make it sound like you've got other concerns," Yuki said, picking up on my tone. "Is the reward not going to be enough to purchase the slaves?"

"That's not it. My concern is actually the opposite."

"What do you mean?"

"The price we were given for the slaves is too cheap," I explained. "The number Elman gave us is enough to live comfortably for the rest of your life and far above what ordinary slaves would cost, but it's still a sum a rich person in the capital would pay without a second thought."

It was often said that the sky was the limit when it came to the market price of slaves. Divine demons were rare. Forget the entire group—it wouldn't have come as a surprise if a single individual had been worth the price he'd given us.

"Of course, there are fees involved in transporting them to the capital. It costs money to feed the slaves and to rent the warehouse where they're being kept. Yet even taking that into account, Elman would be much better off auctioning the slaves like he originally planned rather than selling them to us for such a low price."

"Really? But that merchant seemed intent on selling them to you."

"Yeah, that's what bothers me." When I'd first said I wanted to buy them all, Elman had made no effort to hide his incredulity. Yet when he had offered us the estimate, he had taken the exact opposite attitude, acting modestly and trying his hardest to keep me from leaving. He had even offered to lower the price further. He was

a merchant, so there was no way he hadn't calculated what he stood to gain. I found it hard to believe he had simply gotten cold feet over the enormous costs ahead of him.

That means there's something else to it. Is it personal circumstances or some sort of hidden agenda?

"I don't think there's any point losing sleep over it," Yuki muttered quietly. "Even if he does plan on going back on the deal, all we can do right now is prepare the money. I doubt we can threaten him and get him to reveal his true intentions as things are now."

"Hmm... Yeah, you're right." There were still a few things that concerned me, but for now, we couldn't progress unless I set them aside and focused on earning money. We were dealing with merchants—surely they wouldn't outright rob us.

I couldn't help but sigh. Dealing with cunning individuals required me to think about so many different things. Even more so when facing them in their own field. The world would be so much easier if everything could be as simple as fighting ayakashi or monsters.

◆ ◆ ◆

The Gloom Ore Mountains were said to be teeming with rare magic stones. Even the sand in the river at the foot of the mountain had a variety of them mixed into it. Speculators claimed there were untold riches to be made by those who ventured into unexplored areas and found even a single vein of the rare ore.

Of course, there were very few people who actually attempted it, and fewer still who returned alive. The reason there were so many magic stones was because the area was filled with magical power, and that meant the Gloom Ore Mountains were home to myriad other dangerous monsters besides the hydra.

"Ah!"

Amyu barely dodged out of the way of a pyrolizard's fire breath. The crimson lizard turned its head and opened its mouth again, then was blown away by Yifa's wind magic. Yifa breathed a sigh of relief, only to be attacked by a chimera swooping down from the sky. Lulum fired an arrow that pierced its wing, quickly covering the

monster in ice and sending it tumbling down to the earth.

Up ahead, Nozlow snapped a hobgoblin's cleaver in half, then kicked it away. Mabel's battle-axe smashed right through the armor of a skeleton knight attacking from the side. She simultaneously hurled a throwing knife, piercing one of the two goblins that were trying to slip through and get to Lulum. The other goblin had already been struck by a Fireball from Amyu. The battle was quite hectic.

"Is that all of them? What the heck is up with this?!" Amyu complained, catching her breath.

"Th-There are so many monsters..." Yifa said after confirming that no more were coming.

The monsters here were far more numerous and varied than they had been in Rakana's dungeons.

"Even without the hydra, this place is way too dangerous to mine anything peacefully," said Amyu.

"Still, it's within what skilled adventurers can handle. It wouldn't be easy, but they'd be able to gather materials as the defeated monsters—if it weren't for the hydra, that is," I replied.

Hydras were dragonkin with multiple heads that could spew noxious clouds of poison breath. They were so dangerous that it was said there was no saving you if you encountered one, so not even adventurers were eager to enter the Gloom Ore Mountains. If the hydra could be eliminated, the area would become a bountiful source of materials.

The request's exceptionally high reward was based on the expected future profits. Yet, despite that, it had remained on the guild's request board for years. That fact alone spoke volumes as to how difficult it was to defeat a hydra.

◆ ◆ ◆

Several days had passed since we'd entered the mountains. We had yet to spot the hydra we'd come to exterminate. Even using my shikigami to scope out as wide an area as possible, I hadn't found so much as a trace of the monster. I had been prepared to face a vast mountain range, at least to a certain degree, but our deadline was

closing in. If we failed to find it within the next two days, we would have to return to Keltz.

Slipping out of my makeshift bed, I stepped into the night, bathed in the light of the two moons above. I wanted to speak with Yuki away from everybody else. The supernatural powers kuda-gitsune wielded were different from human techniques. Frankly, I didn't expect much from her, but I wanted to boost our chances any way possible, so I was going to ask her to search for enemies.

I walked through the grassy mountain late at night, surrounded by silence. I had set up a barrier around the area so monsters wouldn't approach, which meant I didn't need to be as cautious as usual. It was the least I could do since I wasn't participating in the fighting.

Suddenly, I heard the faint sound of water. I stopped walking to look around, and sure enough, there was a body of water nearby. However, there shouldn't have been any animals or monsters in the area. I could have just sent over a shikigami, but after considering it for a moment, I decided to investigate myself. It would be faster than relying on the poor eyesight of animals that couldn't even see the flow of energy.

I continued walking, and it finally came into view—a clear, pristine spring, and at its center stood a lone figure. She had elegant curves, and her chest was bountiful despite her slender body. Long black hair and skin as pale as death, shining in the moonlight. Finally, there were black markings like tattoos running along her body. The divine demon looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"What? Are you spying on me?" Lulum asked with a raised eyebrow. I panicked and turned around.

"No, sorry. I just heard water, so I came to check it out."

"Yeah? Well, it's fine." I heard the faint splash of Lulum swimming in the spring.

"What are you doing out here so late?" I asked.

"Bathing. Isn't it obvious?"

"You don't have to bathe this late at night."

"I didn't want the girls to come with me." I heard Lulum give a small laugh. "Our appearance can frighten humans."

Her words made me finally realize something—Lulum and Nozlow had never once cleaned off the dyes that hid their markings in front of us. Very few demons lived in the empire, and the ones that did were primarily beastfolk. I had never heard of any divine demons living here. They were one of the races that had most fiercely opposed humanity in the past. Having their identities exposed would no doubt invite trouble. They couldn't afford to be careless when they didn't know who might be watching.

"Then again, it appears there are also odd humans who go out of their way to spy on us."

"You're unusually cheerful."

"I wonder why that is. Maybe it's because I never expected you, of all people, to do something like this. I thought you were an enigma, but you're a boy like any other, aren't you?" Lulum giggled.

She was clearly poking fun at me. Although she looked to be below the age of twenty, given her long lifespan, it was entirely possible she was far older.

"That aside, you should probably bathe soon too. Unless you want those girls to dislike you."

"That's probably a good idea. See you."

"Also..." Lulum called out to my back as I started to walk away. "That monster on your head might run away."

I froze in my tracks. Without turning around, I placed an invisible hitogata in the air and aimed it at Lulum.

"Don't freak out so much." Lulum's tone was the same as ever as I had my back turned to her. "If you wanna keep it a secret, I won't tell anyone. Not the girls or Nozlow. What kind of monster is it? Will you show me?"

"M-Master Seika..." Yuki fidgeted nervously inside my hair, and I let out a sigh.

"Say hello, Yuki."

"O-Okay..." Yuki poked her head out of my hair. "Um, my name is Yuki. Hello."





“Huh?!” I heard a splash behind me, and Lulum cried out in surprise. “I-It’s so cute! And it can talk?!”

“Eek...”

“What kind of monster is it? Is it your pet?”

“Pet? I guess she’s something like that,” I replied.

“M-Master Seika...”

“Sorry, but I’m not in the mood to answer any more questions.”

“All right.” Lulum relented with surprising ease. “Then can I pet her next time?”

“If there is a next time.”

“Seriously?” Yuki grumbled.

Lulum giggled softly and I glanced at the divine demon without fully turning around. Lulum was submerged in the spring on her back with her eyes closed. “How did you know she was there?”

“I have the ability to see energy,” Lulum explained, opening her eyes slightly. “The energy flowing through the earth, the energy inside objects, and of course, the energy people and monsters have from birth.”

“So you can sense magical power?”

“I can do that too, but that’s not all there is to it. Truth be told, I’m not entirely sure what it is myself.”

Techniques for seeing dragon veins and cursed energy were commonplace in my previous world. They could be learned through practice with a little talent. Any sort of diviner could do it. However, I had never heard of anything of the sort in this world. The study of energy probably hadn’t progressed enough for Lulum to even know what she was seeing.

“That’s how I noticed your pet—I felt some sort of different presence. It was so small I didn’t even notice it at first.”

“That explains it.”

“I also know another secret of yours,” Lulum said quietly.

Immediately shaken, I braced myself.

“I’m not trying to threaten you or anything,” Lulum continued uneasily. “Those girls don’t know, right? I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

I couldn’t trust that. I wasn’t sure what she had discovered, but depending on what it was, I might have to eliminate her. I would

end up repeating my previous life if I wasn't careful.

"I probably should have just played dumb, but this might be connected to the person we're searching for, so I need to know for sure. Seika, you have divine demon blood, don't you?"

Silence overtook us as though emerging from the mountain itself. Dumbfounded, I just said the first words that came to mind. "Do I?"

"Huh?" Lulum stood up in the spring, clearly thrown off.

"Where did that come from?" I asked, averting my eyes from her pale skin. "I don't know. You're probably misreading something."

"Th-There's no way!" Lulum shouted in denial. "Do you not realize it yourself? Your magical power isn't like a human's. It's much closer to a divine demon's."

"I don't have any magical power. My talisman spells use a different form of energy. I found that out from a ritual, not just a measurement by a magic item, so I'm pretty sure it's accurate."

"No." Lulum shook her head. "Everyone has magical power. If you eat and breathe, then you're born with it. Even if you have so little that you can't cast spells."

"You can see that?"

"Yes." Lulum nodded.

It seems like she can see even fainter sources of energy than I can, I thought to myself. "If you're that certain, I guess I can't claim otherwise. Maybe one of my ancestors was a divine demon."

"Ancestor?" Lulum shook her head again. "No, it's not that distant. Was one of your parents a divine demon?"

"Huh? That's not possible." This time, I denied her with confidence. "I was born to a noble family. There's no way any of them have demon blood."

"Just tell me." Lulum's voice was more desperate than usual. "What kind of people are your parents?"

"My father is a count in the empire. He researches magic and has territory in a rural area far from here. I'm told my mother was a mistress, but I've never met her."

Lulum gasped. "Did your father used to be an adventurer by any chance?"

"How did you know? Yeah, he was."

“Th-Then...” Lulum piled on another question. “Did he visit demon territory around twenty years ago? The land where divine demons live?”

“Twenty years ago? No, he didn’t.”

“Huh?”

Hearing the confusion in her voice, I explained my reasoning. “My father was an adventurer long before he became head of the family. Probably closer to thirty years ago. And from what I’ve heard, it was much farther south, near the heart of the empire. Twenty years ago would’ve been around when my eldest brother was born, so he couldn’t have been in demon territory.”

“I-Is that so? Then maybe I’m wrong.” Lulum suddenly sounded crestfallen.

“What’s gotten into you?” I couldn’t help but furrow my brow.

“I was thinking maybe you were the one. The son of the person I’m looking for,” she said slowly. “You’re around the right age, and you have the same color hair and eyes as us. Then there’s your magical power too.”

“But I don’t have markings on my body like you guys.”

Lulum shook her head. “That’s fine. Her husband was a human. He was an adventurer who got lost and stumbled upon our village. He claimed to be a noble, but he was always such a smooth talker it was hard to tell if it was true. Anyway, Meloza’s child was half divine demon, half human. Oftentimes, the human blood is stronger in mixed race children, and they don’t look very different from an ordinary human.” Lulum continued on frantically. “And I’ve never met any other humans as strong as you—”

“As far as I’m aware,” I said, cutting her off, “there have never been any demons in my father’s territory. My mother was most likely a normal human.” I kept going without waiting for her to respond. “It’s said that captured divine demons who became slaves lived in this country back during the war. Some of them chose not to return after they were freed and instead gained status and started families. Maybe my mother was one of those people’s ancestors, and the divine demon blood manifested strongly in me. That’s probably all there is to it.”

"Yeah, I've heard that too. I guess I was wrong again." Lulum gave a feeble smile and looked up at the night sky. "Where are you now, Meloza?"

Looking at her out of the corner of my eye, I saw that she seemed like she was about to cry. Sixteen years—Lulum had said that the person she was looking for disappeared from demon territory sixteen years ago. Just how long had she been searching for this Meloza?

"Is she a relative of yours?"

"Not a blood relative, but she was like an older sister to me."

"What did she look like? In human years, how old did she appear?" Lulum blinked, so I continued to explain myself. "I'm not going to join you in searching for her, but if I do happen to come across her, I can at least let you know."

"Heh heh. You're a complicated one, aren't you?" Lulum chuckled softly. "You're kind deep down, but it's like you're always trying to prevent yourself from showing it to others."

"I have power," I said, closing my eyes. "But having power doesn't mean you can do anything. If I go around trying to save everyone, it'll all fall apart eventually. So I stick to only helping people I owe or people I have connections to."

"Is that right? Then does that mean we have a connection?"

"I'm not forcing anything on you. If you don't want the help, we can end this conversation right here."

Lulum giggled, not answering my question. "Hey, Seika." Her voice was as clear as the night sky. "Would you believe me if I told you we were on a journey to save the world?"

◆ ◆ ◆

Lulum was sitting on the edge of the spring, now fully dressed. She had dried her black hair with a magic item, and it was now swaying in the night breeze. Gazing at the reflection of the twin moons in the spring rather than at me, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Meloza was a priestess at the temple," Lulum said, as though

talking to the spring. “Although she was only a few years older than me, she had been working there since she was little. I got there later and started acting like I owned the place since I came from a family of high status, but she still took the time to teach me so much. Even though some of it was just silly games, we laughed together all the time back then.”

I didn’t know much about divine demon customs or culture, but I imagined it wasn’t that different from human society.

“Around the time I was getting the hang of everything at the temple, Meloza found a human in the forest. When the man woke up, he claimed to be an adventurer. He had been holding off monsters to let his party escape, then slipped off a cliff and fell unconscious. I got scared and called for adults, but he really was a smooth talker. He was so cheerful even while tied up that he got them to release him. Meloza desperately trying to protect him probably helped too.”

“He sounds pretty suspicious from what you’ve told me.”

Lulum laughed. “Yeah, but he wasn’t a bad person. Despite his way with words, I think he was telling the truth about falling off the cliff while covering for his party. That’s why Meloza fell in love with him. There were some disagreements since he was a human, but in the end, our village accepted him. I was probably the only one who never stopped treating him like an enemy. I felt like he had stolen Meloza from me.”

Lulum gave a self-deprecating chuckle. She made it sound like it was the distant past. “How many years has it been since then? When Meloza learned she was pregnant, she left the temple. The man’s wounds had fully healed by then, and he had a job and a house, so they decided to live there together. Everyone gave them their blessings, me included. I think they even had a name in mind for the child. But...” Lulum pressed her lips together and wrapped her arms around herself. “I saw it.”

“Huh?”

“I ruined everything. I should have just kept quiet. I could have at least thought about it a little more before telling anyone.”

“What did you see?”

“The future. A future that led the world to ruin—how else would you describe the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord?”

My eyes went wide. “That means you’re...”

“Yes. I’m the divine demon oracle priestess,” Lulum declared, though her tone carried a hint of shame.

I was so stunned I couldn’t find any words. Oracle priestesses made the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord known to the world. Seeing as the demons were already aware of the Hero’s birth, it was only natural that they had one too, but I never would have guessed it was Lulum.

“Huh, you accepted that pretty easily. I had heard that the Hero and Demon Lord were considered nothing more than fairy tales in this country.”

“I don’t necessarily believe you,” I said, casting my gaze down at the ground. “I just didn’t want to interrupt. Continue.”

Lulum looked back at the spring. “I saw two babies. One was a red-haired human girl, and the other was a black-haired divine demon boy. I didn’t know who the Hero girl was. She seemed to live in a nice house, but none of the humans around her looked like nobles. Human countries are so vast that it didn’t offer any clues. But I knew exactly who the Demon Lord was. His house, his parents’ voices—I knew it all. I panicked and immediately reported it to the head of the temple. Shortly after, I learned that Meloza’s son had been born safely...but there was no room for joy.”

Lulum’s expression turned grim. “Everyone was in an uproar. The village chief, the elders... I guess they never expected that the Demon Lord would be born in their village, during their lifetime. Less than a week later, we were visited by the heads of the bigger divine demon villages. After them came devils, beastfolk, giants, ogres, tria, dark elves, and more—they were all leaders who brought attendants and powerful magic items with them. I’m sure their own oracles told them that the Demon Lord had been born among the divine demons.”

“You’re not the only demon oracle priestess?”

“Most races have one unless the bloodline has died out. The dwarves and elves who left the Demon Lord’s army in the previous

war have them too."

"What did they all discuss at your village?" After saying it out loud, I realized it was a pointless question. Lulum shook her head feebly.

"Nothing. There was no discussion. The divine demon leaders just wanted to maintain the authority they had from the Demon Lord being a member of their race. Those who desired war with humanity insisted that the Demon Lord should be properly educated from childhood, while those currently in contact with humans said that the Demon Lord should be eliminated before he gained any real power. Some supported the positions of the races they were allied with, and some immediately started trying to curry favor with the Demon Lord's family. As oracle priestess, I was present as well, but nobody listened to anything I had to say. However, there was one thing they were all in agreement on."

"And that was?"

"That a massive war was going to break out if nothing was done." I held my tongue, prompting Lulum to continue. "Whenever the Hero and Demon Lord are born, war inevitably breaks out between humanity and demonkind. This time would be no different." From the way she spoke, it seemed like Lulum believed that as well.

"Two months after Meloza's son was born, a plan was finally decided. The Demon Lord was to be taken to a divine demon fortress deep within demon territory where he would be raised. They probably decided that the Demon Lord had to be kept under their control no matter what, far away from human lands. They never even considered the wishes of his parents," Lulum said with a tone of regret. "I thought I was being kind when I secretly told Meloza and her husband what they'd decided. The situation had escalated beyond our control. I wanted them to at least cherish what little time they had together. They would surely be able to meet again, so if they could just wait until then..."

"Then what happened?"

"They ran away. They took their treasure—the young Demon Lord—with them." Lulum bit her lip. "I only learned about it after it was all over. I still remember that day vividly. The forest was set ablaze,

either by that man's magic or by the pursuers the elders sent after them. The man died fighting them off, and Meloza and the baby Demon Lord went missing. I was told that based on the direction they had gone, it was likely they were headed toward human territory."

Lulum closed her eyes before continuing. "The leaders of each race decided to impose a gag order. The prophecy of the Hero and Demon Lord's birth had already begun to spread, so it was too late to conceal it. Instead, they decided to claim that the Demon Lord hadn't been born yet. They believed that would let them hide the fact that the Demon Lord had been taken away and quell any potential chaos."

"That explains it," I mumbled quietly. Galeos hadn't known about the birth of the Demon Lord. According to Gly, Fiona's mother had foretold the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord, yet the demons seemed to only know about the Hero. The reason had always been a mystery to me, but now it finally made sense. The massive scandal of the Demon Lord being taken from demonkind had been covered up by their leadership.

"I'm sure they originally intended to find her as soon as possible, but Meloza made a clean getaway. We don't know their whereabouts even now. Recently, some demons have begun to consider the fact that a Demon Lord hasn't been born a crisis in itself."

"I bet." I had learned that fact three years prior.

"I've regretted it ever since. Eventually, the head of the temple told me to forget about Meloza, but I couldn't do that. If I forget about them, it really will be over. For all of us—me, them, and the world. That's what I thought, so I set out on a journey to the human country that man was from. To find Meloza and her son. Knowing that man, it's entirely possible he faked his own death and survived. And even if he didn't, if he really was a noble, it's possible Meloza went to his family. I believed there was still hope—that she was still alive. And if she was, then I would find her. Even if that meant venturing into unknown lands, I had no hesitation."

Then the divine demon priestess gave a faint smile. "I just never expected Nozlow to insist on coming with me. He had a promising

future as a temple warrior. They must have made a big impression on him as a child. I was surprised. I never expected that shy boy to decide to leave the village."

"Wait, is Nozlow younger than you?"

"Yes. Though only by a little."

"Th-That might be the biggest shock yet."

"Really? I think I've said plenty of things that are more surprising." Lulum giggled. "But I'm grateful to him. I never expected this journey to end up being so long. I may well have collapsed along the way if I'd been alone."

"How long has it been?"

"Fifteen years now."

Fifteen years. Even to a long-lived divine demon, there was no way that was a short period of time.

"I've traveled all over the empire, but never once heard of a divine demon mother and child. They weren't among the slaves we finally found, and even the noble boy with divine demon blood in him turned out to be a miss. I'm beat." Lulum sighed. Her side profile looked weary.

"They could be living in hiding like you guys are."

"If they are, then that would make them impossible to find in this vast country. But you know, lately, I've started to hope that's the case. If it means they're still safe..."

"Why did you tell me all this?" I asked after a moment.

"Good question. I guess I figured it would be okay to get you involved."

"What do you mean?"

"There have been humans who were kind to us. They didn't ask about our circumstances, even though we were clearly suspicious. But in the end, they were still humans. I can't get people weaker than low-level monsters involved in our situation. That would be a betrayal of their kindness. Their lives are already short enough as it is."

"But you don't mind getting me involved?"

"No. You're strong enough," Lulum said confidently. "You'll manage no matter what you face, won't you?"

“There are things even I can’t do. I’m only human,” I said with a sigh. “More importantly, did you not think I might turn you over to the lord or military after hearing your story? If you find the Demon Lord, the advantage the human side has by having the Hero will be lost. Do you really think I’d allow it?”

“You wouldn’t do that. You’re too kind. You help those you have a connection with, right?”

“Look...”

“Also, I’m confident you’ll agree with me.”

“Agree with what?”

“Do you like conflict? Do you want war?”

I paused a moment before answering. “No. It’s better to avoid that sort of thing.”

“I think so too. Demons and humans both profit from war, but enough is enough. If you feel the same way, then there’s a good reason for you to cooperate with us.”

“And that is?”

“If you were in our shoes, what would you do? How would you stop war from breaking out?”

“If I were a demon... I’d probably try to kill the Hero.” I recalled the demons I’d once fought. “If war breaks out, it’ll probably be due to the imbalance of power. Defeating the Hero would solve that.”

“Right. There have been other demons who feel the same way, and some of them even set out to defeat the Hero. I agree that the imbalance of power will be the cause, but that wouldn’t solve it. The Demon Lord would still exist. If the Hero dies, then the Demon Lord will be fought over next, and once that’s settled, the power imbalance will return. Either the side that gains the Demon Lord will flaunt their power, or the opposing side will grow fearful, and then war will break out. A terrible war like no other.”

I could see the logic in what Lulum was saying. If the Demon Lord had already been born and was a wild card aligned with neither humans or demons, then that was the natural result.

“Also, killing the Hero wouldn’t be easy. Even finding her would prove difficult.”

“Why is that? If you’re an oracle priestess, then you should know

what she looks like. There may be a lot of humans out there, but there are only so many red-haired girls around the age of fifteen." I was deliberate with my next words. "Like Amyu."

"Yeah, she's got that beautiful red hair, and I'm sure she's around the right age. She's skilled with the sword and magic too. But she's not the Hero."

"How can you be so sure? It's possible."

"Because she's weak," Lulum said without hesitation. "The Hero can take down a dragon solo. Even if she hasn't reached her full potential yet, the Hero struggling with an evil treant at sixteen is unthinkable. The Hero should already be a swordsman standing at the pinnacle of humanity at that age."

"Still, I can't think of anyone who meets those conditions."

"Right. It doesn't make sense for her not to have made an appearance after all this time. Unless she's being sheltered by a powerful force."

I didn't respond.

"A country, for example."

"You don't think maybe she just hasn't had the opportunity to wield a sword?"

"That's absolutely impossible. The Hero wouldn't have such an ordinary fate. Every Hero before has drawn their sword and wielded their power from a young age. I'm certain this time is no different."

I wanted to say that wasn't necessarily the case, but I couldn't confidently make that claim. If I hadn't been around, Amyu would have battled far more powerful foes like Galeos and the demon party. She might have been the one to participate in the tournament in the capital or fight the dragon and summoner in Astilia.

"The fact that we don't know the Hero's name yet means it's highly likely that the country is hiding her. Even the most powerful demons have no way of fighting her if they don't know where she is."

"If you know it's pointless to target the Hero, then how are you planning on stopping the war?"

"I'm going to find the Demon Lord and bring him back with me," said Lulum, her voice filled with conviction. "He'll make alliances with

all the different races and form the Demon Lord's army, just like in the past. And then he'll make peace with humanity."

Her words took me by surprise.

"The demon races are scattered during times of peace, and only the Demon Lord can unite them. Only the Demon Lord can get demonkind a seat at the negotiating table with human governments."

"You want the Demon Lord to be a diplomatic envoy?"

"Even if a declaration of war can't be avoided, it's still possible to end that war without a single battle, don't you think?"

That would certainly be a plan nobody saw coming. Neither demon nor human leadership would ever expect the Demon Lord to become an envoy for peace.

"I thought a long time about what to do back when I was moping around after Meloza's disappearance, and I realized something. The origin of conflict, the birth of the Hero and Demon Lord, is actually the greatest chance of all for peace. The Hero and Demon Lord are both necessary. Humanity needs the Hero, and demonkind needs the Demon Lord to negotiate on equal terms. If peace can be achieved, then there won't be any war as long as it lasts—even hundreds of years later, when a new Hero and Demon Lord are born. We'll be able to live together without fighting. Right, Seika? That's why I say this is a journey to save the world."

That's more of a pipe dream than a plan. Oracle priestess or not, Lulum doesn't have the status to carry it out. And there's no guarantee as to how the empire would approach negotiations. But if there's even the slightest hope, then maybe it's fair to call this a journey to save the world. Still...

There was a question that had to be asked. "Like you said, the Hero should be known by now. But doesn't that apply to the Demon Lord as well? If the demons aren't hiding him, how do you explain the lack of a Demon Lord? He might already be..."

"I'm sure that's because Meloza is raising him," Lulum said with a troubled smile. "I was a real brat, and she managed to straighten me out. I'm certain she's raising him to be a kind, smart boy."

It seemed like it was hard for her to believe her own words, but

she had to. If the Demon Lord was already dead, or if he was being sheltered by the empire, then her plan fell apart.

The divine demon oracle suddenly chuckled softly. "Now that I think about it, though, there was no reason for me to suspect you might be the Demon Lord."

"Why? Are you saying he wouldn't have such a twisted personality?"

"No. The Demon Lord would surely have even greater power," she said with a bitter smile. "You seem like an incredible adventurer, but there are other rank one adventurers, no?"

"Yeah, here and there."

"According to legend, the Demon Lord gains immense power much earlier than the Hero. He would probably be so strong by now that no human could oppose him."

"Hmm..." If the Hero could only barely kill a single dragon, a Demon Lord around that level didn't sound very impressive to me. "I can imagine what the Hero is like, but what sort of powers does the Demon Lord have? Human fairy tales are all too vague to be of any use."

"It's said that the Demon Lord has an incredible amount of magic power and can cast all kinds of spells. He commanded powerful subordinates he could summon at will and even created a magic sword and cut through a mountain with it. He was also said to have used never-before-seen magic to corrode iron and ruin his enemy's weapons and armor. Then there was the giant Fireball with dark element magic mixed in that he used to wipe out an army created by a necromancer..."

"Hmm." *I figured as much.*

"You sound disappointed."

"I was just thinking I could do all that if I tried."

"I guess just hearing it makes it sound a little trite. I'm sure seeing it in person makes it clear how powerful he is. Powerful enough to unite all the demon races." Lulum casually brushed off my words, not taking them seriously.

A gentle silence overtook us. It was by no means unpleasant, but there was something I needed to tell her, even if it meant ruining

that silence.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help with your plan. You might be able to stop the war between humans and demons if it works, but the chances of success are far too low. Even supposing I believe in the Hero and Demon Lord, I can't put my faith in that. I won't be joining you on your journey. I have things I need to do on my own."

Much to my surprise, Lulum just giggled like it was no big deal. "You're an honest guy, aren't you? It's fine. I was never expecting you to help to begin with. This is something we need to do on our own. But you'll help with the hydra, right?"

"Yeah."

"And will you let us know if you ever encounter Meloza or her son?"

"I can at least do that much."

"All right. That's plenty." Lulum stood up from the edge of the spring and looked at me over her shoulder. "Thank you, Seika."

"I haven't done anything worth thanking me for. We just had a conversation."

"And that's all I wanted—somebody to listen to me ramble. It's too bad it took me fifteen years to find that someone." It looked like there was a deep sadness hiding behind her smile.

◆ ◆ ◆

Left by myself at the edge of the spring, I stared at the moon's reflection in the water in silence. Lulum was gone. She had already returned to our campsite.

"Um, Master Seika..."

"Sorry. Give me a little bit to think."

"S-Sure."

Dismissing Yuki, I quietly contemplated my conversation with Lulum. I would never have guessed she was an oracle priestess. Was meeting her truly a coincidence? I didn't believe in fate, but it was hard to think of it as anything else.

There were a few things I had learned from speaking with her—the Demon Lord had been born alongside the Hero, he was part

human and part divine demon, and it was highly likely he was in the empire. And if I had to guess, I was probably the reason Amyu was still so weak.

"Unless she's being sheltered by a powerful force, huh?" Had things been different, Amyu's name might have already been famous throughout the empire. She would have faced death countless times, growing stronger with each battle. Perhaps even strong enough to face the Demon Lord.

If we're talking about fateful encounters, she's gotta be one too. She would've fought far more powerful foes if I hadn't done anything. Of course, there's no guarantee she would've won. In fact, I think there's little chance she could've beaten Galeos or the demon party. So I don't regret protecting her. But if the past Heroes were also met by similar fates, then maybe I'm wrong...

I sighed and shook my head. It didn't matter. The biggest issue was that we didn't know where the Demon Lord was. I had never given much thought to the Demon Lord. I just assumed that if he had been born, he would be deep within demon territory, and I wouldn't cross paths with him anytime soon.

However, if Lulum was right, then not only had he been born, but he was in the empire. That meant I had to be wary of this unknown person. Still, like the Hero, he was unknown to the world. Given what Fiona had said and the government's actions, it was unlikely he was in the empire's custody. It was also hard to imagine he was already dead. That would be too convenient. It was possible that he was being carefully sheltered by Meloza as Lulum had said, or even by someone else. I just didn't know.

Where are you right now, Demon Lord? What are you doing?

◆ ◆ ◆

The next day, the bat shikigami I had deployed throughout the mountain finally located the target.

"R-Really? You found the hydra?" Lulum asked doubtfully.

"Yeah," I responded curtly, walking next to her. I didn't blame her for not believing me. She had the ability to see flows of energy, but

with my shikigami, I could search a far wider area than she could.

"There's one thing I'd like to confirm," I said, glancing back as I guided everyone. "This hydra has some kind of weird breath, right?"

"That's what the person at the guild said," Amyu replied, jumping over a fallen tree. "It's supposed to be a strange, smelly poison. Hydra breath normally has a sulfur smell like volcanic gas, but this one's different. The breath is transparent with a bluish tint and lights anything it touches on fire."

Amyu repeated what the guild had told us, though the information seemed questionable to me.

"Leaves suddenly caught on fire, and people close to the breath had their hair ignited out of nowhere. But apparently, they died before the flames could even consume them, so I think the poison is a bigger concern than the fire."

"It also drains the color from things, right?"

"Oh, yeah, they did mention something like that. The bloodstains on the corpses' clothes were faded, and the leaves had turned white. The hydra itself is supposed to be white as well. I wonder if that's related."

"I'm not sure if it's related, but..." I had an idea as to what its breath might be.

"I've got something I want to ask too," Nozlow suddenly said after remaining quiet the entire time we were ascending the mountain. "You told us not to worry about the breath—are you really gonna handle it yourself?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Just keep fighting even if it uses its breath on you. The weakness of poisons is that they lack immediate, physical force capable of stopping an enemy. Unlike being struck by a sword or burned by fire, you can keep going. It takes time before the effects set in."

"But even if we defeat the enemy, we'll still die after."

"I'm the healer, remember? I've got you covered."

After a brief pause, Nozlow nodded. "All right. We'd have a hard time beating the hydra without you. I'll have faith in you." Nozlow seemed to have resolved his apprehensions.

I couldn't help but respond with a forced smile. "That said, try to

avoid its breath as best you can. It makes my life easier." To be frank, it would've been easiest for me to just kill the hydra by myself. Putting myself in a support role only made things more difficult. *But things aren't that simple. That's what makes interpersonal relationships so complicated.*

I glanced over at Lulum. The divine demon priestess seemed to struggle to find her footing as she focused on the flow of energy around us. She was the same as ever—Lulum didn't seem the least bit distracted by what had occurred the previous night. I silently returned my gaze to the path ahead. *That's fine. We both need to focus on the enemy in front of us.*

"Here." We finally reached our destination—a cliff overlooking a narrow valley. A rapid current flowed below us. The terrain appeared to have been carved out by a waterfall farther upstream.

Amyu looked around in confusion. "Huh? There's nothing here."

"Below," I replied, looking down at the empty valley from the cliff.

Amyu walked over to me, a curious look on her face. "Below? You mean at the bottom of the cliff?"

"Not quite. It's in a cave in the cliff face."

Just as Amyu poked her head over the cliff's edge, the entire valley was draped in a pale blue.

"Gah!" I quickly pulled Amyu back. Right after the swordswoman lost her balance and fell onto her rear, a lukewarm wind blew up from below the cliff. All the weeds and shrubs growing by the edge turned white. "What the heck was that for?"

"Don't talk, and get away from the edge. It's coming." I took Amyu's hand and helped her to her feet, then retreated to where the rest of our party stood waiting, weapons ready.

A white, reptilian head emerged from below the cliff. Its snout was longer than a dragon's, giving it a more frail impression. However, its dignified scales looked as though they could protect it from any half-hearted attack. Below its head was a long, winding neck. Its turquoise eyes stared as though evaluating us.

"Th-That's a hydra?"

Immediately after Yifa mumbled her question, another identical head rose up. Then another. And another. In total, five heads stared

at us from the cliffside.

"It really does have five heads," Lulum muttered grimly.

Hydras were monsters that were said to grow more dangerous the more heads they had. They normally only had three or four, making this individual a particularly powerful specimen.

Thick claws gripped the edge of the cliff. Clinging to the rock so forcefully it seemed ready to crack, the hydra hoisted its massive white body over the ledge. A powerful torso and thick tail that seemed ill-matched to its slender necks followed it up.

I can see why they're called one of the most dangerous dragonkin.

Amyu looked the creature up and down. "Wh-Where was this thing hiding?!"

"Like I said, a cave in the cliff." It was no wonder we'd had such a hard time finding it. It was said to have wandered the mountain range, proactively attacking adventurers, but I was starting to suspect that was an exaggeration. It probably wasn't a very active monster to begin with. Either way, we had finally found it.

"All right, it's finally time to take down the boss," I announced with a faint smile. "Let's finish this and head back to Keltz."

Before any of my companions could respond, all five of the hydra's heads let out a roar as though declaring the start of the battle.

I hope we make it out of here in one piece, I thought to myself, watching my party members brace themselves.

◆ ◆ ◆

Much to my surprise, the hydra charged at us immediately.

"It's not using its breath?!" Amyu shouted, dodging to the side. Following her lead, we all scattered to avoid the hydra.

The dragonkin's massive body trampled through our formation. Its five heads seemed to be having trouble deciding which of us to prey on first.

Although it was standard for a party's front line to form a wall and protect the back line as they attacked at range from the rear,

Amyu and the others couldn't stop such a large, multiheaded creature. It was best to stay away from typical formations to avoid making ourselves targets for its breath. We had discussed that part of the plan in advance, but from here out, we had to adapt on the fly.

"Nrgh!" Nozlow blocked an attack from a gaping maw, deflecting the hydra's fangs off to the side. Slipping underneath its neck, he unleashed an upward palm strike. Despite it being nearly the size of a carriage, he still managed to knock the head up slightly. However...

"Tch!" Nozlow clicked his tongue and backed away. The hydra simply shook its head in displeasure, relatively unharmed.

A moment later, I heard a loud crash next to me.

"Hrmph." One of the heads had cautiously avoided a bedrock-splitting swing of Mabel's axe. The momentum carried her swing further into the air, and she smoothly transitioned into throwing a knife aimed right at the hydra's eye. Missing its mark, the knife bounced off its hard scales. The hydra's turquoise eyes looked down at the diminutive human in irritation. Meanwhile, Mabel hefted her battle-axe and muttered in frustration. "What a pain."

"What's wrong with this thing?!" I could hear sounds of battle to my right as well—one of the heads was persistently targeting Amyu. Though she managed to repel its bite, the hydra showed no signs of relenting. Amyu was stuck on the defensive. "Enough of this!" Amyu launched a Fireball at its gaping red mouth. The sudden blast of fire caused it to pull back, but nothing more. Shaking it off, the hydra's turquoise eyes glared at Amyu as though unsatisfied with her counterattack. "Gimme a break..." Amyu muttered, her expression grim.

Taking my eyes off Amyu, I turned to Yifa. She was the one in the most precarious position at the moment. Snaking through spears of wind and bands of fire, one of the heads closed in on her. Faced with the oncoming danger, her expression went stiff.

Just then, an arrow imbued with energy came flying from the side, embedding itself between the hydra's scales. A water spell activated instantly, covering the head in ice. However, the hydra was undeterred. The monster opened its massive jaws, causing the ice to

crack.

Lulum dove in from the side, grabbing Yifa and rolling onto the ground. Having missed its prey, the hydra's head barreled on and crashed through three trees before coming to a stop. Had her arrow's ice not slowed it down, she might not have made it in time.

"Be careful. Mid-level spells aren't enough to stop that thing," Lulum said tensely, helping Yifa up.

"R-Right."

Breathing a sigh of relief, I canceled the spell I'd had at the ready. While I could technically handle even a fatal wound, I wanted to avoid any serious injuries. After observing the hydra from the back, I was starting to understand the monster's biology. It had been attacking with its heads, rather than its legs or tail. It probably valued the parts that supported its poorly balanced body over the heads it had multiple of. That being the case, it was only the heads we needed to be wary of for the time being.

"In children's stories, they beat enemies like this by tangling their heads together," I thought aloud.

"You think that actually works in real life?!" Amyu shouted back at me.

Probably not. It wouldn't be that stupid. Those heads aren't for show—they seem to all be capable of independent thought. That said, they don't appear to be trying to pull the body in different directions. That probably means the center head that's just watching us from up high is directing all the others.

Suddenly, all four of the attacking heads pulled back at once. Then the center head opened its mouth, a whirlpool of energy forming inside.

"It's using its breath!" Lulum shouted.

Immediately after, the center head unleashed a flood of pale blue gas. The warm, poisonous wind quickly spread over the surface of the mountain. The moment it blew over me, I was struck by a pungent smell along with a sharp pain in my eyes and throat.

"M-My eyes!"

"Wh-What is this?!"

Everyone was thrown into a coughing fit, rubbing their eyes.

Upon closer inspection, all the plants beneath our feet had turned white, and the branches in the breath's path had caught fire.

This is worse than I expected. That poisonous gas is too dense. Even if I can transfer injuries, we won't be able to fight. As I coughed, I checked my substitution hitogata, only for my eyes to go wide with shock. "Huh? You've gotta be kidding..."

All the hitogata I'd made had turned black and fallen to the ground, their power gone. That could only mean one thing—all of us, myself included, had just died. The hydra's breath had killed us. I instantly went pale. *Th-This is bad...*

I had made backups just to be safe, and even backups of my backups, so we could die three or four times, but they would run out the way things were going. It was no longer a situation where I could just sit back and watch.

Seeing that not a single one of us had fallen, the central head looked at us in confusion. Seemingly running out of patience, it opened its mouth once more, another vortex of energy forming inside. Just before it could unleash its breath again, I released a spell from a hitogata I had floating above it in the sky.

Phase of water: Cascade. Water shot up into the air, then came back down, falling to the earth like rain. Caught off guard, the hydra cut its breath short and looked up at the sky.

Poison gasses were ineffective in the rain. It created downward air currents, and on top of that, certain gasses would be dissolved by water and washed away. Although it wouldn't dissolve as easily as volcanic gas, I suspected it would prove effective against the hydra's breath.

"I stopped its breath! Now's your chance!" I shouted at the members of my party, who were surprised by the sudden change in weather. Even without its breath, it was still overwhelming us. We needed to change up our strategy. "Don't attack alone! We've got numbers, so work together and surround it!"

The party responded immediately. The hydra, on the other hand, was now losing its spirit. The unfavorable rain had likely caused it to have some doubts, but with its sluggish body supporting its five heads, it would be difficult for it to retreat. Seemingly finding its

resolve, one of the heads attacked Nozlow. Just like before, the divine demon martial artist stopped its massive jaws. However, what occurred after was different.

"Chilling, freezing, and shattering blue! Spirits of the frigid lake of ice, fall silent, freeze, and turn your rage into a hammer! Glacier Fall!" It was one of the first times I'd ever heard Amyu use a full incantation. A moment later, a massive icicle pierced through the neck of the head Nozlow was pinning. Blood gushed out, and the hydra's eyes widened before the head stopped moving.

"High-level magic, huh?" Nozlow muttered in surprise, covered in blood and rain.

"Yep. Chanting an incantation isn't very magic swordsman-like, is it?" Amyu replied, fending off an attack from another head. Amyu typically only used incantationless mid-level or lower magic. I'd asked her about it before, and she'd said that was how magic swordsmen typically fought. Nonetheless, that didn't mean she was incapable of using high-level magic. She was the Hero, after all. She was more gifted than anyone.

"I see," Nozlow mumbled quietly. Without any warning, he jumped on top of the head targeting Amyu. "Then I'll show you one of my tricks too." When the hydra realized he was on top of it, it tilted its head and shook it back and forth. In contrast, Nozlow simply grabbed onto its scales with one hand and rested the palm of his other hand on top of the hydra's head. But that wasn't all—before the hydra could shake him off, he delivered a blow that shook the very air itself.

The hydra's head promptly hit the earth as though the strings holding it up had been cut. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth, no longer moving. It was dead.

"Wh-What was that?" Amyu mumbled in shock, watching Nozlow jump back to the ground. "Did you just punch it?"

"Something like that."

There was a martial arts technique passed down in the Song dynasty known as fa jin. It was a palm strike delivered from almost point-blank range that sent a shock deep into the target's interior. I had heard that masters of the technique could even rupture their

enemies' organs through armor. I'd never expected to see it in another world.

Watching Amyu and Nozlow's teamwork, Lulum smiled. "Right. There's no need for us to fight alone." She nocked an arrow and aimed at the head approaching her. With a swish, the arrow pierced right between its scales.

At first glance, it seemed to have had no effect, but when it was mere moments away from striking, the hydra suddenly froze in place with its fangs bared. Looking closer, thin shadows seemed to have extended from the arrow, connecting back to Lulum's feet.

"Th-This one is pretty strong, but it stops me from moving too." Lulum forced a smile even as her cheeks twitched. "Take things from here, Mabel."

"Got it." Mabel sliced right through the hydra's neck, and its head hit the ground, blood gushing out like water. It was as though its hard scales and powerful muscles hadn't even existed. It was a scene that wouldn't have been possible without the enormous weight powering the battle-axe's downward swing. Satisfied with herself, Mabel hefted her axe back over her shoulder. "That was refreshing."

Just then, I heard a creaking sound as another head uprooted an entire tree. Its brute strength—enough to overpower ten oxen at least—was surprising enough, but even more astonishing was the fact that it was clearly trying to use it as a weapon.

Perhaps it had determined that close-quarters combat was too dangerous. That particular head, which had previously engaged Mabel very cautiously, swung in a wide arc with the tree clenched between its jaws. If it hit, the two of them wouldn't make it out unscathed. *If* it hit.

"If high-level magic is effective, then this should work, right?" A moment later, a giant, red-hot stone fell from the sky, crushing both the head and the tree together. It resembled the high-level earth spell Meteor Fall, but it was cast by elementals, making it entirely different from the magic humans used. "Th-Thank goodness. I made it in time," Yifa said, relieved.

Amid the steam created by the meteor's heat evaporating the

falling water, the final head was clearly distraught. With its breath sealed and its other four heads down, the final head was all that remained.

"Seika, we're almost there!"

"Finish it off!"

Yifa and Nozlow shouted at me.

"Huh? You want me to do it?" I asked blankly.

"Of course! You think we're gonna complain at a time like this?" said Amyu.

"Hurry!" Mabel added.

Lulum rounded out the group. "Deal the final blow, Seika!"

"All right, if you insist." With a chuckle, I ended my Cascade spell, and the rain stopped. The central head looked up at the sky with a start, then opened its mouth wide, energy gathering within. It was probably thinking it could still beat these humans if it could just use its breath. "Going out of my way to use rain instead of a barrier paid off," I muttered, the corners of my mouth curling into a smirk.

By canceling the spell, I could bait the hydra into using its breath. Pale blue wind began to pour out of the hydra's maw. Just as it did, I activated a spell from a hitogata floating right in front of it.

Phase of yang: Faint Lightning. Sparks flashed around the hitogata. Though it was supposed to be a spell that simply created small-scale lightning, a moment later, an explosion rang out right in front of the hydra. The gust from the impact blew over the ground. Taking the blast so close to its face, the scales on the neck and jaws of the hydra's final head were blown away, leaving its white body dyed red with blood. Its one remaining eye appeared to be glaring at me.

"No tougher than a venomous snake," I couldn't help but mumble. *Guess I should put it out of its misery.* I attached a hitogata to its now scaleless neck and made a hand sign with one hand.

Phase of wood: Opium Decoction. The final head approached me, its mouth open wide. However, its desperate assault suddenly veered off course as though it had lost sight of me. It crashed into a nearby boulder, shattering the stone and falling still. The light had left its

eye. It had likely lost consciousness.

When consumed in excess, the medicinal components found in opium poppies led to hallucinations, deep sleep, and eventually, death. Although it served as a painkiller in small quantities, it could also be used as a poison like this. Eventually, the energy faded from the hydra's body. The white hydra that had long terrorized adventurers had met its end.

I took a deep breath. "Somehow, we made it out unharmed." Nobody had sustained any serious injuries. Granted, we would have all died once without the substitution hitogata. There were no cheers of joy—everyone simply looked relieved. Dragonkin aside, it wasn't our first time defeating a high-level monster. Nonetheless, a feeling of accomplishment seemed to be shared between my drenched companions.

"Oh, you..." Amyu looked at Nozlow, and her voice trailed off. The black markings on the martial artist's thick, pale arms were starting to become visible.

"Hmm?" Nozlow looked down at his arm and frowned. "The rain just washed the dye off. That's all." His tone sounded slightly uneasy.

I looked over at Lulum and saw her in the same state. She was staring at her own markings, now visible beneath the faded dye, with an uncomfortable expression. She'd always kept them hidden around humans—even around us, who knew her situation. I couldn't blame her for feeling awkward. Still, her reaction was making things uncomfortable. Just as I was starting to think that I shouldn't have used the rain...

"Hmm." Unbothered, Amyu looked over Nozlow's arms. "Y'know, I almost forgot you guys were divine demons. You're born with those markings, right? You don't add them yourselves?"

"That's right. Unlike the markings humans engrave on their bodies, we get them from our parents," Nozlow replied.

"Hmm, is that right?" Amyu's face lit up into a grin. "Then you're lucky you got cool ones."





Nozlow opened his mouth for a moment, then had second thoughts and turned away. “They’re not that cool,” he mumbled quietly.

“N-Nozlow, come on...” Lulum said with a tone of disbelief after watching the situation unfold. “You couldn’t say anything better than that? Amyu went out of her way to compliment you.”

Nozlow didn’t reply.

“You’ve always been like this.”

“I-I think yours are really pretty too, Lulum,” said Yifa.

“They’re like tattoos,” Mabel added.

“Y-You think so? Thanks...” Lulum shrunk back a little under Yifa’s and Mabel’s intense stares. The mood had lightened up before I knew it.

“Good grief. They’re so carefree. They have no idea how you feel,” Yuki whispered into my ear. “I was really nervous. I’m glad nothing bad happened.”

“Yeah, it was tougher than I expected. Especially that breath.” I hadn’t expected it to take effect so quickly. I had been surprised by how quickly my substitutions had been used up, but what had really caught me off guard was the intense irritation when the breath had hit my eyes and throat. It was far worse than I’d anticipated, and fighting through it would have been impossible. Ordinary smoke or volcanic gas wouldn’t have been as bad.

I guess you can’t understand stuff like this until you experience it firsthand. Knowing something exists doesn’t mean you can underestimate it.

“Though I’m sure you were totally fine.”

“Hmph! I was not! That garlicky smell was awful!” Yuki made it sound like it had been a harrowing experience, but if it had just been a bad smell to her, then she’d had an easy time. Only poisons that were widely known by humans affected ayakashi. “Humans really are fragile if they can die from a bad smell.”

“It’s not the smell that kills you, but...whatever.” Humans *were* weak. They were all talented by human standards, yet they’d still had to risk their lives to defeat a spirit of that level.

“Seika!” Amyu suddenly called out to me, startling me out of my

thoughts.

"Wh-What is it, Amyu?"

"I wanted to ask what you did at the end there."

"At the end?"

"You made the hydra's breath explode. But there was no smoke, so it wasn't black powder, right?"

"You use a lot of strange magic. Do you also have a spell to make a hydra's breath explode?" Lulum followed up.

"Oh, no, that's not what happened," I explained. "That was an effect of the poisonous gas the hydra's breath was made of." A gas that was pale blue, drained the color of whatever it touched, could set things on fire, and had an odd smell. Only one thing came to mind—ozone.

Ozone was a powerful toxic gas with several unusual qualities that was created by lightning strikes. It took away color from things it touched, could set them on fire, and exploded when exposed to powerful stimuli. It didn't react unless the concentration was high, but I figured if it was high enough to kill someone instantly, it would be fine. I had gotten to witness an interesting phenomenon. I was glad I hadn't simply blasted it away with a random spell.

"Hmm, then I guess it wouldn't work on a normal hydra," Amyu said, a hint of curiosity in her voice.

"No, it would. Volcanic gas has similar properties provided it's dense enough."

"Really? Then let's go to a dungeon with a hydra sometime. I wanna try it too!"

"It's too dangerous. Sticking to the book and launching a surprise attack on a rainy or foggy day is much safer. Volcanic gas is easily dispersed by water." Amyu listened to my explanation with an unhappy look on her face.

"You know a lot about random stuff," Lulum said, watching our conversation unfold.

"It's not random stuff. I just happened to read it in a book before."

"Another natural history book? You sure do like those."

"What's wrong with that?"

Lulum giggled. “I guess you really aren’t Meloza’s son.” When I silently turned to look at her, she spoke with a resigned smile. “That part of you is quite human.”

Opium Decoction

A spell that creates morphine. When ingested in large quantities, one of the alkaloids that make up opium causes delirium, foggy consciousness, or even a comatose state that can lead to death in only a few minutes. Although morphine wasn’t actually discovered until the early modern era, in this work’s world, it was isolated by an Arabian herbalist in the eighth century.

Act 3

After reporting the hydra's extermination to the guild, we immediately returned to Keltz—or at least, that was what I had hoped would happen. In reality, the reward for the request was so high that the guild wasn't able to prepare all the money immediately. Since we were short on time, we ended up rushing them nearly to the point of threats. In the end we managed to obtain a sack full of gold coins in less than two days. We then immediately secured a carriage and left the city at the foot of the Gloom Ore Mountains that very same day.

"Phew... It's almost over, but we can't let our guards down yet."

I turned around from the driver's seat, reins still in hand, and saw Amyu wearing a tense expression.

"You got that, guys? Protect that money no matter what."

Yifa and Mabel nodded.

"O-Of course, Amyu!"

"We've got this."

The pair held the large sack of coins like it was their child. They had been like that, Amyu included, ever since we'd received the money; they had never seen such a large sum before, and it was making them act strange.

"S-Seeing this makes it hard to accept the money," Lulum said awkwardly, watching the three.

"It'll be sad, but it's all right," said Amyu.

"If this child can be of use to someone..." Yifa sniffled. "Then I'm happy."

"Saying goodbye is part of adventuring," said Mabel.

Lulum's expression gradually turned to the wary look of one observing a lunatic, and I faced forward with a small sigh. We could already see Keltz's walls, bathed in the setting sun. We didn't need to worry about bandits at this point. Elman had agreed to hold the

slaves through today—we would make it in time, just barely.

"Looks like everything's gonna go smoothly, Master Seika," Yuki said, slightly peeking out of my hair. "I thought hunting monsters to earn a fortune big enough to set you for life in just a month was ridiculous, but you actually pulled it off. I never should have doubted you!"

"No, we haven't pulled anything off," I calmly replied to Yuki's ecstatic statement.

"Huh?"

"We don't have nearly enough to pay for the slaves."

"E-Enough what?"

"Money, obviously."

"Huh?!" Yuki couldn't help but cry out, then panicked and covered her mouth. "Wh-Wh-What do you mean?! Those people said you would have enough money if you defeated that spirit that looked like Yamata-no-Orochi."

"Oh, that?" I gave a slight smile. "I've been lying to them. The price I told them was only twenty percent of the price Elman actually gave me."

"H-Huh? Why would you do that?"

"Because, like you said, it's impossible to earn a fortune big enough to set you up for life in a single month. If I'd told them the real price, I'm sure those two would have resorted to drastic measures. I want to avoid that and somehow buy them back peacefully."

"B-But you can't buy them back if you don't have enough money!" Yuki said, clearly lost. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll secretly pay the rest."

"Where are you— Oh." Yuki seemed to realize it.

"That's right. I have the letter I got from Fiona," I said with a grin. If I used it, I would likely be able to cover the difference. "This is the perfect way to use it. The sum isn't something we could easily come up with ourselves, but it's not overly expensive either—just the right balance."

"I see...but it still feels like a waste."

"If I let myself think that way, I'd never use it in my entire life."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Yeah." In my past life, I had filled my manor with a plethora of untouched cursed objects and treasures. Upon reflection, they had probably all been lost in the fire when I'd died.

"Couldn't you have covered the entire cost with that? Why go out of your way to defeat that spirit?"

"Because I have no obligation to cover the entire cost. It's not good to constantly be creating debts. And also... Why not?" I turned to look at the back of the carriage. All the energy they'd had was now nowhere to be seen. Everyone back there, Lulum and Nozlow included, was now dozing off. "It was pretty fun."

◆ ◆ ◆

We passed through the gate just as the sun set. The company would soon be closing its doors for the day. Despite being nervous in the unfamiliar downtown, I hurried the horses along as fast as I could. Missing the date by a single day probably wouldn't be a big deal, but I still wanted to speak with Elman today if possible.

"Hey, what are you gonna do after you buy your people back?" Amyu asked Lulum while they rode in the shaking carriage.

"We're planning on heading back to our village," Lulum answered, forcing a smile. "We can't really travel with fifteen people. We've been gone for ages, so this is a good opportunity to visit anyway."

"Then I guess this is goodbye," Amyu said, sadness evident in every word.

"Guess so. But that's to be expected. We're different races, after all. Saying goodbye is part of adventuring, right?"

"Y-Yeah..." Amyu was holding back tears. Yifa and Mabel sniffled too. "How long until you guys leave?"

"Some of them will probably be hungry and wounded. We won't be able to head home immediately. We could take on another dungeon in the meantime," Nozlow suddenly interjected.

"Nozlow..."

"If we're going home, we can convert some of the valuables we brought into money," Nozlow said curtly. "We should have enough

for a brief stay.”

“Heh heh, you’re right.” Lulum smiled. “Let’s do a little more adventuring before we say goodbye.”

“Th-Then...” Amyu rubbed her eyes. “It’s a promise. A-And also, don’t forget about it. Adventurers are like that.”

“Yes, I know.” Lulum held Amyu’s hand for a while, then came up to the front of the carriage and sat next to me. I glanced over at her, still silent. “They’re good kids. I see why you spoil them.”

“I’m not really trying to spoil them. We’re around the same age, anyway.”

“You did say that, didn’t you? Though I find it a little hard to believe.” Lulum giggled.

“What are you gonna do about your search for the Demon Lord?” I asked hesitantly.

“It’ll continue. We’re just dropping by home,” she said, her expression calm. “Though I am a little tired. Taking a short rest might not be a bad idea.”

“If...” Lulum looked over at me as I carefully began to speak. “If there ever comes a time when you have to give up, you should find something else to hold on to. Some things in life are simply beyond our control.” I had crossed deserts and seas, even going so far as to learn the West’s ancient wisdom, but in the end, I had never been able to bring my wife back. No matter who you were, there were always things you couldn’t do.

“Something else, huh?” Lulum repeated my words with a serious expression.

“It doesn’t matter what. Pursuing knowledge, art, training disciples—there are all sorts of things.”

“What have you given up on?”

I looked out at Keltz as I answered. “I haven’t given up on anything yet.” *Not in this life, at least.*

“Oh. Well, you’ve given me something to think about.” Lulum looked somewhat refreshed. She had no doubt thought countless times about what came after her journey. “Thanks, Seika.”

“You can thank me for everything when we say goodbye. There’ll be no end to it if you thank me every time I help you in the

dungeon.”

“My, were you planning on coming with us? We don’t need your rank one status anymore.”

“I’m not comfortable sending those girls to a dungeon alone.”

“You really do spoil them,” Lulum said with a giggle.

◆ ◆ ◆

The sky was red by the time we reached Keltz’s commercial district.

I hope they’re still open...

When the sign came into view, Lulum pointed ahead. “Looks like they’re here. But...” Her words trailed off.

There were indeed familiar figures beneath the Elman-Neg Company sign. The company’s slender, bearded representative, Elman, and the gloomy, hunched vice-representative Neg. However, they weren’t alone.

Ten or so armed town guards were with them, all wearing matching uniforms. I slowed down the carriage as we approached, and the guards surrounded us. Despite my mounting wariness, I jumped down from the driver’s seat. Nozlow was already glaring sharply at the humans from the back of the carriage, Amyu and the others behind him. Lulum dismounted from the front as well. They all looked worried.

I called out to Elman, whose smile was shadier than ever. “Hey there, Elman. This is quite the grand reception for our second visit. I can’t say I’m a fan of this sort of thing.”

“We’ve been waiting for you, Seika,” Elman said, stroking his beard. “I’m glad to see you returned safely. I’m relieved. Though you’re a grimy adventurer who showed up uninvited, you’re still my dear customer. If something happened to you...”

“As you can see, I’m fine. There’s no reason to worry about a rank one adventurer who can easily slaughter dragonkin. If you understand that, send these people on their way.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Elman replied, no longer even trying to hide his scheming. “I truly am relieved. I was a little concerned

when I heard you were taking on every guild request in town, but I convinced myself that you were simply a little short on funds. The other rumor, however, is one I cannot ignore."

"And that is?"

"That you're working with demon spies."

Lulum's and Nozlow's breaths caught in their throats.

"If that were the case," Elman continued theatrically, "oh, how dreadful it would be! You would be subjecting not only Keltz but everyone who lives in the empire to danger! A betrayal of human society itself! A mere merchant couldn't possibly handle such a situation by himself. When I presented this information to the lord alongside a little coin, he agreed to lend me his men. Now, Seika, may I ask that you hand those two dangerous demons over to me?"

"No need. We'll come to you." It was Nozlow who answered. He cast aside the cloak hindering his movements, his sharp gaze fixed on Elman. "But no promises on what happens after that. You should've brought more men."

"Hmm..."

"No hard feelings." Nozlow kicked off the ground. It had to be some sort of martial arts technique—he covered nearly nine meters in a single step, immediately putting the merchant in range of his fist. He unleashed a lightning-fast knife-hand strike. With the immense magical power of a divine demon enhancing his physical abilities, he could sever the slave trader's slender neck in an instant. Yet that didn't happen.

Nozlow's hand stopped right in front of Elman's neck. Pointed shadows extending from the ground had pierced his arm, stopping it mid-motion. He shifted his weight to launch a kick, only for a shadow to skewer his right leg. They tore through his left arm, shoulder, and chest, until his entire body had been pierced by black shadows.

"Gah!" The divine demon martial artist coughed up blood.

Stroking his beard with a concerned look, Elman spoke to the man next to him. "Take care not to kill him, Neg. He'll fetch a high price."

"I-It's fine, brother! Divine demons are sturdy!" The hunched

ghost user laughed creepily.

"Nozlow!" Lulum cried out, drawing the bow on her back. She had an enchanted arrow at the ready. "Hang on, I'll—"

"Heh heh, not happening!" A dark red, thornlike pattern appeared around Lulum's neck, and the divine demon priestess's eyes shot open.

"Urgh... Gah..." Her bow fell from her hands. Unable to endure the pain, she collapsed on the ground. Her hands clutched at her neck as though trying to remove a rope, but nothing was there except a dark red curse mark.

"A-Are you okay?!" Amyu raced over to Lulum. The divine demon was sweating profusely, her eyes barely open, and her voice hoarse.

"Run... He's..." Lulum's shadow expanded widely before she could finish. It quickly expanded beneath all our feet. Then curse marks appeared on Amyu's, Yifa's, and Mabel's necks.

"Agh!"

"What the heck is this?!"

Everyone fell to the ground. The shadow continued extending over to Neg, and a pitch-black ghost covered in rags appeared behind him.

"Oooooo..." It was a wraith lord. One of the most powerful astral monsters, capable of using dark element magic.

Elman laughed triumphantly, as even the guards on his side were stunned into silence by the ghostly king. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Takes you back, doesn't it, Neg? We used to capture people like this all the time and sell them off." Elman's eyes were wide and bulging like a gecko's. "We captured an entire group of bandits who tried to rob us and sold them to a mine! We took out an underhanded competitor and sold his wife and daughter to a brothel! We even threatened a lord who falsely charged us exorbitant fees and forced him to sell off his beloved subjects!" Elman looked over fondly at the ghost user next to him. "It's all thanks to you, Neg. All that business and violence was the cornerstone of our current success."

"If you hadn't turned them into money, I would've died on the side of the road. We're unbeatable together!" Neg laughed cheerfully. "But you know what the best part was!"

"Yes, indeed. The runaway divine demon slave. Dangerous though he was, there's no merchandise more valuable. I never thought we'd come anywhere close to it again."

"I-If he ever ran off again, I was planning on hunting him down, torturing him, and selling him off to someone else."

"Well, nothing to be done if he's dead," Elman said regretfully.

I see. No wonder Neg didn't hesitate to take on Lulum and Nozlow—he's beaten a divine demon before. It probably wasn't even close.

"Yet look at how far we've come, Neg. It once took an incredible stroke of luck to obtain such merchandise, and now we have fifteen of them. Or seventeen, I suppose I should say." Elman briskly walked over to Lulum, who was still suffering from the curse mark, and grabbed her chin. "Hmm. We already have plenty of women and children, but this one isn't bad. She should fetch a nice price depending on her condition. Well done identifying these two as divine demons, Neg."

"I-I told you, brother. Everyone said they were demons!"

"Y-You!" Amyu unsteadily stood up, anguish on her face. The curse mark was still around her neck. Despite the pain she assuredly felt, she put her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Don't touch Lulum!" Drawing her spellblade, she charged at the slave trader.

However, a wall of flames erupted in front of her before she could take more than a few steps. She froze in her tracks. Finally reaching her limit, she fell to her knees, groaning and clutching her neck. A faintly red ghost floated in the air, dancing around the flames.

The flame wraith wasn't alone. There was a pale blue frost wraith, a light green wind wraith, and an earth-colored ground wraith, alongside a hell ghost that resembled black fog, and wisps that looked like hitodama. Every sort of astral monster you could think of was rising from the earth around us.

"Wh-What did you just try to do to my brother?! I-I-I'll kill you!" the ghost user shouted, his eyes wide with anger.

"That's enough, Neg," Elman said calmly. "I don't think she'll be able to fight back anymore. Even just standing while afflicted by a wraith lord's curse is an impressive feat. What I'm more curious

about is...” Elman walked over to Yifa, who was gasping on the ground.

Vengeful spirits were swirling around her just like they surrounded Nozlow, who was bloody and pinned down by shadows, and Lulum, who was groaning in the middle of the street. The slave trader looked the girl over as though evaluating her.

“Hmm... She’s a decent specimen. Her hair color is disappointing, but she should still fetch a nice price. Neg, what sort of demon is she?”

“She’s not a demon, brother. She’s an elf, and not a pure one either.”

“That’s too bad. I suppose we won’t be able to claim she’s a spy.” Quickly giving up, Elman turned around to face me. I had been watching the events unfold silently. “Before we get down to business, I’d like to ask you a question. Why are you unharmed, Seika?” Although he wore a relaxed smile, I could see the fear hiding in his eyes.

“What a dull curse,” I said, rubbing the curse mark on my neck. “All it does is make the target feel like they’re choking. It doesn’t actually affect the body. It’s nothing more than an illusion.”

“Even if you understand how it works, you still shouldn’t be able to endure the pain.”

“You make it sound like you’ve experienced it for yourself.”

“But of course.”

“You’re one gutsy merchant to test your bodyguard’s capabilities on yourself. But don’t fool yourself into thinking this scare tactic of a curse can do anything to me.”

“I see. My goodness, rank one adventurers certainly are something else. I’m impressed.” Elman didn’t let his composure falter. “Nevertheless, it would be wise to avoid doing anything brash. Let us return to the topic at hand,” Elman said with an exaggerated gesture. “Even an accomplished rank one adventurer won’t be able to avoid charges for working with demon spies—and divine demons at that. You may well be executed. Your party members as well, naturally.”

Elman’s voice was full of confidence. “Even you can’t hope to

eliminate this many people at once. If so much as a single guard escapes, you'll be in dire straits. Naturally, we have other guards observing at a distance through spyglasses. And even supposing you did manage to silence everyone, the lord will realize what happened and prosecute you. You're already in checkmate. Ha! But have no fear, Seika," Elman said as though he were extending me a helping hand. "I know that these two demons were deceiving you. Weren't they?"

I didn't respond.

"I'm told your party originally only had four members. You encountered two demon spies during your travels, and they tricked you into helping their people. I don't mind reporting to the lord that you were merely a victim."

"Stop beating around the bush. Out with it."

"Obediently hand them over to me and leave town," Elman said with a toothy grin. "Did you pity the wandering demons you met by chance? Divine demons closely resemble humans, after all. But I must warn you, pointless sympathy will be your ruin. You would be wise to abandon your virtuous noble heart, and soon. I take no mercy on those who are after my merchandise. Had I given an honest price, those demons might have attacked the warehouse then and there, so I put it at a steep discount. Ordinarily, I would have laughed off the idea of buying all of them like the joke it is. You're quite impudent for a mere adventurer. Consider this your punishment for not knowing your place. Now, Seika, what—"

"Sorry for interrupting when you're clearly enjoying yourself, but I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I beg your pardon?"

Elman looked at me incredulously, and I turned to the fallen Lulum. "They're demons? That's news to me. I never would've guessed."

Elman looked baffled for a moment, then burst into laughter. "Ha ha ha ha ha! Well, now!"

"As you said, we simply met by chance, and let them join our party because they were strong. I guess they had us completely fooled. I appreciate you informing us, Elman. You can do as you like

with them, as thanks."

"S-Seika?!" Amyu raised her head slightly, staring at me in shock. "What are you saying?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha! Excellent! We truly are alike, Seika. This is precisely how an ex-noble must get by!" Elman seemed overjoyed.

I ignored Amyu for the time being and continued speaking with him. "Seems like your suspicions are cleared. Mind undoing the curse on the girls now?"

"Hmm, I think I'd prefer to err on the side of caution."

"Then I'll do it myself," I said as the curse marks around Amyu's, Yifa's, and Mabel's necks disappeared. The three immediately gasped for breath.

"Y-You!" Amyu quickly stood up, about to charge at Elman with her sword in her hand.

"Amyu. Stop," I commanded, imbuing my voice with cursed energy. That was all it took to make her freeze.

Her eyes widened, and she looked at me in disbelief. "Seika... Why?"

"I understand how you feel. You got along well with that woman. But get a clue already. We were tricked."

"Don't give me that crap—"

"Marvelous. I see you have a good head on your shoulders, Seika." Elman's smile deepened. "These individuals will soon face a summary trial to determine their guilt. While I don't know their exact charges, their sentence has already been decided—enslavement. Though criminals sentenced to slavery are typically auctioned off, thanks to the kindness of a certain lord with whom I have a close relationship, I've already secured their purchase. They'll be sent directly to my warehouse after."

"I don't care. Do what you want, but don't brag to me about it."

"Oh, pardon me. You're quite right," Elman said with a playful tone, clearly in high spirits. He reached into a leather bag slung over his shoulder and pulled out two collars. Intricate patterns were etched into the surface of the black metal, and I could feel energy flowing through them. "We managed to secure more collars since our last meeting. Thank goodness we got them in time for today."

He handed the slave collars to the guards, and they put them on Nozlow and Lulum. Bloodied and unmoving, Nozlow was easy, but Lulum tried to resist despite her limp body. However, the guards pulled her up by her arms, grabbed her hair, and attached the collar.

"Urgh!" Despite my binding her by name, Amyu took a step forward.

The Hero really is incredible. I'm impressed that someone born in this world can resist my curses, even if only slightly. Just to be safe, I cast it again. "Amyu. *Drop your sword.*"

"N-No!" Amyu gritted her teeth and strengthened her grip on the sword that was about to fall from her hands. Still, it didn't seem like she was capable of resisting both commands, and she didn't move another step.

"Well, that takes care of that. Neg, you may release your curse and magic," Elman said contentedly.

Nozlow collapsed to the ground once the shadows were removed, and Lulum gasped for air as the guards forced them to their feet.

"If you're ready to take them away, then clear the road," I said to Elman. "We need to return the carriage."

"Certainly. Am I safe to assume you'll no longer be purchasing any slaves?"

"Yeah. It's not necessary anymore."

"Then I must ask that you pay a cancellation fee. It need not be too much. Just enough that you can be certain we won't report you."

"You're a greedy guy." With a sigh, I turned around and walked over to Yifa and Mabel and picked up the sack of gold coins that had fallen to the ground next to them.

"S-Seika, that's..."

Ignoring Yifa's plea, I tossed the sack toward the slave trader. It landed at his feet, and several coins spilled out.

"My, my..." Elman lifted it himself, despite how much it must have weighed. "You all earned quite a bit. I suppose adventurers aren't to be underestimated. I wouldn't mind selling one of the divine demons to you for this amount."

"I told you I don't care anymore."

"Ha! Very well, then. Live a long life, Seika," Elman scoffed as he

handed the pouch to Neg. “It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.” Elman turned around and left. Neg followed, clutching the coin pouch with both hands, as did the guards escorting the two divine demons.

Lulum looked vaguely in my direction. However, she quickly turned away, sadness in her eyes. I simply watched her in silence.

◆ ◆ ◆

It was the dead of night, and the twin moons had fully risen. Lulum, trapped in a cage in the warehouse with a collar around her neck and shackles around her wrists, called out to the cage across from her.

“Nozlow! Nozlow!”

The divine demon martial artist lay motionless and unresponsive in his cage. Although his ragged breathing confirmed he was still alive, Nozlow seemed too heavily wounded to get up. Lulum glanced toward the magic item hidden in her sleeve. Her opportunities to use it would likely be limited.

Just then, the door to the warehouse opened with a heavy sound. The light held by the large lookout flickered in front of the cages.

“Boss, what are you doing at this hour?”

“I wanted to check on the condition of the divine demon man. Can’t have him dying on us.”

“Brother, I told you he’ll be fine. Divine demons are tougher than that.”

Elman and Neg strode into the warehouse ahead of the lookout.

“Just to be safe. Heal him if there are any complications, Neg.”

“All right, brother.”

The lookout yawned. “Then ya coulda come earlier.”

“Our meeting with the lord dragged on. Besides, I came just in time to wake up the lookout as he started dozing off.”

“Aw, c’mon.”

The three approached Lulum and Nozlow as they exchanged words. They didn’t so much as glance at Lulum, instead illuminating Nozlow’s cage and peering inside.

"Hmm... I suspect he'll be fine."

"That's what I've been telling you, brother," Neg mumbled.

"Glad to hear it. Do ya wanna check out the other one too? She's probably sleeping, but..." The lookout turned around and shone his light on Lulum's cage. As he did, Lulum pulled a thin stone knife out of her sleeve and pointed it at the three humans.

The knife, seemingly carved from a magic stone, was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand. It didn't look like it could be used as a weapon, particularly through the bars of the cage. Yet, a moment later, a tremendous surge of power erupted from the dagger, creating a blade of water equivalent to high-level magic. It sliced through the bars of the cage with ease, claiming the lives of the three men in the process—or at least, it was supposed to.

"No way!" Lulum's shock was evident on her face. The blade of water that cut through the bars never reached Elman or the others. It was blocked by a veil of light and disappeared. "A-A barrier?! Urgh! Gah!" The slave collar's effect activated, choking Lulum.

Elman's eyes widened slightly. "Now this is a surprise," he muttered, stroking his beard. His gaze then drifted to the stone knife that had fallen to the bottom of the cage. "A magic item, huh? I see. There's a brief delay before the slave collar takes effect. It's not a concern with ordinary swords or magic, but magic items can be used quickly enough to kill the master in that short time. I was careless. I'll have to be more prudent in the future."

"Th-Th-That was scary..." In contrast to Elman, whose expression had barely changed, Neg placed his hand over his chest in relief. A ghostly being floated above his head, clad in divine light.

"Y-You even have a holy spirit?!" Lulum gasped. Holy spirits were high-level astral monsters that possessed light magic. They were also exceedingly rare. They appeared in monster hordes, casting barriers to defend against spells and healing magic to aid their allies.

"H-Huh? What just happened?" the lookout asked.

"Don't worry about it. More importantly, take this merchandise out of her cage."

The large man obeyed Elman and opened the cage, yanking Lulum out.

"Agh!"

"That was quite the intriguing trick." Elman looked over the haggard divine demon as though she were livestock. "In the past, I would've whipped you, but unfortunately, we've done away with that."

"Brother, I think she's an enchanter. She might have something else on her..."

"I'm aware. Strip her naked. Don't give her any clothes until we find a buyer."

"Right now? You got it, boss." The large man picked up the knife, and Lulum twisted in his grasp.

"S-Stop!"

"Oh, right. We need to check her markings." Elman grabbed Lulum's jaw, judging the black markings vaguely visible beneath the dye. "Different divine demons have different patterns. I suspect it will influence their selling price, so we'll need to devise a way to show them during the auction. Ha! It's time for my merchant's instinct to shine. I'm excited."

Lulum's expression warped. "You would... For such a ridiculous reason?"

"Hmm... It seems this merchandise is still clinging to her dignity." Elman's smile was like a crack spreading across his face, his gaze locked on Lulum. It was a smile filled with malice—one intended for a person, not merchandise. "It would appear you don't understand your place. This is an order. Discard that worthless dignity immediately—a slave isn't deserving of it."

The divine demon priestess glared at him. "No. You can take our freedom, but you can't take our pride."

"Suit yourself. You'll lose it on your own eventually. No one maintains their pride when stripped naked, fed scraps, and covered in their own filth. Do it."

Knife in hand, the lookout began tearing Lulum's clothes. She motionlessly endured the humiliation.

This is a little ahead of schedule, but oh well.

"Like I said before," my voice echoed through the dark warehouse. All four people simultaneously turned to face me. "I try

to help those I owe or have a connection with.” I stood quietly in the middle of the warehouse. It must have seemed like I had appeared out of nowhere—and in fact, that was exactly what had happened.

“S-Seika?”

“Seika...”

Just as Lulum and Elman muttered in surprise, a low creaking sound filled the warehouse, and one of the support beams gave way. The heavy beam crashed down at an angle, flattening several empty cages and sending a deafening roar through the warehouse.

“Whoa! What the—?!” the lookout cried out.

More beams followed one after another. The ceiling itself began to collapse, the night sky peeking through. Bricks from the roof shattered on the floor and nearby cages, sending debris in every direction.

“C-Crap!” The large man let go of Lulum and covered his head with both hands, racing toward the exit as fast as he could.

“H-Hey! Wait!” Elman shouted.

“We gotta get outta here, boss! The warehouse is collapsing!”

He seemed to be under the impression that the warehouse was falling apart of its own volition. It was the natural response. I couldn’t imagine many people in this world were capable of such a feat without catapults, ballistae, wands, or magic circles.

Despite being told to run, Elman remained motionless. He didn’t take his eyes off me. There was already a large hole in the ceiling, and now the walls of the warehouse were beginning to collapse as well.

“Ceilings aren’t too difficult, but it’s not easy to topple a brick wall with gravity alone. So I devised a little trick.” As I spoke, a beam directly above us snapped. I opened up a gateway hitogata above Elman’s and Neg’s heads, transporting the falling beam and roof to the other plane. “You burn sulfur to get a poisonous vapor, dissolve it with water, then add iron to trigger the reaction. The result is oil of vitriol—also known as sulfuric acid.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Although it takes time to combine earth, fire, water, and metal, when used properly, you can even dissolve the mortar holding a

brick wall together. Mortar is alkaline since it's made from ash. What, you didn't know that? You'd do well to remember it. Knowledge has a way of coming in handy when you least expect it." I stared the merchant down.

"Now, Elman, I believe you know why I'm here." Elman remained silent, not moving a muscle. "Did you really think you could just threaten me and I'd back down? You were too quick to send the lord's men home. I guess you're more naive than I thought. Adventurers aren't known for being well-mannered."

"S-Stay away from my brother!" Countless astral monsters emerged from the walls and floor as Neg shouted. There were ghosts, wisps, specters, and on top of that...

"Oooo..." The wraith lord seeped out of the darkness. Its fellow wraiths wouldn't go near it, perhaps out of fear. Surrounded by ghosts of all colors, Elman finally opened his mouth to speak.

"N-Naive? Certainly not. I am a merchant. I don't factor wishful thinking or conjecture into my calculations." His expression was tense, yet he still forced a smile. "If we're using force, I never needed those men to begin with. They would only get in Neg's way."

"H-Heh heh heh!" The gloomy ghost user gave an unsettling laugh, spurred on by his brother. "I-I'll turn you into a slave too! I'll burn your legs, freeze your arms, and cover you in curses! Then I'll heal you back up so my brother can sell you off for a high price!"

"A wonderful idea, Neg. A former noble and rank one adventurer would certainly be worth a lot. If we have those attractive young ladies who were with him convicted and sell them too, we might even be able to rent a larger trading house."

I sighed. "There's a saying where I'm from: 'Don't count a tanuki's pelt before you catch it.' Do you have anything similar?"

"We certainly do. However, it doesn't apply right now." Elman's smile deepened, and Neg's ghosts rushed at me. "You're already as good as skinned!"

Flames, wind, curses, and debuffs came hurtling my way, only to vanish harmlessly against the barrier surrounding me. Yet the ghost user wasn't fazed.

"Heh heh, a barrier?! We'll see how long it lasts!" The countless

spectral beings showed no signs of relenting, continuously launching magic despite the barrier.

That could cause some serious damage. The wraith lord swooped through the air, circling the barrier. It reminded me of a fox stalking a hen in a chicken coop. Nonetheless, it was woefully unaware of how outclassed it was.

"You let your greed blind you, Elman. Where did the caution you had when we first met go?" I muttered in exasperation as a hitogata rose up behind me. "If you've been in the merchant business for a while, then you should know it's always greed that brings a merchant to ruin." I made a small hand sign.

Summoning: Soranaki. A massive sun clad in darkness emerged from the spatial distortion.

"Wha—?!" Elman was astonished by the bizarre sight. After a moment's pause, Neg's ghosts attacked the soranaki. However, their magic was absorbed by the flames on its surface, and their curses seemed to have no effect.

"Wh-What is that thing?!" Neg shouted, shaken.

Then the false sun pulsed.

"Tonight's parade has come to an end," I mumbled. The slow-moving wisps were the first to be engulfed by the soranaki's flames. While the ghosts and wraiths struggled violently in resistance, they too failed to overcome the false sun's pull and were sucked inside.

"M-My astral monsters!" Neg screamed as though he himself were being engulfed. "Y-You're dead! I'll kill you!" The wraith lord hurled a vast amount of curses and dark magic as it drew near. The power surging within it was truly deserving of the title of lord. Even in my past life, there were few vengeful spirits with its strength.

But, at the end of the day, it's just a ghost.

"O-Ooo..." The wraith lord was anticlimactically swallowed up by the soranaki. Its powerful curses and dark magic failed to so much as make the false sun's flames flicker.

"E-Eek!" Neg fell to his knees.

"To think you had such a monster..." Elman muttered in shock.

"Is that...a dark element Fireball?" Lulum whispered hoarsely next to them.

It was no such thing, of course. Soranaki were genuine ayakashi. They appeared under four conditions. First, there must be a Parade of One Hundred Spirits. Second, it must be marching eastward. Third, dawn must be about to break. And fourth, it must occur during the observing human's inauspicious time as determined by divination.

When all four conditions overlapped, a soranaki would suddenly appear at the end of the Parade of One Hundred Spirits' march, engulfing all the ayakashi and souls. It would then head toward the morning sun and be extinguished with the break of dawn. Even among ayakashi, soranaki were particularly peculiar—they were almost akin to a natural phenomenon. They possessed no will of their own, they didn't attack humans, and their flaming bodies produced no heat.

Nonetheless, when faced with other ayakashi or spirits, soranaki possessed unparalleled strength. I had once seen one engulf a seven-tailed bake-gitsune that could have rivaled a ryuu in terms of power. Although they disappeared when exposed to sunlight and were incapable of obeying commands, this time I had managed to use the soranaki well. Everything had gone according to plan.

"Now, Elman, let's get down to business."

"B-Business?"

Ignoring the flustered Elman, I stuck invisible hitogata to the divine demons' cages. "I'm here to pick up my merchandise."

"H-Huh?"

"Today's the deadline, isn't it? The date's about to change. Let's get on with it."

Phase of metal: Metal Corrosion. Gallium corroded the metal, causing the iron bars of the cages to begin to crumble away.

"The iron is decaying..." Lulum's shocked whisper reached my ears among the clamor from the other slaves awoken by the commotion.

I pulled the promissory note and a pen out of my pocket, my eyes locked on Elman. "How much?"

"P-Pardon?"

"I'm paying the rest of what I owe you. How much, Elman?" Ink

created by a spell filled the tip of my glass pen. “I’ve forgotten the estimate you gave me. And I’m purchasing two more slaves now, so I’ll need a new one anyway.”

The dual moons peered through the hole in the ceiling alongside the giant sun covered in darkness.

“What’s wrong? Name your price,” I demanded, the celestial bodies looming behind me.





Metal Corrosion

A spell that weakens metal using gallium. Gallium is a liquid metal with a melting point of only thirty degrees Celsius. It disrupts other metals' crystalline structures, making them brittle. Though it wasn't actually discovered until the modern era, in this work, it was isolated from a mineral mined near the Pyrenees by an alchemist in the Kingdom of the Franks(modern-day France). It was named gallium after Gallia, the Latin name for Gaul, the land in which it was discovered.

Act 4

The divine demon slaves I had rescued were gathered in a plaza tucked away in a corner of the commercial district. After expelling Elman and Neg from the crumbling warehouse, I had freed all the slaves from their cages and led them here. With a warding barrier in place, there was no need to worry about onlookers or guards. I could finally take a breather.

Many of them were weak, but fortunately, none of their lives seemed to be in danger. The slaves being held on the second floor turned out to be just small children. Though they were hungry and had a few injuries, it wasn't anything major. They wouldn't have been fit for sale if they'd been handled too roughly, so perhaps that was natural.

Nozlow was the most seriously wounded, and even he wasn't in any danger. Martial artists were a tough bunch. He'd insisted on helping, but his fever hadn't gone down even after his wounds had been healed, so I was having him rest for the time being. Though truth be told, I would've really appreciated his assistance.

I let out a long sigh. *I'm exhausted.* They were all women and children, so even though I had been trying to free them, there had still been a lot of fear and crying. It probably would've taken forever had Lulum not gone around calming them. Yet despite finally rescuing her people, Lulum didn't seem particularly happy.

Is she having a hard time accepting the situation? Did I overdo it?

"Master Seika," Yuki said from atop my head.

"What, Yuki?"

"Why did you give that man the promissory note?" There was clear discontent in her voice. "You even wrote the exact amount he asked for. You had no reason to give him what he wanted after how terribly he acted. Honestly, you shouldn't have paid him back at all."

"Who would pay for the warehouse I destroyed if Elman went

bankrupt?”

“Uh, well...” Yuki’s tone was that of both shock and confusion. “Why did you destroy the warehouse in the first place? I don’t think that was necessary.”

“I didn’t know what would happen if the soranaki came into contact with a physical object. I doubt it would, but I couldn’t have it exploding. I wanted an open spot to summon it.” As a result, I had learned that the false sun was effective against astral monsters. Next, I wanted to test it against normal monsters. They were closer to animals than astral monsters or ayakashi, so I was less confident it would work.

“That was a pretty high price to pay just to test the soranaki,” Yuki said, interrupting my thoughts.

“There was more to it than that. I’m not sure what Elman told the lord, so it would be bad if he disappeared. That said, if I left him to live in poverty, he’d probably start up another unethical business.”

“Hmm...”

“And frankly, I was impressed by his audacity.” I never would’ve expected him to give me the same number as his initial quote in that situation. I was almost certain he’d offer them to me for free. He must have really dragged himself out of the dirt in the past—he was a merchant with guts. I couldn’t help but fill in the sum he told me. “Even with that money, he probably still took a loss. It’s a good lesson for him.”

“Hmmmm... I still feel like it was a waste.”

“Money aside, I had to give him the promissory note regardless.” Yuki looked at me curiously. He likely hadn’t seen it in the darkness, but Elman would be realizing something right about now—Fiona’s seal was on the promissory note. He wouldn’t dare make an enemy of someone carrying a note with the imperial family’s seal on it again, and he’d probably clean up the aftermath neatly as well.

“Shouldn’t you have at least done something about that fox-possessed one?”

“You mean Neg? That wouldn’t accomplish anything. It would only upset Elman. All his ghosts are gone, so it’ll be fine. I’ve got more important things to take care of,” I said, walking up to a divine

demon girl.

"Eek!" She cowered and shrank back when she saw me. Ignoring her fear, I grabbed the slave collar around her pale neck.

"Hold still." Just to be safe, I had set up a barrier to prevent the collar from activating. However, perhaps for that same reason, I couldn't figure out how to take it off. It didn't seem to have any joints. "Guess I have to destroy it." I sighed.

Phase of metal: Metal Corrosion. Gallium created by the spell corroded the metal making up the collar. Discovered by an alchemist in the Kingdom of the Franks, the metal was liquid at room temperature and turned other metals brittle when they came into contact with it. After a brief moment, the collar split in two. It was a bit of a shame since it was such a valuable magic item.

"Ah... The collar..."

"Stick out your hand." I removed her handcuffs the same way. "Do you see what I'm trying to do now? Tell the others to come here. They'll probably start crying if I go to them."

"O-Okay... Umm..." The young divine demon got ready to run off, then turned around. "Thank you." There was a slight smile on her face.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Good grief." After finally removing fifteen sets of collars and handcuffs, I let out a sigh. Though the first few slaves were afraid, the later ones got used to it and even thanked me. Demons or not, children were always cute.

However, we couldn't afford to relax just yet. The group drew too much attention. I didn't expect to have any issues with the guards now that I'd given Elman the promissory note, but I still wanted to avoid being noticed if possible. Just as I was deciding how to proceed—

"Seika." A voice called out to me from behind. I turned around to see Lulum standing there in a cloak, her collar still around her neck.

"Oh, right, there were seventeen slaves in total. I forgot about you and Nozlow." Lulum didn't respond to my joke, simply standing

there silently as though deep in thought. I couldn't help but find it odd, so I continued. "Spare me the resentment, all right? We've got our own circumstances, and we can't just openly oppose those in power. I understand you had a hard time, but it wasn't an easy decision for me to make either. Amyu slapped me, you know. Oh, right, I need to let them know you're safe."

"Hey, Seika. Could you tell me one thing?"

"Now? What is it?" I furrowed my brow.

With a deep breath, Lulum asked me a question. "What's your family name?"

"That's all you wanted to know? I wasn't really trying to keep it a secret. I don't mind telling you," I said, a little let down. "It's Lamprogue. My name is Seika Lamprogue."

Lulum gasped and froze up.

"What's all this about?" I asked, my curiosity growing.

"I only heard it once, but Meloza's husband had a family name."

"Well, yeah, if you're gonna claim to be a noble, you would."

"His name was Gilbert. Gilbert Lamprogue."

"Huh?"

"I finally found him... Meloza's son..." Lulum mumbled, overcome with emotion.

"Hold on, I'm not following. What are you—"

Lulum courteously knelt before me. The divine demon priestess spoke solemnly, her head lowered, as I stood there. "Please, come to our land."

I didn't believe in fate. Determinism had long since been refuted by ancient Greek philosophers. Nonetheless, her words made me feel like it had to exist.

"Your Majesty, the Demon Lord."





Extra Story: Gold and Ghosts

Am I cursed?

Slumped over in an alley, the young man spat out blood alongside his bitterness. That familiar warm, metallic taste oozed from the split in his lip. It was awful. Not only had he lost what precious little money he'd saved up, but his only coat had been stolen as well. He had no idea how he was going to continue doing business now. He had even gone out of his way to take a longer route through the safe part of town.

"Assholes..." With a curse, he spat out more blood. The slightest movements sent a sharp pain running through his right leg. It probably wasn't broken, but it might have been fractured. Looking back, his entire life had been like this.

Born as the second son and unable to succeed the family, he had been looked down upon by his dim-witted older brother. Rather than be kept around like a caged animal and used for tedious territory management, he'd left home—only for the relied-upon relative, a politician, to lose his position and close off his path to the assembly. Then, deciding to sell his status as a noble, he'd approached a rising merchant family and entered marriage discussions with the daughter—until said daughter eloped with another man, breaking off negotiations. He had tried entering business on his own, and just as he had been gaining traction, harassment by a competitor had cost him an important client. Now, to top it all off, he'd been mugged in the street.

He was cursed. At this point, it was hard to think otherwise. Of course, there were no curses by mages or monsters that could change one's fate. He wasn't foolish enough to believe the stories that those who died still holding grudges became unseen astral monsters who brought misfortune to their enemies, nor was he religious enough to believe in curses from the heavens. Despite that,

he saw no other explanation.

"H-Heh heh... What's this? You look like you're from a well-off family." The young man looked up in response to the voice and saw a child looking back at him. He was gaunt and had sunken eyes, and his laugh only added to his creepiness. Judging from his shabby appearance, he was likely an orphan.

"What do you want, kid?"

"Give me some money," the child said with a disturbing laugh. "You're dressed well, so I know you've got some. G-Give me something. Just one silver coin is fine— Ow!" The child suddenly jumped, and the young man's eyes opened slightly. A small, blue flame was floating in the air where there had been nothing just a moment before. "Hot! Hot! Crap! I-It came out again!"

Upon closer inspection, the child was surrounded by similar floating balls of fire. The young man extended his hand to the blue flame in front of him. It was hot. The fire was real—then he came to a realization.

"Is this a wisp?" The young man wasn't well-versed in monsters, but he didn't think he was mistaken. He had heard of a type of astral monster that was a mysterious flame like the one before him.

"Crap! Go away!" The child swung a stick at the wisps. Though they flickered ever so slightly, they refused to leave him alone. In fact, they seemed to be trying to get even closer. It was like they were fond of him.

"Ha!" The young man couldn't help but let out a self-deprecating laugh. Now *that* was a curse. His luck really must have hit rock bottom to run into someone so ominous.

"Wh-Why does this only happen to me..."

"Done talking to yourself?"

"Sh-Shut up! Give me your money!"

Realizing he was being extorted, the young man frowned. "You're not saying that to me, are you?"

"D-Duh! Do you see anyone else here?"

"Seriously? Why me?"

"Huh?! B-Because you're rich, obviously!" the child shouted. "You're wearing expensive clothes, your hair is styled, and you don't

look like you've missed a meal! You don't smell like the back alleys, and you don't have the eyes of a beggar! You're one of those people who's had everything since they were born!"

The young man remained silent in the face of the child's barrage.

"P-People who have are supposed to give to those who don't! The old man who told me that stole all the money me and the other kids got from begging! So later on, I stole everything from his house! Because then he was the one who had stuff! H-Heh heh! He froze to death even though it was the middle of summer! Everyone was so confused! It was hilarious!" The child's face twisted into a warped smile. "S-So hand it over, or else!"

"Are you stupid?" the young man practically spat. "How the hell do I look rich to you? You think I have anything? I just got robbed, dumbass."

"Huh?" The child looked at the young man's clothes, then at the pavement around him. It was as though he'd only just now noticed the man's torn shirt and the blood on the ground.

The young man wasn't finished venting his frustration. "I might've had it all when I was born, but since then, it's just been loss after loss. No matter how hard I try, how much I think, it all gets ruined by some shitty stroke of bad luck. I'm cursed, that's what I am. That said, I still probably have it better than you, kid. So, what do you want? My shoes? My pants? Want me to shave my head or pull a tooth so you can sell it?"

"N-No..." The child backed off, then ran away.

The young man sighed. What sort of horrible face must he have been making to drive off a poor begging child? How long had it been since the child had fled? He decided to return to the inn. He had paid up front, so he wouldn't be kicked out, though he would have to leave the next day.

Limping along, he tried to leave the alley when he heard light footsteps, and the child from earlier returned. He was out of breath like he'd run back.

"Tch. What is it this time, kid? Hmm?" The young man raised an eyebrow as he looked the child over. He was wearing a coat he hadn't had before. It was far too large for his small stature, but it

looked familiar—it was incredibly similar to the coat that had been stolen from him.

"Heh heh... Here!" The child held out a piece of bread.

"What's the big idea?"

"I-I'm giving it to you!" the child said with a creepy laugh. "I-I know the thieves around here! You told me they had money, so this is thanks! Heh heh heh heh!"

"Huh? That doesn't explain why—"

"It's like I said! Those who have are supposed to give to those who don't!"

The young man took the small piece of bread from the child's dirty hand and shoved it in his mouth. It was hard, and the wheat was poor quality. It was much worse than the bread he'd eaten at home—the kind that even commoners wouldn't eat unless they had soup to soak it in. On top of that, it made his cracked lip hurt. Still, for some reason, it tasted inexplicably delicious.

"Y-You might have been born rich, but you don't know much, do you?"

"Huh?"

"Curses aren't unlucky. Heh heh! They're useful!" The child drove off the wisps around him with a stick as he continued. "Honestly, I h-hate these things. If it weren't for them, my parents wouldn't have abandoned me. B-But they're also useful. I even stole your money back from the thieves! Heh heh heh!"

He's a tough kid, the young man thought to himself. Rather than lament his situation, he was making use of it and surviving. *Curses are useful.* Did he have anything like that? Something he could only do because he'd been driven out of a marquess's family and plagued by misfortune ever since? He swallowed the bread and looked at the child.

"Hey, kid."

"What?" the kid demanded warily.

"Did you kill those thieves?"

"No, b-but they might not be alive for much longer."

"Perfect," the young man said with an easy grin. "Take me to them, kid. And give me that coat."

"N-No! It's mine! I've never worn anything this warm before."

"Then lend it to me. I'll buy it off you at triple market price three days from now."

"Huh?"

"I'm saying I'll give you enough money to buy two coats." The young man seemingly glared at the sky. "Let me show you how to make use of appearances."

◆ ◆ ◆

Elman returned to the present from his reminiscing. After a big loss, he would always look back on where he'd started. The day when he'd met Neg and sold the thieves into slavery. It had been a long time since then.

It was early morning in Keltz. A throng of people had gathered in a corner of the commercial district where warehouses lined the street. Onlookers swarmed around a warehouse that had partially collapsed in dramatic fashion. It was, of course, the very same warehouse that Elman had rented and that Seika had destroyed the night prior. There'd already been a commotion by the time Elman had returned at dawn.

The lookout who had fled had told the landlord that the warehouse had simply collapsed due to age and wear. At the very least, Elman likely wouldn't be held responsible. However, Elman was no mere traveling merchant. He was a city merchant with a trading house in Keltz, and he was a slave trader at that.

Given the exploitative nature of his business, he was expected to aid those he owed when they were in trouble. If he didn't, he would be ostracized and called heartless, causing him to lose his standing in the city. Such was the burden of a shady business like slave trading. He would likely have to pay the majority of the repair cost. The boy had no doubt given him the promissory note anticipating that. However...

"We're deep in the red, brother." Neg, who was standing next to him and observing the warehouse from a distance, sounded hopeless.

In terms of profits and losses, he was correct—they were in the red. They still hadn't finished paying transportation costs for the slaves, food costs, taxes, or even the cost of the collars. And now they had to cover the repairs as well. They wouldn't be able to pay for all of that with just the promissory note. Had they even a single divine demon slave left, there might have been hope, but there was no chance of that.

No, perhaps he should be thankful that they even had the promissory note to rely on. He owed a great deal to his past self's courage.

"We don't have enough gold coins for this month's payment. We might have to sell off some of our credit or dip into our emergency fund. Wh-What do you wanna do, brother?" Neg sounded like he was about to cry.

Elman was suddenly struck by emotion. Back then, Neg hadn't been able to read, write, or do basic math, yet here he was now, capable enough to be entrusted with part of the company's accounting. He wasn't just a bodyguard anymore—he was a genuine comanager.

"Th-This is awful! My astral monsters are all gone too..."

"Ha! How is it awful, Neg?"

"Huh?"

"We didn't go bankrupt. We haven't lost our status. And above all, we aren't dead. The two of us are alive and well." That boy had possessed incredible power, far greater than that of Neg's astral monsters. And that wasn't all.

Elman pulled the promissory note out of his pocket. It looked the same, even in the light. The seal it bore was unmistakably that of the imperial family. Specifically, it belonged to Holy Princess Fiona, extolled by the people for her beauty and the circumstances of her birth, and said to have numerous banks and companies under her control behind the scenes.

That rank one adventurer not only had power—he had support. The support of a member of the imperial court. The lord of Keltz was powerless compared to her. Frankly, it wouldn't have been strange for him to have been killed the moment he'd incurred the boy's

wrath.

Yet he was alive. What could that be called if not good luck?

"As long as we're alive, we can do anything. Especially the two of us together. A crisis is an opportunity, no?"

"I-I guess..."

"You're the one who taught me that, Neg."

"Huh? D-Did I say something like that?"

"Ha!" Elman turned his back on the people crowding around the warehouse and walked away. There was no point in dwelling on what was already done. "We can learn from this failure. Perhaps we've been taking on too much risk. Now that we have capital, it's dangerous to continue with the same mindset we've had. I think it would be wise to gradually withdraw from the high-risk, disreputable business of slave trading."

"I-I was thinking the same thing...but what else would we do?"

"Hmm, I'm quite intrigued by that oil of vitriol the boy mentioned. I can see a number of potential uses for it. He said it was made by heating sulfur and dissolving the vapor with water, but judging from the name, I assume it can be made from green vitriol as well. If it can be made from readily available alum, then all the better. I suppose we should start by investing in researchers in a closely related field. If it can be produced through magic, it could make for an excellent commodity."

"A-All right, brother. I-If we resell the remaining collars, we might be able to get the money..."

"Ha! Exciting, isn't it, Neg?"

Even curses could be useful. A crisis was an opportunity. That was how Elman had lived since the day he met Neg, and how he no doubt would continue to live in the future.

Extra Story: A Transformation of Scales

The man awoke with an intense thirst. Above, he saw the rafters of an unfamiliar attic. He seemed to have been sleeping in a wealthy estate.

Gradually, the man started to remember. He had come all the way from the Sanuki province (modern-day Kagawa Prefecture) to visit a certain individual. It took six full days for him to finally arrive in the capital, only to collapse from thirst on the main road. He had no memory of what occurred after that.

His thirst hadn't abated. The only reason the man awoke was the presence of water nearby. He craned his neck to the side and saw a child standing beside him. The child appeared to be around six or seven and was looking at the man in surprise, a ceramic pitcher of water in his hands.

"W-Water..." the man croaked hoarsely. The child silently approached him and placed the pitcher by his pillow. He eagerly tried to grab at it, but couldn't find the strength. "P-Please... I can't..."

Seeing his desperation, the child nodded and held the pitcher up to his lips.

"Ah!" the child cried out in surprise. The pitcher must have been filled to the brim, as the moment he tilted it, water spilled out and splashed onto the man's face. Naturally, none of it made it into his mouth.

"Blurgh!"

"S-Sorry." Despite his calm tone, the child still sounded somewhat apologetic.

"It's fine. Thank you. I feel a bit better now," the man said with a smile, his head soaking wet. He did, in fact, feel less thirsty than

before. He slowly sat up, then extended his hand to the child. "That's good water. Excellent water. I only need a little more. Could you hand it over? I can drink on my own now."

The child looked at the man for a moment, then nodded. After handing him the pitcher, he turned around. "Master is calling for you."

"Master?" The man froze up just as he was about to drink. "Who is that?"

"Master Haruyoshi," the child answered casually, looking back over his shoulder.

Once he left the room, the man mumbled to himself. "Haruyoshi... Haruyoshi Kuga." He realized he was in the very manor he had intended to visit.

◆ ◆ ◆

"Whoa..." As far as the man was concerned, the small tray was a veritable feast. The rice was piled high, alongside a fish and watershield soup, pickled water dropwort, and steamed clams. The man wasn't a picky eater, and compared to tough, fibrous grasses, the meal before him looked far more filling. Though likely just a coincidence, most of the ingredients were things he was familiar with. That was a welcome comfort to his weary body.

"May I?" the man asked. The exorcist wearing a kariginu robe sitting across from him nodded with a grin.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you." The man clumsily carried rice into his mouth with his chopsticks. He didn't know how long it had been since he'd last eaten. He hadn't even drunk any water over the course of his journey. In his desperation, he had failed to think that far ahead. No matter how much of a hurry he was in, letting himself collapse was inexcusable. He hung his head in shame.

His shame aside, however, the meal was quite good. "This is good rice. And fish. And herbs."

Haruyoshi simply watched the man eat in silence. Though a tray was in front of him, it bore only sake and a small serving of clams.

The summer sun was beginning to set outside, and Haruyoshi and his disciples had already eaten. What they had given the man was just leftovers. Unaware, the man continued clumsily handling his chopsticks.

"Is it good, mister?" the child sitting next to Haruyoshi suddenly asked. "My brother and I made dinner today."

"Did you? It's excellent. You're a good human."

"Heh heh!" The child's face broke into a grin. He didn't know it, but the child rarely expressed his emotions. It was rare for him to so proactively speak with a guest he was meeting for the first time. Under ordinary circumstances, Haruyoshi would have been surprised. However...

Haruyoshi stared at the man, his expression unchanging. His gaze was stern. He hadn't touched his sake in some time.

"These clams are good," the man said, holding one between his chopsticks. He had a slight smile on his face. "Clams are my favorite." He tossed the clam into his mouth, shell and all.

"Wah?!" the child let out a cry, while Haruyoshi silently narrowed his eyes.

The man happily chewed the clam, loudly crunching the hard shell.

"You don't need to eat the shell," Haruyoshi said quietly, picking up his chopsticks. "You can just eat the inside." He began to work on his own clams as though showing the man how it was done.

The man looked at him blankly for a moment, then played it off with a smile. "Oh, you're right. That's a good way to do it." He hurriedly began copying Haruyoshi.

"Master." The child turned to Haruyoshi, and the man's face stiffened. "He must have been really hungry, huh?"

"Y-Yes, I was. I apologize for being so impolite. Ha ha... Ha ha ha." The man gave an unnatural laugh.

Closing his eyes with a small sigh, Haruyoshi spoke to the child. "It's getting late. You should head back—I'll clean up. I have something I need to discuss with our guest."

"All right." The child stood up and started running down the hall before turning around for a moment. "Get a good rest, mister!"

The man waved his hand at the child. Once the child was out of sight, he promptly returned to his meal, silently shoveling rice and clams into his mouth. Equally silent, Haruyoshi once again watched him eat. Once all his bowls were empty, the man politely set down his chopsticks and looked at Haruyoshi.

"That was an excellent meal."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it." That was all Haruyoshi said. While he was often curt with his friends, who tended to be rather eccentric, it was rare for him to treat a guest he was meeting for the first time that way. Haruyoshi put his sake down. "If you've regained your strength, then tell me what business you have with me. I'm told you wanted to see me."

"Oh, how'd you know?" The man was confused. It was true, but he hadn't mentioned it to anyone.

"The person who found you collapsed in the street said you were mumbling my name deliriously. That's why he brought you here."

"I see. That makes sense." The man believed it. How else would he have been brought to the very place that had been his destination? He was ashamed of his slowness to catch on.

"So, your business?"

"I have a favor to ask of you, master exorcist Haruyoshi Kuga." The man straightened up in response to Haruyoshi's blunt question. "I apologize for the late introduction. My name is Rokurokusai. Born and raised in Sanuki."

Haruyoshi looked at the man. He had round, slightly wide-set eyes and a protruding nose that gave him a somewhat dim-witted look. Although he wasn't particularly old, his goofy features made him appear more aged than he actually was.

"That's an odd name. Did you come up with it yourself?" Haruyoshi asked quietly.

"No, it was given to me by the children of the village. It's very important to me," Rokurokusai replied with a smile.

"Is that right? Continue."

"Sure." Rokurokusai straightened up once again. "The rainy season ended early this year, and the heat has been relentless. There's been no sign of rain lately, and the water level of the lake

the village relies on is getting low. The rice paddies haven't dried up yet, but it may only be a matter of time. It happens often in Sanuki. There's little rain, and unlike the capital, we don't have any large water sources such as Lake Biwa. Because the mountains and sea are so close, fresh water quickly rushes away down rivers. We've managed to get by until now, but this year has been particularly bad. I've never experienced anything like it. If this continues, the crops won't bear fruit, and the village children may not make it through the winter."

Haruyoshi remained silent throughout Rokurokusai's serious explanation, his expression unchanging. "So, why visit me? What is it you want? If you want someone to pray for rain, you'd be better off seeing a priest than an exorcist."

"I've heard rumors about you. They say you're the most powerful sorcerer in all of Japan. You've transcended the human lifespan, mastered every kind of curse, and even have ryuu in your service." Haruyoshi's brow twitched, but Rokurokusai continued undeterred. "I've heard that water ryuu can use their powers to call rain. So, please, Haruyoshi, use your ryuu to bring rain to my village."

Haruyoshi didn't respond.

"I've grown weary of prayer. At this point, praying for rain won't do us much good. Typhoon season is still far off. The village needs rain *now*—guaranteed rain. I've spoken with the villagers, and you'll be compensated. Please, Haruyoshi." Rokurokusai bowed deeply.

The man from Sanuki's situation was dire, yet Haruyoshi sounded like he wanted to sigh, his expression unwavering. "You seem to be a little mistaken. Ordinary water ryuu aren't that powerful."

"Huh?"

"I have indeed subdued a mizuchi, but it's only capable of creating a small tornado. While that's certainly quite strong to the average human, and it might even be capable of bringing about a little rain, it's not enough to restore the water level of a lake."

"That can't be..."

"However, that doesn't hold true for more powerful ryuu. I also command higher-ranking ryuu capable of bringing about disastrous storms. Were I to use one of them, perhaps I could bring about your

wish.”

“In that case—”

“But I won’t.” Haruyoshi shook his head. “They wield the massive power of nature, akin to the typhoon. The effects would extend far beyond your village. It would easily restore the water level and allow the villagers to survive the winter, but it may cause floods and sweep people away elsewhere. Fields could be submerged, ruining the crops. And even if not, it’s hard to imagine that a great storm wouldn’t cause hardship for someone somewhere. I can’t create other victims in order to help you. I have no duty or reason to do so.”

“Th-Then...” Rokurokusai hung his head bitterly. “Is there no way for you to bring water to our village? If you can control ryuu, then surely you must be capable of other great feats. Water is one of the five elements you exorcists use. You could use one of your spells to create water—”

“That isn’t how onmyoudou works. At its core, it’s a system of techniques for creating calendars, divination, and exorcism. Granted, that doesn’t necessarily apply to me, but I won’t do it,” Haruyoshi said bluntly. “While I don’t know the size of this lake of yours, it must be rather large to support an entire village. Creating enough water to fill it would likely prove no easy feat, even for me.”

“B-But you said high-ranking ryuu could do it.”

“They don’t create the rain clouds themselves—they thin out the upper atmosphere and pull moisture from the sea. It puts a much lighter burden on them than creating something from nothing. That’s also the reason they cause clouds and air currents to swirl, creating a typhoon. I could probably do it, but it would require me to entrust the protection of the capital to someone else for a while. I would have to find someone to watch over my disciples as well. I simply see no reason for me to exhaust all my cursed energy to help your village.”

Rokurokusai appeared stunned. His sole hope for saving his village had just been crushed. What should he do? What should he have done? No matter how much he thought, he couldn’t figure it out.

It was to be expected. All he had going for him was his long lifespan. Though he wanted to save the village, he couldn't create miracles. All he could do was cross the sea, walk on land, and beg those stronger than himself. That was the only thing he had managed to think of. Hopelessness welled up within Rokurokusai. Nevertheless, he didn't want to give up.

"P-Please!" Rokurokusai cried out, moving off his pillow and placing his hands and knees on the floor. "I beg of you! I can't think of any other way! Can't you please do something?! I know it's pitiful to have to rely on your strength and knowledge, but I can't possibly return to the village like this and face the children who were counting on me! Please, Haruyoshi!" Rokurokusai pressed his brow against the floor.

Rokurokusai now felt a deep shame at having so carelessly partaken in the earlier meal. He should have paid proper respect before indulging in the food. Not only was he powerless, but he had even forgotten his manners—how could he be so pathetic?

Haruyoshi let out a small sigh. "Basically, you just need water, correct?"

"Y-Yes."

"All right." Haruyoshi stood up, and Rokurokusai looked up at him in confusion.

"H-Haruyoshi?"

"I'm heading out for a bit."

"Huh?"

"I'll return in the middle of the night. We leave first thing in the morning, so you should spend the night here." Ignoring Rokurokusai's sparkling eyes, Haruyoshi turned around, then spoke without looking back. "We'll be flying to Sanuki tomorrow."

◆ ◆ ◆

"Whoooaaa!"

The next day, Rokurokusai was flying through the air. "Wh-What in the world..."

Rokurokusai and Haruyoshi were riding atop the head of

Haruyoshi's massive water ryuu, Mizuchi. At first, Rokurokusai had been terrified riding on something so superior to him, but after seeing Mizuchi calmly obey Haruyoshi's commands, he soon grew accustomed to it. The fact that he was flying was more important to him.

"What a beautiful view." His eyes widened, gazing at the mountains, forests, and rivers below. Needless to say, it was a view he'd never seen before. In all his years of living, Rokurokusai had only ever known the lake and the village. Although they were still important to him, he couldn't help but realize how insignificant he truly was. If he became a being on the level of a ryuu, could he see views like this whenever he wanted?

After a brief silence, Rokurokusai asked Haruyoshi a question. "How are ryuu born?"

Haruyoshi gave a puzzled look for a moment, then answered honestly. "Generally speaking, they're born as ryuu, just like any other ayakashi. However, also like other ayakashi, they can be born when other beings transform into a ryuu."

"Other beings?"

"Snakes, lizards, carp... Even humans on occasion." Seeing Rokurokusai's silence, Haruyoshi continued. "It's quite rare, though. When a being dies harboring powerful emotions, lives far beyond its natural lifespan, or gains some form of power through unusual circumstances, it can transform into an ayakashi. In fact, ayakashi can transform into more powerful ayakashi as well. In any case, it's a phenomenon that seldom occurs."

"Is that so?" Rokurokusai quietly closed his eyes.

"I know the general direction, but I'm not familiar with the exact geography of Sanuki. I'd like to head there directly on Mizuchi. Would you recognize your village from the sky?"

"Sure, that won't be a problem," Rokurokusai replied calmly, opening his eyes back up. "There's no way I wouldn't recognize the land where I was born."

◆ ◆ ◆

The ryuu had flown the path that had taken Rokurokusai six days on foot in a mere three and a half hours. Mizuchi was fast, and because it was flying, it didn't need to take detours around mountains or wait for a boat when it reached the sea. That had shortened the actual distance traveled considerably, letting them leave the capital at the crack of dawn and arrive in his village in time for breakfast. It almost made Rokurokusai wonder what the point of his arduous journey had been. But right now, that wasn't important.

"This way, Haruyoshi!" Once the ryuu landed in a clearing a little ways off from the village, Rokurokusai began guiding Haruyoshi to the lake that was their destination.

They walked along a mountain road, and as they drew near to the lake, Rokurokusai's heart began to race. He had only been gone for a week—the lake couldn't have dried up in that time, but how much water would be left? Finally, they reached a lake at a slightly higher elevation than the village.

"This is it, Haruyoshi. How awful," Rokurokusai mumbled feebly, taking in the sight.

A few moments later, Haruyoshi followed after him only to furrow his brow. "This is the village's source of water? It certainly isn't in very good condition." As was to be expected of a lake used as a water source, it was rather large. However, at the moment, most of it was dried up.

The shoreline was exposed, leaving a foul stench from the rotting aquatic plants. The water level seemed to be around one-half or even one-third of its normal state. The fins of struggling carp could be seen in puddles here and there. The stream flowing out of the lake barely had any water either. The small shrine by the shore dedicated to a water god made the water shortage all the more tragic.

"It's gotten so bad in just a few days..." The intense heat had likely continued the entire time Rokurokusai had been traveling. Even now, it wasn't yet noon, and it was already almost unbearably hot.

"Please, Haruyoshi. The village doesn't have a moment to spare," Rokurokusai pleaded.

“It would seem not.” Haruyoshi pulled a single talisman out of his sleeve. He tossed the human-shaped paper into the air, where it floated like a leaf on water and drifted toward the middle. “I suppose this is a form of connection as well. I can do my good deed for the day.”

Haruyoshi chanted a spell in a foreign language, and the air around the talisman in the lake’s center began to warp. A moment later, a torrent of water erupted from the distortion.

“Wha—?!” Rokurokusai’s eyes widened in shock. Water was pouring endlessly out of midair. Slowly but surely, the lake’s water level was beginning to rise. The splashing provided minor relief from the scorching heat. “Are you doing this, Haruyoshi?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes.” Haruyoshi nodded. “That said, I’m not creating it. Much like a high-ranking ryuu, I brought it from elsewhere.”

“Wh-Where did you find this much water?”

“Lake Biwa,” Haruyoshi answered curtly. “Taking enough water to fill a small lake won’t even be noticed there, so I brought it within another plane.”

“Th-That makes sense. Is that why you left your manor last night? To get water from Lake Biwa?”

“Hmph.” Haruyoshi snorted in response and awkwardly turned away.

The lake’s water level was slowly rising. How long would it take? Once the water reached the area where plants were growing by the shore, the intensity of the water pouring out suddenly decreased, then stopped altogether. The spatial distortion returned to normal and the floating talisman came back to Haruyoshi.

“I just took a random amount, but it wound up being almost perfect. I’m always lucky in the most unnecessary ways. Still, it beats not having enough, I suppose.” Haruyoshi spoke to himself as he grabbed the talisman out of the air and stowed it away in his sleeve. “There was a little mud mixed in at the end. You’ll have to forgive me for that. I tried to only draw from the surface of the water. Though I imagine getting the lake a little muddy was unavoidable.”

Given how much force the water hit the lake with, it was inevitably going to kick up some sediment, but it didn't even register as a problem. The lake was so full that it looked like the drought had never existed.

"You have my most sincere gratitude, Haruyoshi," Rokurokusai said in awe. "You've saved the village children. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"You can start by telling me the truth," Haruyoshi said without so much as a grin. "I've already granted your request. I won't demand you return the water, so be honest with me. Was your goal truly to save the nearby village? Or was it to save your fellows living in this lake?"

Rokurokusai was shocked for a moment, then a strained smile appeared on his face. "You picked up on it, huh? Here I thought I had you fooled."

"Of course I did. Someone who can't recognize the inhuman has no business calling themselves an exorcist."

"That makes sense. I guess I was a fool to not expect that," Rokurokusai said self-deprecatingly. "Truth is, I wasn't worried about them. I really did it for the village."

"Hmm. Why is that? To repay them for worshipping you? You have a strong sense of duty for a lake's guardian deity."

"I'm nothing so important as that." Rokurokusai shook his head, then spoke as though reminiscing. "It was so long ago I can no longer remember how much time has passed. I had been stranded in a dried-up waterway, unable to move, when three children from that village found me and carried me to this lake. They often visited after that, giving me grains of rice when they saw me. That made me happy. Those children have long since passed away, and perhaps even their descendants as well. Nonetheless, I always wanted to pay them back. I suspect it's that desire which allowed me to live far beyond my time."

"That's all I am, even after the years turned me into a youkai and their prayers granted me some semblance of divinity. I merely came to know human speech, understand their ways, and take on their form. I can't make it rain, fly through the sky, or even save them

from this drought. They gave me so many names and built that shrine, yet I can't do a thing for them." Rokurokusai looked at the shrine and gave another bitter smile. "That's why I'm grateful to you, Haruyoshi. Because I'm foolish and powerless, you saved the village in my stead."

"I wouldn't say I agree with that," Haruyoshi said quietly, looking at the lake.

"What do you mean?" Rokurokusai appeared perplexed.

"As you can see," Haruyoshi said, pointing at the lake, "the lake you protect is full of water despite the drought. A powerless god wouldn't be capable of such a thing."

"Wh-What are you saying? You're the one who did that, not me."

"That's not true." Haruyoshi shook his head. "Had you not come to me, I wouldn't even know about this lake or the nearby village. It was at your request that I brought water from Lake Biwa. Despite being a god of water, you crossed the sea and walked over land all the way to the capital to reach me and give me your earnest plea. You were the one who spurred me into action and saved the village. The word 'power,' as humans use it, doesn't only refer to violent force or cursed energy. It can mean authority, wealth, or even strength of will—any means of accomplishing something. I may not know what to call the power you possess, but you're the one who made this happen. By no means are you a powerless god."

Rokurokusai listened quietly as Haruyoshi continued.

"I hear the species you used to be will eat anything without discrimination and is tenacious enough to live out their lives in muddy water. While living in the mud might not sound like a positive, you've undoubtedly inherited that resilience from your past self. That's why you endured hardship without ever giving up. And because you never gave up, you gained the power to move others. You used that power to accomplish a feat even a ryuu would struggle to do. I believe that's something to be proud of."

Rokurokusai cast his gaze down and remained silent for a moment before speaking with a faint smile. "Thank you, Haruyoshi. Though my wisdom and divine power are lacking, I was able to be of use to the village, wasn't I? I suppose it's only because I am who

I am that I could accomplish that. I promise to one day repay the favor. With Sanuki's blessing, I'll visit your manor once again."

"No need," Haruyoshi replied bluntly. "All I did was carry water. Nothing worth thanking me for. If visiting the capital requires you to leave your lake for several days, you should just remain here and watch over the village like a proper guardian deity."

"In that case," Rokurokusai declared with a serious expression, "I'll repay the favor when I one day become a ryuu and can fly to the capital in one swoop. Even if it takes centuries, I will never forget this debt."

Haruyoshi closed his eyes and sighed. "Suit yourself. I won't get my hopes up."

"Heh. Until then." Rokurokusai abruptly turned around and jumped into the lake. The splash sent ripples across the surface, and his body didn't reappear. A moment later, a massive fish leaped out of the water. It was even larger than a human and covered in deep black scales. Then it dove back into the water, and this time it didn't come back up.

"He was a carp spirit?" At some point, a white kuda-gitsune had started clinging to Haruyoshi's eboshi cap. "Did you realize that, Master Haruyoshi?"

"Of course I did. He was clearly acting strangely. I suspect the boy noticed as well."

"It's rare for that child to open up to strangers. I'm not sure what to think about him opening up to a spirit. I also realized that man wasn't human, but I never expected him to be a carp. How did you know?"

"He was surrounded by powerful water ki when he was brought to the estate, so I figured he had to be some sort of creature that lived near the water. The clams were the deciding factor."

"The clams?"

"Yeah. Remember how he ate them? Shell and all?" Haruyoshi put a finger to his throat. "Carp have hard teeth inside their throats that allow them to crush the shells of snails and clams." Then he looked at the shrine by the lake's shore. "Though I suspect he no longer needs to eat, he still has habits from his previous life."

“I see. I’m surprised you know all that. Still, why did you help him even knowing he was a spirit? You were really harsh on him at first. I thought for sure you were going to turn him away.”

“Hmph. That was just because he took on a human form. I was going to seal him if he thought he could fool me and harm people.” Haruyoshi snorted dismissively. “But since that didn’t end up being the case, and it in fact helped other people as well, I didn’t mind. I was free anyway.”

The kuda-gitsune giggled.

“What?”

“Nothing. You just can’t help but look after others, even when they aren’t human.”

“Well, I don’t hate carp,” Haruyoshi said, trying to brush off the accusation. “You have to get rid of the mud, but the texture is nice and firm.”

“There you go again. Come on, let’s head home, Master Haruyoshi. Your disciples are waiting.”

The ryuu took off into the sky. The exorcist was already gone when a large fin broke the water’s surface.

◆ ◆ ◆

A few hours later, a man living in the village visited the lake. He had found it odd that the stream had suddenly gained so much water and had come to investigate. Much to his surprise, a bountiful, full lake entered his vision.

“Huh?” The man’s eyes went wide. Just yesterday, the lake had been on the verge of drying up. He had been prepared for the village to lose its source of water to the drought and be wiped out. But now...

“I-It’s a miracle.” Overwhelmed by the sight, he retreated and fell on his backside. However, he immediately stood back up. Engraving the sight of the sunlight reflected off the slightly cloudy water into his eyes, he began racing back to the village. “It’s a miracle!

Everyone! Lord Rokurokusai has brought us a miracle!”

† † †

It may surprise you to learn that most of the carp in Japan are non-native. Indigenous to the Eurasian mainland, they primarily spread through intentional release after the Meiji period. Today, the habitat of native Japanese carp is limited to a few bodies of water such as Lake Biwa and Lake Kasumigaura.

Another such body of water is Lake Rokuroku in Kagawa Prefecture. Among native carp habitats, it’s notable for its abundant population, and uniquely, the complete absence of non-native species. As a result, it’s said to be the only body of water where a pure strain of indigenous carp remains.

The reason for this is the presence of the type-2 supernatural being, Rokurokusai of Sanuki, who protected the entirety of Kagawa Prefecture before falling into slumber at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lake Rokuroku is where he is believed to have originated, and it has long been regarded as a sacred area by locals. As such, the lake has never been artificially stocked. The native carp still present are said to be the descendants of Rokurokusai’s familiars.

Lake Rokuroku has one other unusual characteristic—it’s home to a large number of species native to Lake Biwa, such as Biwa moroko gudgeon, Biwa oily gudgeon, *Heterogen longispira* snails, and *Vallisneria asiatica* var. *biwaensis* aquatic plants. There are no other known bodies of water like it, so it has long been called “Sanuki’s miniature Lake Biwa” by researchers. Of course, the distinctive ecosystem is the result of species being introduced from elsewhere. The history of this introduction dates back to the late Heian period, around a thousand years ago.

As for the details, there is a legend passed down among the people protected by the aforementioned Rokurokusai. Originally a carp that transformed with age, he was an intelligent and friendly supernatural being. The events described occurred one thousand years ago, when he still took on the form of a giant native carp.

One year, there was a terrible drought. Lake Rokuroku was on the verge of drying up, and the village that depended on it for water was at risk of falling into ruin. Rokurokusai, who had obtained divinity from the villagers' worship, decided to travel to the capital before it was too late. He sought to plead the village's case to the great exorcist Haruyoshi Kuga, who was alive at the time. Taking on the form of a human, he left the lake, crossed the sea, and walked over land in a six-day journey to reach the capital.

Upon Rokurokusai's arrival at Haruyoshi's estate, the exorcist immediately saw through his disguise. The people of that era saw most supernatural beings as threats to their lives. Even a being who had obtained divinity like Rokurokusai could have easily been sealed away. However, after hearing Rokurokusai's desperate plea, Haruyoshi was moved by his devotion to the village. He brought water from Lake Biwa to the drying Lake Rokuroku, saving the village. The fish eggs and aquatic plants brought with that water are said to have caused the miniature Lake Biwa's unusual ecosystem.

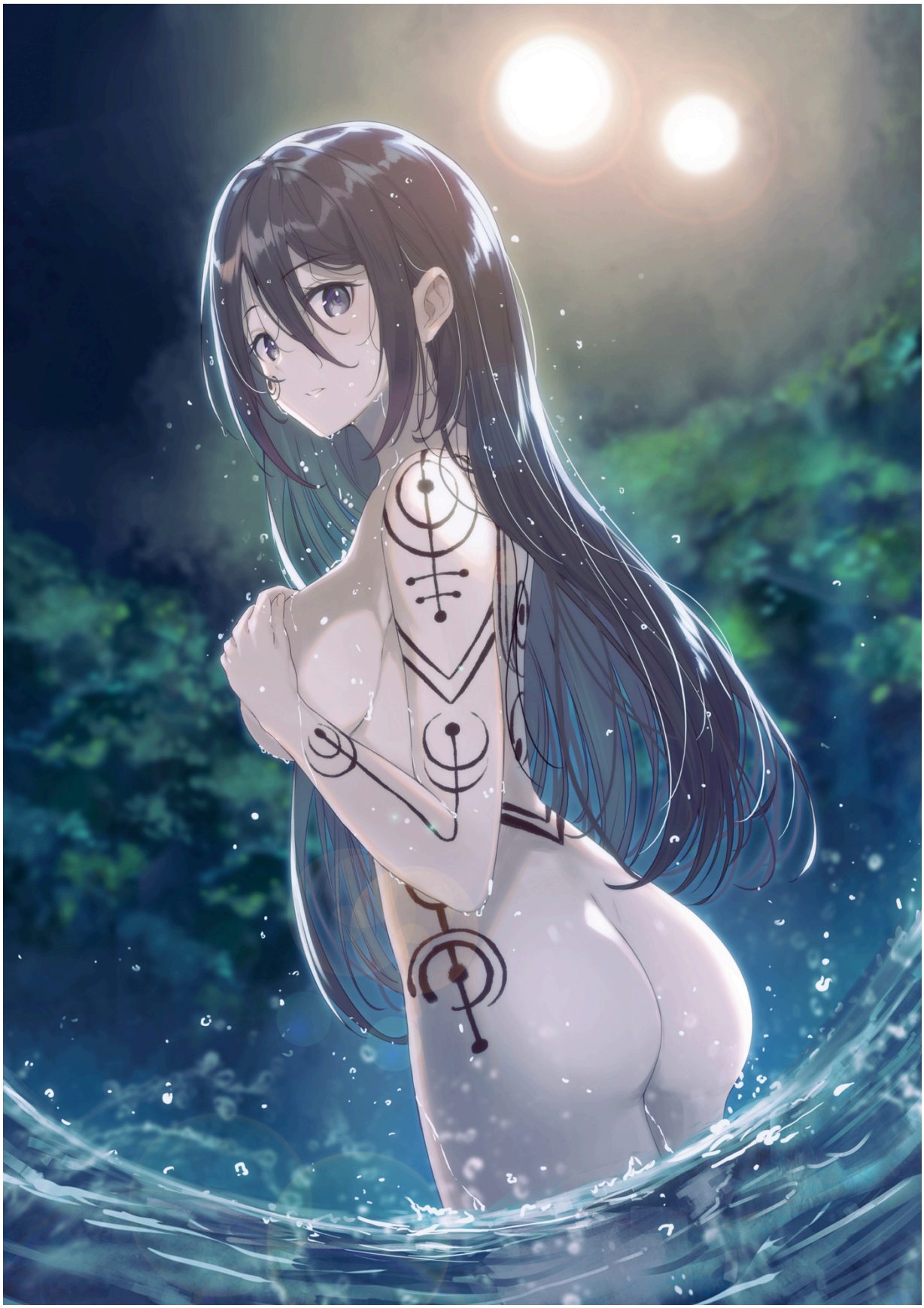
As a side note, after that incident, the people's faith in Rokurokusai grew stronger, and he continued to perform miracles such as increasing rainfall. Around a century later, he ended up transforming into a water ryuu. Having promised to repay Haruyoshi, he immediately set out for the capital. The villagers helped tie a cloth filled with delicacies from Sanuki's mountains and seas to his body and watched cheerfully as he triumphantly took off into the sky.

When he reached the capital and learned of Haruyoshi's death, Rokurokusai is said to have grieved deeply. A poem composed by Rokurokusai in front of Haruyoshi's burial mound is still passed on to this day.

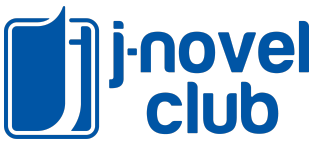
O kind ryuu among men, who lifted a carp from the mud. Even in your next life to come, may you soar high in the heavens.











Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Reincarnation of the Strongest Exorcist in Another World: Volume 5
by Kiichi Kosuzu

Translated by Jarod Blackburn Edited by Aldia Elwood

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Kiichi Kosuzu 2023
Illustrations by Yuunagi

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Futabasha Publishers Ltd.
This English edition is published by arrangement with Futabasha Publishers Ltd., Tokyo English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved.

In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content)

that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: July 2025