
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
1
Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen


"H-HEY THERE, MARIE. NICE MORNING, ISN'T IT?"
"...KAZUHIHO?"
Marie's sleepy eyes regained their luster, and the corners of her eyebrows perked up as she looked up at me.


KAZUHIHO / KAZUHIRO KITASE
Kazuhiho has the ability to adventure inside a dream world, and enjoys spending time there more than reality. He will go out of his way to ensure a comfortable night's sleep, and has a high cooking skill due to his ability to bring food and drinks with him into his dream. However, he has very little motivation for work. He has a rather sleepy-sounding tone of speech, and those around him tend to see him as lacking in motivation. He appears to be younger than his actual age while in the dream world.
MARIABELLE
Mariabelle had begun to dislike humans from never leaving her elven forest for so long, but she had learned to become accustomed to the somewhat-airheaded Kazuhiho after spending so much time with him. She travels to modern Japan and back after getting dragged into his ability to cross between worlds, and seems to enjoy the trips after falling in love with Japan's cuisine and culture. Goes by the nickname, Marie.
WRIDRA
Her true form is a magi drake with the power to "guide" the world. She is currently assuming the form of a draconian to interact with Kazuhiho and his friends. She's highly intelligent and incredibly curious about human culture and forms of entertainment.


"YOU'RE DONE ALREADY? THAT WAS FAS—"
I turned around to find Marie's still-wet body there, and, of course, she wasn't wearing anything…
I let out an awkward ooft.
Her slim body, beautiful figure, feminine breasts, and colorful...

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Chapter of Elf: Prologue

It was just a morning like any other. Sparrows were chirping outside the window as usual, and the morning sun filled my room through the curtains. With the recent arrival of spring, and this having been the first sunny day we had in a long time, it was the perfect day to go for a walk. Breathing in the fresh morning air would be just the thing I needed to wake up and clear my mind.

Or so I thought...

“Calm down, take a deep breath. I didn’t do anything wrong. Not a thing.”

I realized I was spouting nonsense in my state of confusion. I sounded like someone who had just committed a crime, but that definitely wasn’t the case.

“Wait a minute. What’s going to happen now? I brought someone into my room without their permission... Not to mention, their national origin is...”

I wondered to myself out loud as I looked over at my bed. Maybe this could be considered a crime in certain circumstances, but I needed to take a deep breath and focus on the main issue here.

There was an unfamiliar sight on my bed, which was a bit bigger than necessary for one person. The lump under my blanket slowly moved up and down, softly breathing in its comfortable sleep. I wondered if the faint, sweet smell was coming from those exhalations. The long, silky, silver-white hair glimmered radiantly in the sunlight, drawing me in with its luster. They seemed young in age. Their pale, pink lips, shapely nose, and long eyelashes almost made the person seem doll-like in appearance. I found myself mesmerized, but now wasn’t the time for absent-minded gawking.

My gaze shifted slightly over to the woman’s ears. Those, I thought, were my main source of concern. Judging by her elongated, slightly drooping ears, she definitely wasn’t human. Though, the world was a big place of course, so maybe it wasn’t impossible for someone like this to exist out there. But what would probably be going through most peoples’ minds if ever they saw her fairy-like appearance, was this:

There was an elf in Japan.

Elves only exist in fantasy stories. I couldn't imagine what sort of panic there'd be if people found out they actually existed, and that there was one sleeping in my bed right now.

As those thoughts went through my head, the eyebrows of the elf girl in question twitched. Her eyes slowly opened, revealing their amethyst shimmer to Japan. Seeing their elegant, misty color felt like I was witnessing the moment a flower bloomed. People sometimes described eyes that seemed to draw you in, but I never thought I'd actually experience it.

I forgot about everything including the current situation for a while, entranced by the girl's eyes. As they began finding focus, my brain started functioning like normal again.

What in the world happened last night?

Just like the girl who was slowly opening her eyes, my thoughts accelerated toward the past. My heart beat louder with nervousness and inexplicable anticipation.

Yes...that time, I...

Chapter of Elf, Episode 1: Hello, Ms. Elf

People tend to have at least one strange side to them. There are people who can sense ghosts and spirits, and people who can easily draw beautiful works of art. There are beautiful people with terrible singing voices, and skinny people who are voracious eaters. There are people who aren't so good-looking but have no problem finding dates, and so on.

I, too, actually have one of these strange quirks myself. This was related to the fact that I was an average, twenty-five-year-old salaryman, but, above all else, including the advancement of my career, my primary focus was on getting off work on time.

I undid my tie as soon as I got back to my room and began putting on my comfy pajama top. The way I hummed as I made my bed might very well be a strange sight to behold. It might not be as weird if I wasn't single, but, unfortunately, I never had a girlfriend before. This was my routine, or more like the thing I lived for. After all, I'd been dreaming of living in a fantasy world ever since I was a child. I loved stories about fighting and defeating monsters with swords, shield, and magic the most. I remembered borrowing those books from the library and reading them over and over until they were all worn out.

Maybe it was because of my obsession, but I dreamt about this sort of thing practically every night. I would fight in a world of swords and magic, participate in intercontinental wars, and step foot into enormous labyrinths. Those dreams began when I was a child, and even as an adult I still looked forward to seeing them at night.

The one unfortunate thing was that they could also get too real. It'd have been nice if they'd go easier on me every once in a while, but I'd actually been beaten by monsters time and time again, and it wasn't uncommon for me to jump awake from them in the middle of the night. I was always extraordinarily weak, and I couldn't remember how many times I'd gotten dissolved by slime-looking things. I'd been robbed by natives, who I couldn't even understand, countless times too.

But, no matter how terrifying those foes may have been, they were just

dreams. There was never any pain since they were just dreams, so I could get away with such recklessness as charging straight toward a towering dragon. Then afterward, I'd be awakened by the morning sunlight and stretch my limbs, thinking about the fun dream I just had. There was simply no way to experience such things in modern Japan.

So, as usual, I prepared my bed for the night. I put a water bottle next to my pillow, along with a bento that would still taste good cold. This wasn't some sort of ritual, but doing as such made it so that later... Actually, it'd be quicker to just do it than explain.

I looked at my watch, which told me it was 7 p.m. If things went as they usually did, I'd wake up at 7 a.m. I slept longer than most people my age, but I worked hard and lived alone, so no one could really say anything about it. It was nice to only have to take care of yourself. Though, I wasn't sure if I should think about it as a grown-up's privilege or lament my trivial life. Of course I thought of myself as the former, but most people would see me as the latter.

But that was fine. Life was to be enjoyed, and I had no intention of letting go of my life of sleeping.

"Well, good night."

And so, I dove into my cozy blanket. A veteran sleeper by now, I let out a snore and stepped into that other world as usual.

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Chirp chirp, chirp chirp.

As soon as I lazily opened my eyes, I saw a little bird right in front of my face. The blue color of its small, round body gradually grew darker toward the end of his wings. This extremely curious little guy was named Nuzzle, and he wasn't really afraid of humans. He was named after some nearby ruins called Nazul-Nazul. In the spring, he came out in search for food, but he seemed to spend most of his time in the ruins.

"*Ahhh...* I slept really well. Though, on the other side, I just fell asleep right now."

And yet, I felt well-rested even when I woke up in Japan too. Well, I guess that

made sense, considering I was in a dream on this side.

I offered breadcrumbs from my chest pocket as usual. The bird chirped with gratitude, then picked it up in his beak and flew off.

I brushed off the remaining crumbs and stood up as I suppressed a yawn. Then, the sun, rising into the clear, blue skies and gently sloping meadow, filled my view. There was a river flowing nearby, so it seemed I wouldn't have trouble finding drinking water.

"Hm, guess it's picking up where I left off last night. Ah, that's right, I was sleeping under a tree..."

Night dew had collected on the cloak I used as a makeshift bed, and the droplets fell off in beads as I wiped them off. I had picked an area with some trees growing in it because I was being cautious of the rain, but judging by how the sky looked now, it seemed there was no need for worry.

I took a look at my surroundings: There was a leather shoulder bag and something glinting in the sunlight next to it.

"There it is. A water bottle's good enough, but I gotta have my tea during meals."

There was a plastic bottle that seemed out of place in the fantasy world, and a bento was wrapped in cloth next to it. I had prepared it before going to sleep, and, strangely, it filled my stomach when I ate it in my dreams. Or maybe it was weirder that I could even get hungry in my dreams...

"Food is hard to come by and tastes bad in my dreams, so this really helps."

A while back, I would fish to keep myself from starving, but I switched to this method once I began working full time. The reasoning was that I didn't want to waste time trying to secure food when I could be enjoying my dream.

Now, I put it all into my bag and began walking toward the river. I needed to refill my water bottle, and my face could use a morning rinse.

I felt the chill of early spring as I splashed some water on my face. Rubbing my face with the cold water was very effective at waking me up from my dozy state. My face in the reflection of the wavering water was far different in age

from my face in the real world. The smooth, youthful skin and sleepy-looking eyes... Oh, I'm awake now, but that was just how my eyes naturally looked. Judging by my height, I was probably on the older side of middle school. My black clothes clearly didn't offer much in terms of protection, and I'd chosen something cheap so I didn't mind if they got damaged. I suppose the only equipment on me that you wouldn't see in Japan was the sword hanging at my waist.

"I've gotten a bit older compared to before, but I age much slower in the dream world. Now, judging by how that bird was here, this must be near the Nazul-Nazul Ruins."

If I just walked down along this river, it'd lead me to the underground city. But the question was whether I'd keep heading that way or find some place else. I stroked my silver bracelet as I thought about it, then a bluish-white screen appeared before me. These were distributed to every country, and were able to inform the wearer of their current status. It showed that I was level 72, indicating I was far too overpowered for this area.

"Man, my level has gotten pretty high from keeping at it all these years."

I was hopelessly weak to begin with, but I'd grown so much from all the hard work I'd put in. But I'd been playing for nearly twenty years, so it was hard to say whether my pace had been fast or slow. Though, there wasn't some nemesis like a demon lord for me to defeat, so I'd just been taking it easy. If there were some grand enemy like that to get excited about, I probably would have been trying much harder instead of raising my fishing skill all this time.

"To be honest, I was only raising my level so I could go check out other areas... Hm?"

Just then, I felt someone's eyes on me. I noticed it thanks to the Intuition skill I leveled up to avoid combat, but it seemed whoever was looking at me wasn't looking for a fight.

A young girl with long ears appeared from behind a tree and approached me.

"Oh, good morning, Kazuhiho. I see you're out here camping primitively as usual. If you ask me, you seem far more elf-like than I do."

“Ah, yes. Good morning, Marie. I’m lucky the weather is nice again today. Sometimes I wake up during heavy rain, and that can be pretty mentally draining.”

Marie tilted her head as if she had no idea what I was talking about.

Her species was that of the elves, and her real name was Mariabelle. I called her by her nickname Marie, and although she seemed to be about my age, she was over a hundred years old, which was partially why she was called a half-fairy. Her hair, glimmering in the sunlight, was pure white like the fluff of a dandelion. It went straight down to her waist, making her easily recognizable even from afar.



Then there was me, who, for some reason, went by “Kazuhiho.” I only had my young self to blame for getting one letter wrong. It was based off of my real name, Kazuhiro Kitase...but I had spelled it wrong when I was doing the initial setup.

“No use crying over spilt milk... Oh, just talking to myself. Anyway, it’s not often I see you all the way out here, Marie. Would you like to go check out some nearby ruins with me?”

“My, that’s quite a place you just invited me to. I don’t quite understand human sensibilities yet, but do women usually like it when someone invites them to ruins?”

“I guess that would depend on the person. But, if you do decide to join me, I’ll treat you to some bento.”

Her long ears twitched in response.

I saw a sparkle in her purple eyes, and despite it being plain as day that she was tempted, she fidgeted with the staff she was holding behind her back.

“W-Well... If you really insist, I suppose I could take you up on your offer. Though I am pretty busy with some other business, just so you know.”

With that, she glanced at the bag I had placed beside me. It was quite small, so the shape of the bento box was visibly bulging out of it. She seemed to have a keen sense of taste. Ever since I shared some of my bento a while back, she came to expect it more and more. But, being difficult as she was, she never directly asked if she could have some.

It was also very rare for me to run into her. Ever since she moved from the elven forest to the Sorcerer’s Guild, she’d been spending her days studying magic. Since I had this rare opportunity to spend time with her again, I wanted to go have some fun with her.

“Let’s go then. There aren’t many strong enemies around, so it’s perfect for taking a walk.”

“I think your idea of a ‘walk’ is a little odd. Most people would call this ‘exploring ruins,’ not some afternoon stroll.” Her brow furrowed adorably as

she corrected my not-so-common sense.

I'd known her since grade school now that I thought about it, so she may be my best friend in this world. Though she did act like she was my big sister or something, being much older than me and all.

We began walking side by side, when my gaze was drawn to the object she was holding.

"Oh, is that your staff? I wanna see!"

"Hmhm, go ahead. The shaft is made from holly—and look, it even has unicorn hair here."

"Wow, Marie, I'm always so impressed that you can even use magic. Let me take a good look at it while we walk."

Marie smiled happily in response.

Her ability to control spirits was a specialty of the elves, and, as her gray robe indicated, she was also a mage. It seemed she had just obtained her staff recently, as it was in pristine condition. I had no idea how this thing was able to unleash magic, since all I'd learned was to swing my sword around.

It was cute listening to her go on about the valuable materials her staff was made of, but she had actually killed me when we first met. She was quite an outrageous elf, but she seemed to have finally calmed down in recent years. I voiced this observation out loud, and she gave me a slightly annoyed expression.

"You have it all wrong. That was your own fault, you know. I was horrified when you came back to life and talked to me again with a smile on your face. I thought you were a ghost or something."

"Well, in any case, it wasn't murder. And I don't know if I was really smiling, but I do feel happy when I see you, since you're so pretty and all."

Marie ran her hand through her hair with a cool expression, as if she heard that all the time. She kept glancing back at me as if to say, "Go on..."

I thought it was cute when girls made that sort of expression. I might be in the body of a child, but I was a full grown adult in reality. So being able to escort an

adorable girl like this was far from unpleasant. In fact, I kind of enjoyed it when she acted cheeky like this...though she would hate it if I told her that.

I gazed at her in the morning light as we walked along the river. The color of her smooth hair was far too lustrous to describe as a mere “white.” Maybe the closest comparison would be silk. Her eyes were purple like amethyst, so saying they were like gems would be an apt comparison. Maybe it was because of the long life she’d lived, but even though we were similar in height, I couldn’t hold a candle to her in terms of intellect.

“Oh, is that it? Over by those mossy rocks.”

Her slender finger pointed at the ruins in question. The cave-like hole before us that was surrounded by moss-covered rocks was the entrance of the Nazul-Nazul Ruins. It had quite a long history, and rumors have said it was once an underground city that was destroyed 1,000 years ago. But how was such a well-developed magical civilization destroyed? That was a mystery still yet to be solved.

“Well then, let’s go seek ancient mysteries, shall we?”

“Yeah, you’re definitely an odd one. What do you hope to find in some ruins nobody has stepped foot in in ages?”

We stepped up to the cave, and I pulled her up by her slim hand. I didn’t realize how light she was and overcompensated the pull. She was propelled into my chest and I found her big, round eyes right in front of mine.

“Hmph, can’t you do something about those sleepy-looking eyes of yours?”

“I was born with these eyes. There’s nothing I can do about them.”

She giggled and waved her holly staff. A light spirit emerged from the staff and began floating around us. Then it flew over to the cave and banished the darkness within.

The preparations seemed to be complete. Marie nodded, and our exploration of the Nazul-Nazul Ruins began.

The Nazul-Nazul Ruins...

Long ago, there was a civilization that had suddenly been wiped out. In most

cases, destroyed cities met their end due to war or natural disasters wreaking havoc on homes. But those who'd investigated these ruins reported no signs of conflict, and most homes there had been left undamaged. Because of this, there was a theory that this civilization had crumbled due to an unknown illness. However, the likelihood of that was questionable when considering how advanced their magic was.

"So that's why this is known as one of the seven wonders of the region. This was investigated by countless others in the past, so what makes you think you think you'll be the one to solve the mystery?"

"It's not just me. I have you here too. Besides, I wouldn't mind if I didn't succeed. It's the will to solve it that counts."

Our footsteps echoed aloud as we continued exploring through the ruins. The ceiling was high overhead, and it was impossible to see it through the darkness even with the light spirit accompanying us. Its summoner, Marie, conjured additional spirits upon recovering her magic powers, and there were already five of them flying around in total.

"So you're saying you'll just consider us lucky if we do find something? In any case, this place is pretty big now that I see it from the inside. I never would have guessed it's this spacious looking at it from outside."

"Yeah, it did used to be a whole city after all. The entrance is just part of the sewage system."

It seemed the waterway was crucial for the ruins. The river was flowing down the path formed with rocks, and seeing that there was still water here, either the water source hadn't died yet, or there was rain water flowing into it. It looked to be made quite simply, with a basic rock construction. However, I'd spotted many magic runes on the way here that served to increase its durability. That must have been the reason it was able to retain its shape for a millennium.

"That's some incredible technology, to be able to endure for 1,000 years like this. Couldn't they use this for the city buildings too?"

"I don't think so. It was built into a vein so it doesn't have to be resupplied with magic, meaning there are pretty strict conditions that need to be met. It

would also require a highly skilled caster, which I doubt anyone would be able to afford.”

Hm... I didn’t really get it, but sounded like it wasn’t really plausible. Coming from an earthquake-prone country like Japan, it made me envious seeing magic that could increase stability like this.

The girl’s long ears twitched in response to my muttering, then she turned to me.

“Earthquakes certainly are scary, but it can’t happen all that often. Where in the world are you from?”

“Oh, I’m from Japan, but it’s probably not on any of your maps. It’s an island country really far from here.”

She made a noncommittal noise and contorted her face in such a way that was hard to tell whether she was interested or disinterested.

Black hair and black eyes was a rare combination in this world, but her interest was more focused on my bento. I knew the reason she even followed me into the ruins and the reason she kept glancing at my bag was all for that boxed lunch I’d made.

It’d been some time since we came in here. Fatigue should be setting in soon. I found an open area where we could rest and turned my face toward hers.

“That looks like a nice place to sit down. How about we have some lunch?”

“Good idea! I wonder what you brought today, hehe~”

The elf’s footsteps suddenly seemed lighter, and she excitedly helped me prepare. To think she was actually a hundred years old. Elves really were hard to understand sometimes... Well, even though she was just after my food, it sure was cute when girls were this expressive.

I handed her the cloth-covered bento, and her purple eyes lit up brighter than her light spirits.

“I-I’m going to open it now...”

“Sure, go ahead. You probably don’t know how to use chopsticks, and you already washed your hands, so you can just eat it with your hands.”

The girl opened the bento box, and she blinked her eyes with childlike glee. Today's menu was some juicy inarizushi and chikuzenni that was enjoyable down to the texture. They might not look flashy in the color department, but the delicious fragrance was very enticing. The sharp smell of soy sauce emphasized the following gentle sweetness, stimulating one's appetite whether they wanted it to or not.

"Mm, that smell... It's so wonderful!"

I couldn't help but smile as she took several deep breaths with the lid still in her hand.

"Go on, dig in. I'm not that good at these kinds of simmered dishes, but I love how I can just make big batches at once and still have them taste good when cold."

I gestured for her to begin eating, and she first took the inarizushi in her hand. It was full of juices, which ran down her fingers as she held it. Unconcerned, she carried it over to her mouth and the juices seeped out into her mouth.

"Nn! Mmm... So...sweet!"

The faint aroma of soy sauce. She licked her fingers and put little wrinkles between her brows. She then chewed the inarizushi full of umami, and the intrinsic sweetness of rice came flooding in. The juices and sour-sweet flavor mixed together, leaving the fragrant aftertaste of sesame. The elf seemed completely enchanted, and continued chewing with her eyes shut tightly.

"Here, have some tea. Drink it slowly, now."

She politely bowed her head, even in her currently enamored state, and took the plastic bottle. She was taken aback by the material when I first introduced it to her, but she'd eventually gotten used to it.

"Nn...nng... Paah! I'm impressed. It seems you've improved your skills again. So, what is this brown stuff?"

"Inarizushi. It's really good because it brings out the flavor even when it's cold. And this is chikuzenni. It's made with spring vegetables, so it's very nutritious. Here, try some."

Marie nodded repeatedly, then tossed bamboo shoots and lotus roots into her mouth. The crisp consistency fanned her appetite as she alternated eating between the inarizushi and simmered vegetables.

It was hard to believe a slender elf like her could eat so much. It was entertaining to watch her toss food into her mouth one after another despite being far skinnier than I was. She drank some tea and rested a bit before turning to me with a smile.

“Hehe, I was right to tag along, Kazuhiho. I’ve always wondered, but is this all home-cooked?”

“Yeah, today’s meal is. I just buy it at the store when I don’t feel like cooking though.”

“Where do they sell them?! Come on, tell me! Is it at the nearby Sissle? Or is it at Phlox?”

I guess I couldn’t tell her it was from Japan. If I tried avoiding the question and gave her a vague answer, she’d puff out her cheeks and get upset for trying to “keep it a secret again.”

“Well, I’ll treat you to some more any time. Let’s come hang out here again when you’re free.”

“I’m busy with my studies, so it’s not like I have a lot of free time. Buuut I suppose I can make time every once in a while.”

It’s not often she showed me her pretty smile like this. I heard she usually disliked humans, so it made me strangely happy when she was friendly with me. It was like interacting with a wild animal that shouldn’t possibly warm up to you, but this was probably an extremely rude way to think of elves.

“We should get going soon. I want to get out of here by sundown.”

“Yes, we should. But I’m pretty full, so would you mind walking slowly?”

We washed our fingers with the water bottle from earlier and wiped our hands with a towel before standing up to leave. Finally, we dusted ourselves off and our fun little lunchtime came to an end.

The Nazul-Nazul Ruins were full of running water, and every part of them was

full of humidity. We walked along the waterway and peeked into dwellings as we passed by. These might be 1,000-year-old ruins, but, due to their underground location, they were slow to deteriorate and it wasn't hard to imagine people used to live here.

I wondered just what type of people lived in such a dark place like this before it was destroyed 1,000 years ago, and as I mulled over the thought, I noticed something lurking in the shadows.

"Oh, a monster. Wait here for a sec... Heeey, hellooo?"

I left the startled Marie behind and moved closer to the shadow as it slowly faced me. The monster looked like a lizard on two legs, and it was far wider than even a crocodile. This one's level seemed to be in the twenties, and they were considered to be quite vicious.

They were known as lizardmen. It was a bit odd that even the females had "men" in the name, but that was neither here nor there. He directed his round eyes toward me, then bowed his head. It was partially because there was such a severe level gap, but I could also understand their language, so it was rare to get into a fight unless something drastic happened.

"Ah, if it isn't Kazuhiho. Going for a walk with an elf today? Boy, am I jealous!"

"Well, I think she's just after my bento..."

Most lizardmen weren't used to talking, so some parts of their speech were a little hard to understand. But some species of monsters didn't even have a language, so this was still well within the range of things I could handle.

"We just came to explore these ruins. So, is this area safe?"

"I wouldn't say that... There's a dragon with a nest in the back, and she just entered her spawning season. It'd be dangerous to go near there. My people are a subspecies of dragonmen, as I'm sure you know, and we've been dragon guards since my ancestors' time. But young ones these days spout things like, 'We're lizards, not dragons!' But...I digress. In any case, the dragon back there is very irritable right now. I would advise against going near that area."

He sure was talkative for a lizard.

I waved at the helpful lizardman and walked away. I jogged over to Marie, and she looked at me with slightly widened eyes.

“My goodness, did you learn how to speak with monsters now? Where did you learn how to do that? I doubt there’s any literature of that kind.”

“Yeah, I just kinda dove into it head-first. I can’t count how many times I got attacked, and it took about three years to learn. You remember how I learned how to speak Elvish from you? It’s kinda like that.”

“Oh, you really did dive into it, didn’t you... I felt strangely sorry for monsters just now.”

Even an elf, who lived for nearly an infinite amount of time, seemed to have trouble understanding my life choices. She pressed her pointer finger to her forehead and squashed it up and down as if struggling to do just that.

There were many different types of monster languages, divided into categories ranging from A to E Groups. I wondered what sort of face she would make if I told her I already learned all the way up to C Group.

“But it’s so useful. Want me to teach you, Marie?”

“I have to admit, I am a bit interested... Then maybe I could ask you to teach me tomorrow, if you have time.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. It’s been a while since I made upcoming plans with you like this, so it makes me happy.”

She gave me a suspicious look as if trying to figure out if I was attempting to hit on her. I didn’t mean to make excuses, but now that I was twenty-five in the real world, time spent with cute girls was extremely valuable and it made me happy just hanging out with her. But I wouldn’t tell her this, because she’d probably just look at me like some sort of pervert.

“But anyway, a dragon in spawning season, huh... I want to go take a look.”

“Here you go again... Do you intend to make some otherworldly dishes or something?”

“What? No, not at all. Though, I have read that reptile eggs come in all sorts of varieties. Some are jelly-like substances, some have hard shells, and others

are squishy and soft. I hear dragon eggs are oily, but I wonder if it that's true. Hmhm, I guess I wouldn't know until I eat it."

She gave me a look as if to say she was right. But still, I'd like to see something like that at least once. I didn't mean to eat it of course, but I was very curious to find out what a dragon egg was like.

I dragged Marie toward the depths of the ruins, despite her obvious reluctance.

I wore a cape with a Stealth Effect over my head and covered my entire body, then crawled across the ground like a caterpillar. The light fairies had already been dismissed, and the surrounding area was covered in darkness. I looked to my side with bated breath, then a pair of purple, forlorn-looking eyes turned to me.

We went through the dried up waterway and arrived at what seemed to be the deepest area there. A low, eerie noise echoed around us, and there seemed to be no sight of any monsters. That, too, provoked an unnerving image in my head.

What could possibly be up ahead...?

I moved closer with the elf and looked down from the rocky plateau to find darkness awaiting below. The loud, rumbling sound of something breathing from its depths was an obvious sign there was an ancient dragon sleeping down there. But of course, I didn't have the ability to see through complete darkness.

(Stay still, Kazuhiho. I'll give you night vision too.)

(Whoa, thanks, Marie. You never cease to amaze me.)

I could always count on Marie. She could use Sorcery in addition to Spirit Magic, letting her adapt to a wide range of situations.

Her fingers, which she pressed firmly against my forehead, glowed faintly in the gloom. This apparently granted a buff that amplified light like a cat's eye, making it seem as if my surroundings were shining.

I looked down once again, my heart jumping as I could now clearly see an enormous dragon.

So big...

Judging from its size and staggering intensity, it could be the rare legendary-class dragon. Its estimated level may even surpass 1,000. Being only level 72, I wouldn't stand a chance against it.

(It really is big... Do you know what this dragon's name is?) (It's black and possesses dense magic, so possibly an arkdragon, a type of magi drake. Look, the marking on its body surface is moving. So it's true, they can generate magic simply by breathing...) Marie seemed timid at first, but she was now full of wide-eyed curiosity.

But...how do I say this... The cape wasn't all that big, so she was holding tightly onto my arm. She may be slender, but she was still a girl. My arm was squeezed between the two mounds on her chest, and...

(Are you listening, Kazuhiho? Do you know what this means if that really is an arkdragon? Their spawning season only comes once every 1,000 years. One of their scales...no, even one drop of saliva from them could be sold for a high price! Oh my, this is so exciting!) (You can be pretty un-elf-like at times, Marie. Do you ever get told you're worldly-minded?) In response to my comment, her amethyst eyes looked at me. Her eyelashes seemed even longer from up close, and she looked like a beautiful doll with her pale skin. But she was giving me a cold glare, so I couldn't just keep staring.

(You are the one to blame, Kazuhiho. I never would have become interested in the human world if it weren't for you. You're the one who troubled me with talks of the city full of excitement and all the things I would love to buy.) *Huh? And that's* my *fault? Did I ever say I'd take her to the outside world...?*

I'd visited her elven village before, having hung out and learned some Elvish while I was there. I didn't recall ever inviting her out of there though.

But, more importantly, the sensation of her breasts squeezing my arm harder may have been the bigger issue here. I may have been mature mentally, but Marie could be a bit more modest about these things.

Well, not that I don't enjoy it of course.

I soon realized it wasn't the time to be troubled over such things. The

arkdragon’s eyes had opened before I knew it, and it was now giving off a warning growl.

(I-It hasn’t noticed us, right? I mean, its eyes are...)

(Yup, it’s staring right at us. But don’t worry, I’ve already secured an escape route.) I looked behind me and saw a small cave. It was just big enough to fit both of us, so there was no way for the dragon to chase us through there.

Baaam!

Lattices came down with a heavy, metallic sound, and we both froze in place.

Don’t tell me this is an inescapable event! It really may be legendary-class!

The rumbling music that followed signaled the start of a battle, and its imposing tone indicated the might of our opponent. It was a surprisingly slow and steady rhythm, but from the low sounds of the music, I could tell there would be sorrow and despair followed by a tragic end. It told us we were about to face death, and all we could do was tremble as we held each other.

The dragon’s gigantic claws perched on a foothold with a loud scraping noise, its glowing eyes appearing before us. I embraced Marie in my arms in an attempt to protect her, but then the dragon’s mouth opened like a volcano’s throat.

It was a sight that shook me to my very soul: a dragon’s breath igniting before my eyes.

Yup, looks like I’m dying again today. I wish I could’ve at least seen its eggs...

As soon as the leisurely thought crossed my mind, my surroundings were enveloped in a furious torrent of power, and I felt every hair of my body evaporating. I vanished in a mere instant. My very existence was destroyed before I could even register pain.

The overwhelming nature of this life form was both horrifying and moving at the same time...

Then, the fierce stream of energy that had bent light itself suddenly stopped. The world went from black and white to vibrant colors again, and the arkdragon let out a satisfied-sounding snort as tranquility returned to the cave. Eventually,

it climbed down the sheer wall and went back to its nest of eggs.

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I let out a long yawn in a pitch-black room, then moved aside my comfortable blanket to stretch out my limbs. It was still dark as expected, and I looked up at the clock to see that it was three in the morning.

That's a shame, I was having so much fun with Marie...

I scratched my head, thinking of how I wish I could have spent more time with her.

If I was defeated in my dream like I was earlier, or if I fell asleep over there, I ended up being forced awake here. So, when I looked at the bottle and bento box next to me, they were, as expected, empty.

This is my "strange side," despite being an ordinary salaryman otherwise. I could play and eat in my dreams...not that that was something I could really brag about.

I muttered to myself and flipped the bedside switch to turn on the indirect lighting. It cast the darkness away, just like the light spirits. But right as I was about to get up to go to the bathroom, I froze. I think it was safe to say anyone would be surprised if they suddenly noticed the bare skin of someone's arm wrapped around their chest.

I slowly turned to my side and found hair whiter than my sheets, and the smooth skin of a shoulder...

"M-M-Marie?!" I cried out hysterically, despite it being the middle of the night. Any hint of lingering sleepiness was instantly blown away.

In my bed was a half-fairy elf girl sleeping comfortably.

And so, the most bizarre incident in my life was updated to that moment. It was slightly...no, incredibly peculiar, but it seemed my dream had become reality and an elf showed up in my room.

Chapter of Elf, Episode 2: Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf I was still completely frozen by the time I heard the sparrows chirping outside to indicate the weekday morning had come. I finally let out a breath, coming out as a sigh heavy with the troubled thoughts in my mind.

I blankly looked out the window and muttered to myself, “Guess I didn’t get a wink of sleep...”

That wasn’t very surprising, considering there was an elf girl sleeping in my own bed. I’d question the sanity of anyone who could go back to sleep in that situation.

My eyes couldn’t help but be drawn to her. As the room grew brighter, the elf’s presence became harder and harder to ignore. Her hair gleamed like silk, and the beauty of her facial features almost made her look like a full-blown fairy. She was ridiculously pretty with her pale skin and lips that were as bright as a blooming flower, and I couldn’t help but stare, stare, stare at her.

She was an elf, which was obvious from her long ears, and a user of Spirit Magic and Sorcery. The fact that she was sleeping in my bed was like a dream in itself, ignoring that this was, in reality, just a condo in Tokyo.

But how exactly did she appear before me? And what is that world I thought only existed in my dreams...?

I couldn’t find any answers, and simply let out another heavy sigh.

Her name was Mariabelle. I’d always called her Marie in my dreams, and it was only recently that we became close enough for her to smile at me. But last night, we were hit with an arkdragon’s breath attack while I held her in my arms, and I woke up with her here, and next to me, for some reason or other. On top of that, we woke up in my bed (which was very comfortable, if nothing else).

So many questions...

But first, I'd need to make sure she didn't wake up in a full blown panic. After all, she was transported from the world I thought was a dream to here in Japan. If I were in her shoes, I might not be so calm with all the questions I'd have. Actually, I probably would've been full of excitement from the inexplicable events... But knowing I had to tell her there was no guarantee she could go home was a hard pill to swallow.

As I struggled with those thoughts, the elf girl's eyes slowly opened.

Her clear, amethyst eyes...

It was like witnessing a vivid flower blooming in front of me, and I wouldn't have been surprised if they had some sort of charming effect. They were just that beautiful, and I could feel my heart fluttering despite my age. I simply watched as her bright lips gradually opened and uttered words in Elvish.

"...Kazu... hiho?"

"H-Hey there, Marie. Nice morning, isn't it?"

Marie's sleepy eyes regained their luster, and the corners of her eyebrows perked up as she looked up at me. I didn't blame her; I mean, I looked fifteen in my dreams, but I looked drastically different now as a twenty-five-year-old.

"Huh? Wait, are you...actually Kazuhiho? Not his dad or something...?"

"Yeah, it's me... I'll explain later, but first, are you hurt? You got hit by that dragon's breath earlier..."

She seemed to finally recall last night's events, and threw the blanket off herself in a fluster. I had a bad feeling when I saw her bare shoulder, but I suddenly got a full view of the elf's skin. I looked away, but it was too late.

"Wh-Whaaaaaat?!"

It might have been the most hysteric scream I'd ever heard. The image burned into my brain was that of clear, white skin, and... Oh, I shouldn't think about it. My face turned bright red, even though she was just a younger girl.

I heard a sound I assumed was her throwing the blanket back over her head. I was too scared to make sure, but I was pretty sure that was it. My back and

neck were sweating profusely, and I could almost feel her staring daggers into me; but then, her voice trembling with rage, she spoke to me.

“Y-Y-You!”

“Sorry! I-I didn’t know, and I didn’t lay a finger on you, really!”

I’d be incredibly happy if she just took my word for it, though I’d also probably have a hard time believing that if I found myself naked in someone’s room. The real question was, how trustworthy of a person was I?

She exhaled loudly from her nose, which I took as her considering my words despite her obvious anger. We weren’t particularly close, but all I could do was hope she understood what type of person I was.

After waiting for a long time, she finally let out a sigh. “Maybe it was thanks to you...but I haven’t been hurt. I trust you’re going to explain what’s going on?”

“Absolutely!”

“Bring me some clothes first! And don’t you dare turn around!”

A pillow hit me right in the face, and I was forced to go buy some women’s clothing. I looked all over my place, but I didn’t have any sort of clothes, equipment, or bags a girl could use.

“Yes, yes sir. I’m very sorry. I’ll be absolutely sure to go in tomorrow.”

I bowed my head deeply and hung up the call on my smartphone. I couldn’t help but sigh, considering I was standing in front of people in suits who seemed to be on their way to work and staring at a clothing shop that was about to open for the day. I didn’t like taking days off when I wasn’t even sick, but I had no choice. It wasn’t like I could just tell my boss I had to deal with an elf who came out of my dreams.

But...what’s done is done, so it was time to find something that fit her, without being too expensive of course. I was sure a cute girl like her would look great in nice clothes, but I didn’t have the greatest fashion sense. I didn’t go out often, let alone buy clothes for a girl.

“Hmm... I think I’ll just buy something for now and go buy the rest with her.”

So it was decided.

I had no idea what size or type of underwear she'd want, so I'd get her the athletic type with stretch. Thinking so, I went to find some underwear and put it in my basket, along with a pleated skirt and high socks. Then I picked out a white, long sleeved shirt and some sneakers that seemed to go well with them. I wanted to at least get her some nice shoes, so it was a shame I didn't know her size. Not that sneakers were bad, but I did spend an unnecessarily long time thinking if they'd go well with more formal outfits...

I definitely need to bring her next time...

The reason I was grumbling to myself was because I was beginning to understand that it was somewhat fun shopping for such elegant women's clothing. They were all bright, spring colors, and the vibe of the outfits changed completely depending on the combinations. It was a completely different experience from buying men's clothes, which aspired to have just enough "normalcy" so you wouldn't stick out. It was always such a shame I only ever saw Marie in robes, but now I'd get to dress her to my preferences...

Ah... I should stop myself there...

The shop staff behind the pillar was coming over to check if I was the one who called out to her. I briefly wondered if me doing business here made it look like I was into cross-dressing, but I let those thoughts slip by. I quickly paid for the stuff, tossed the shopping bags full of compromises into my car, and decided to drive straight home.

I drove a small station wagon-type car that fit about four people. Its only feature was its low cost, but it was enough for just driving around the city.

I tapped the steering wheel with a finger as I waited for the lights to change. I looked over to the bag of things I'd just bought when a question came to mind: Why was she naked?

Her staff and bag were gone too, and I doubted she had time to hide them somehow.

Then I realized I was in the same situation: I wasn't able to bring any of my equipment or valuables from there to here either. The only difference was, I was already wearing my pajamas before falling asleep here.

Yeah, that has to be the reason...

If that place in my dreams actually existed, then they'd both be independent of each other and this would be Marie's first visit to this side, so she was forced to start with a blank slate, clothes and all... Maybe.

Thinking about it, I wondered if I was also naked when I first arrive at her world... No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't dig up those memories from when I was a kid.

Then I realized I was beginning to accept the bizarre situation I was in. I always thought a dream was just imaginary and this morning's events had my brain spinning, but it was time to switch my way of thinking. Now that I saw it with my own eyes, I had no choice but to accept the reality...

Yes, there was an elf in my room. Nobody would believe it, but I at least had to. Marie was real, and I had taken her hand and brought her into my bed. Because I held her in my arms just as I died, it was highly likely my ability to "awaken in Japan when I die" affected her too. But what would happen if she died in this world? She might go back to her own world like me, but I definitely didn't want to find out that way.

The light turned green and I stopped all the speculation that was going nowhere. I pressed the pedal with my foot, and the car slowly began accelerating.

I opened the door with shopping bags in hand and found Marie standing in front of the windows. She was wrapped in blankets and stood with her back toward me, so I couldn't readily see her expression.

I lived in a 1DK condo that was only about nineteen square meters and designed for one person to live in. From the entrance, the kitchen was directly to the right, with a table and chair directly in front of it. On the left hand side was my bedroom, which had a low cabinet separating it from the dining area. That was how I was able to see Marie, who was standing at the bedside, immediately after entering.

Her bangs were wavering in the wind that blew in through the slightly open window, and there I was, at a loss for words from the sight of an elf in the scenery of a residential area. The sight was so mythical, it made me question

whether I was really still in Japan.

I let out a fervent breath, then finally called out to her, “I’m h—”

“Kazuhiho, where exactly is this?” Her quiet voice asked me.

So she really was standing there just to stare at the view. It was completely different from her own world, so she must’ve been in total shock.

“I understand how you feel. When I went to your world for the first time, I...”

“You must be very wealthy if you can live in such a tall building! This is so amazing, Kazuhiho! I’ve never seen such an advanced city before! Ahh, looking down below makes my knees shake!”

Oh, right. I was in a state of total excitement, like I’d gone to a fun theme park for the first time. I, too, would always get pumped up just like that whenever I went to her world. It’s said birds of a feather flock together, but maybe we’d hung out so many times *because* we had similar personalities. She was very curious and inquisitive just like me, and we both became totally engrossed in things that interested us.

I stood there thinking about all that when the girl pointed at something outside. She tapped the window glass with her finger, then turned to me with eyes full of curiosity.

“What’s that tower over there? Is that where a highly renowned archmage lives?”

“Tower? Oh, the Tokyo Sky Tree. I took the day off, so do you want to go check it out together? It’s cherry blossom season right now, so I’m sure you’ll enjoy the scenery.”

I’d never seen her smile so brilliantly. I didn’t expect her to be into the typical tourist stuff. But, to be honest, I was just glad she wasn’t feeling down about this whole situation.

“Then I’d better make good use of my day off and show you around my world. First put these clothes on and...”

“Ah! Ah! I’m so excited! Let’s have a good time together, Kazuhiho!”

If she jumped at me for a hug like that... And there went the blanket... Her

supple, perfectly beautiful butt was in my vision, and Marie immediately covered my eyes with a *whap!* I really shouldn't have stared if that was the only outcome...

In any case, we couldn't go anywhere until we got her dressed. I guided her away from the bed and laid down the clothes in the shopping bags. She always wore those heavy, stuffy robes in her world, but I'd been told sorcerers changed the color of their robes depending on their rank. I heard navy blue was the highest, so I mostly chose that color for her clothing. A pleated skirt that ended above her knees paired with the high socks made her somewhat give off the impression of a schoolgirl.

And of course, I stood there agape when I saw her step out, fully dressed.

"It's so light and stretchy and easy to move in! I've never seen fabric with such fine knitting before! Are you sure I can wear this? It must have been expensive..."

Even as she happily marched in place on the flooring, she seemed to be concerned about me spending money for her. Her fingers were fidgeting as she looked up at me apologetically. Honestly though, I was so glad she seemed to enjoy them that I didn't even care about the cost.

"Now that I see you wearing them, I definitely think they were a good buy. You've always been so beautiful, but those clothes really suit you. I'm surprised by just how great you look."

Marie seemed a bit surprised herself, then made a prim expression as if to say, "Go on..."

When she held the edges her skirt in her hands and struck a cute pose, my face broke into a slight grin. Her shapely lips curved into a smile in response, showing off her pearly white teeth.



“Your age may be different, but I’m relieved to see that you’re definitely Kazuhiho. So, is this the ‘Japan’ place you mentioned before?”

I was also relieved to hear she believed me. The elf was about a full head smaller than me, so I bent down a bit to speak with her.

“That’s right. This is why it was never on your maps, or why I wasn’t able to show you around. But for some reason, it looks like I’m allowed to do that today. So I’d like to take the time and explain things as you get to know my home.”

With that, I jiggled my keys in front of her: my room key and car key. Upon seeing them, the girl’s eyes sparkled even brighter. It was like she was about to step into the world of a storybook.

“We have some really nice spring weather today, so we should go out and eat. What type of food do you like, Marie?”

“Something that isn’t too pungent. Fresh food would be great, but I won’t ask for too much. I’ll leave the choice to you. Also, I’ll need you to explain exactly how I ended up here.”

She seemed incredibly curious about it as she followed me with light footsteps. Then I remembered something important just as I reached for the door...

“Oh, I almost forgot... Elves don’t actually exist in this world. Could you wear this cap so people don’t start freaking out?”

“My, what a wonderful knit. You know, I don’t think your taste in clothing is as bad as you think.”

Huh, maybe she was right. I was more of an indoors type of guy and I was certain I wasn’t good at picking out clothes at all, but I’d take that as a compliment.

I watched her put the cap over her head and conceal her ears, then pushed the front door open. The morning sun felt so gentle and relaxing. But my heart, on the other hand, was beating excitedly. The elation coming from the girl behind me must have been rubbing off on me. There was nothing like the sense

of wonder from seeing a new world for the first time.

And so, I was to go on a date with a girl for the first time in my life. Not only that, but this also had to be the first time in the world anyone was on a date with an elf.

Now, there seemed to be several obstacles before we could go eat. It was an issue when we stepped out of the condo and she saw the asphalt sidewalk too. She was crouched down and rubbing it with her fingertips, presumably trying to understand what it was. Whenever something caught her attention, whether it be a green light or a car in the parking lot, the elf stopped to observe it.

The most troublesome part was probably when she didn't allow me to drive until I would explain how cars worked. She refused to move until I opened the hood and went over the functions of each part underneath. By the time I guided her to the passenger seat and I sat at the steering wheel, thirty minutes had already passed since we left the condo. It seemed strange to me as someone from the modern world, so when I questioned her about it, she looked at me as if I asked her if the sky was blue.

"Well, how else would I become a better sorceress if I didn't try to understand difficult things? Everything has a flow to it. At least personally, I found it to be stimulating and interesting."

Ah, so that's why...

I murmured for her to stay still, then put the seat belt on for her. She quickly began tugging at the belt and complained that it didn't completely lock her in place. She seemed to be quite busy with all the fidgeting and complaining. It'd work in case of a sudden brake, but there were some things in the world you couldn't prepare for just by understanding them.

I turned on the engine and heard a sharp breath being drawn right next to me. Whenever I drove, safety was my number one priority. So much so that when I took an acquaintance somewhere, he complained that my driving had made him sleepy. But the car hadn't even moved yet, and there wasn't much I could do before I began driving. It seemed an elf girl who grew up in a forest couldn't help but get spooked by the roar of an engine.

Feeling a bit concerned, I turned to her. "Hey, do you want to walk instead?

There are other places we could eat. It's just that I have a place I recommend for this season but it's a bit of a drive."

"No, I'm fine... It is a bit scary, but I want to see how it moves. Kazuhiho, would you mind if I hold your hand?"

I was a bit taken aback by her request. I couldn't remember the last time I'd held hands with a girl, and I felt like Marie and I always had a certain distance between us as friends. But I was honestly happy to see she relied on me. I luckily drove an automatic, so I replied, "Of course not," and she held onto my wrist.

She was apparently nervous, because I could feel the sweat and warmth from her skin. She seemed to have calmed down a bit compared to earlier, so I assured her it would be okay and slowly lifted my foot off the brake pedal.

"Let's get going then. I think I'll take us to a Japanese restaurant."

"Ah! I-It's moving! Whaa, I can see everything outside! This is so scary!"

She grabbed onto my arm in surprise and fear, despite us moving very slowly. The way her head darted around to look at her surroundings made her look like a little squirrel or something. But things that could be experienced firsthand tended to be easily and quickly learned but hard to forget. Similarly, I heard professional soccer players might lose some of their vitality as they got older, but they were still able to maintain their soccer skills.

As we kept driving for a while longer, the girl's grip on my arm slowly loosened.

"Wow, the ground is all made of rock. I doubt it was all shaped by carving them, so they must have been laid down on top..."

She muttered to herself as she analyzed her surroundings like she'd done earlier. It seemed she was lessening her sense of fear by understanding things like the functions of the road, sidewalks, and traffic lights.

In any case, I couldn't help but think about what a peaceful day it was. The warmth of the sun truly made it feel like spring, and there was a woman walking her dog down the sidewalk. The elf's purple eyes followed them, and by the time the brown dog disappeared from view, her hand had already released

me. Both her hands were pressed against the window, and she murmured as if speaking to herself.

“Japan really is a peaceful place. Not only are there no monsters around, everyone seems to have a stable life too...”

“It’s a nice, quiet country, for the most part. The Japanese tend to admire cultures from other countries, but, since we’re an island country, people from other places tend to envy our culture in turn.”

I thought it might have been a mistake to drive today, but it seemed to be working out. Seeing her calm down over time, I began thinking of how it gave me a good opportunity to describe the things going on around us. She’d gotten much more used to the car by the time we arrived at the restaurant, but she still let out a yelp when an electronic beep sounded upon closing the door.

We arrived at a Japanese-style restaurant, though it was unfortunately a franchise chain. I wanted to take her to a fancy place since it was her first visit, but, sadly, I didn’t make that kind of money.

The only reason I owned a condo was because my strange hobby was sleeping, so I prioritized my living conditions above all else. As such, I owned a high quality bed and air conditioning system.

Anyway, we ducked under the shop curtain and slid the door open, and a waitress came to greet us right away. As expected, she wore Japanese attire, and Marie looked around with great interest at everything, including the clean-looking interior.

“Put your shoes in this shoe cupboard. We can put ours next to each other.”

“Oh, okay... But won’t they get stolen? They’re very comfortable, you know. I’m worried about just leaving them here... Oh, that wooden board is the key...? I’m not too sure about this...”

It seemed she liked the sneakers I’d given her. She wasn’t a woman who was easily shaken, but it made me smile seeing her worriedly ask me over and over if our shoes wouldn’t get stolen. I couldn’t bring myself to apologize and tell her they were actually pretty cheap...

Speaking of, well, speaking, I realized I’d been talking to Marie in Elvish this

whole time. Worried about the waitress's reaction, I turned to face her again; sure enough, she was frozen in place without knowing what to do. But it was completely different from what I was expecting. The woman was standing with a dreamy expression, lost in Marie's wondrous beauty. Not surprising since she probably thought Marie was a fairy or something. I mean, Marie even had purple eyes.

"Umm, two please. This is my adorable niece visiting from out of the country. I'm hoping you could show her some Japanese hospitality."

"Y-Yes, of course!"

Her expression brightened as she replied energetically. She was quite pumped up. This really went to show how good beautiful people had it.

The waitress guided us to our table, which was a nice seat right next to the window. We had a view of the cherry blossoms as I'd hoped, and Marie seemed to forget to sit down, enamored in the picturesque scenery. This may be a chain restaurant, but it completely transformed in spring. There was a sense of presence to each cherry blossom tree as if they hoarded all the sunlight for themselves, and the entire view was filled with a vivid pink. The trees had bloomed nicely again this year.

I took a seat as I, too, admired the scenery. It might be because it was past lunchtime already, but it was quite the luxury to have this view all to ourselves. I thanked my company for letting me take the day off and took the menu in my hand.

"I'll order for us, Marie. Let's see... Tempura, sashimi... Ah, can't forget the steamed egg custard. And one dish that you recommend, please. Oh, and one fork."

"Thank you. Please enjoy your stay!"

The waitress smiled brightly at us. Marie was unable to understand her, but bowed in response with widened eyes. Then, Marie finally sat down in the seat opposite mine. She observed the sturdy wooden table and the sunken kotatsu seat, then look right at me.

"What was that lady saying to me just now?"

“She said, ‘Please enjoy your stay.’ She seemed to be very distracted by your cuteness.”

“There you go saying those things with that sleepy look on your face... But I’m surprised how no one seems to have their guard up, the workers and townspeople included. It seems like they’re not concerned at all...”

She directed her gaze out the window to the cherry blossoms again. I wondered how those colorful, pink cherry blossoms appeared in an elf’s eyes. Judging by the captivated look in hers, we might not have been so different after all.

“That’s because there are no monsters in this world. I also think it’s so calm here because it’s one of the friendliest island countries in the world. Since you’re here now, you may as well enjoy this world to the fullest, Marie.”

Marie stopped herself short of replying and seemed as if she was debating whether she should accept my gesture of kindness. But it was such a nice day today, and we were in middle of the most beautiful season of the year... I smiled at her to show her it was okay, and she finally nodded back.

“Then I will take you up on your kind offer. I do consider you one of the few humans I can trust.”

“But you know, there really aren’t as many bad people out there as you may think. Maybe you’re a little too cautious, Marie.”

She gave me a look that screamed at my perceived naiveté. But when it was coming from a cute girl like her, even being looked down on was somewhat nice. Now, I wasn’t some sort of pervert; it was more like, if I’m getting scolded, I’d rather it be by a cute girl.

Marie seemed to be curious about the kanji on the menu and began asking me questions while staring at the characters.

“Now then, would you mind explaining something for me? Where exactly is this, and why am I in Japan? I don’t understand any of the languages here, and I don’t remember anything after being attacked by the arkdragon. And why is it that you seem to be grown up all of a sudden?”

I guess it was about time for me to fill her in. Though, I didn’t really

understand much of what was going on either. I prefaced by saying some of it was just conjecture, then began explaining:

“Let’s start with this country: Japan. I’m almost positive you wouldn’t find it on any maps from your world. It’s a small island country, but it has a dramatic history that’s pretty cool when you really get into it.”

She listened to my words with an expression that was hard to tell if she was interested or not. The problem now was explaining the rest of her questions. I wasn’t confident I could clearly explain much of what was going on to her satisfaction.

“You know how you dream when you go to sleep? Have you ever dreamt about a place you’ve never visited before?”

“...Yes, but what of it?”

“From my perspective, whenever we hung out together, it all took place inside my dreams. But this time, I woke up with you. I thought it was just a dream all this time, but this morning I realized both worlds are real.”

Her round eyes met mine. The reason her fingers were still fidgeting with the menu must have been due to her active mind. A person’s brain and fingertips were somehow connected after all.

“Whenever I die or fall asleep in your world, I always wake up in this one. That might be why you ended up coming here with me this time. I always ventured alone, but that was the first time I died together with someone.”

“You mean...I died?”

Her expression became uncertain, likely because of my use of abstract concepts like dreams and reality. But at this very moment, even I couldn’t be so sure which was which, so it was probably safer to consider both of them as real.

“From what I gather, you’re not actually dead, Marie. I think if you sleep in this world, you’ll be able to go back to your own. We’ll just have to wait and see come night time.”

Marie made a noncommittal response while resting her chin on her hand. Most elves didn’t believe in an afterlife because it was a known fact that elves,

unlike humans, dissolved into the Spirit World after death. This was why it'd be easier for her to understand if I explained that our two worlds were both "reality."

"As for your last question about my age, I think time flows differently between Japan and the dream world. That, or I was only aging while dreaming in that world. Either way, there's no way for me to tell for sure at this point."

"Hmm, if what you've said so far is true, I think the latter is more likely. I've wondered about it before, but it seems you aged slower than the other humans. So, Kazuhiho, how old are you right now?"

I told her I was twenty-five, and her eyes widen. Apparently, she thought I looked younger.

"It's hard to tell how old humans are. At your age, it's not uncommon to have a full beard and several children. But I do think you look more reliable and attractive this way."

"Oh, uh, thanks... Anyway, I'm sorry that all I can offer for now is guesses. To be honest, I'm still surprised from all this myself."

Not only had my dream become reality, but a part of it appeared in my world. There probably wasn't a single person in the world that could fully explain what was going on. Luckily, it seemed Marie understood this, at least to a degree. I could only hypothesize from the results, but that seemed to be enough to stimulate her intelligent mind.

We decided to organize our thoughts on the matter later and discuss it all again tonight.

As we continued talking, the food finally arrived. I'd just finished telling Marie what I knew, so I'd take this next opportunity to introduce her to some Japanese food like sashimi, tempura, and miso soup.

"Oh, even the bowls are pretty! None of them are chipped at all... Ah, um, thank you."

"Marie says thank you," I translated for the waitress. "And she's happy to see how pretty and clean the bowls are."

The waitress smiled happily, bowed, then left us to eat. The sashimi, tempura, and other springtime food all looked so colorful and tasty.

Now was it just me, or did people enjoy compliments from foreigners more than those from other Japanese people? I did understand the waitress's reaction though, seeing Marie's face light as bright as it did. Her smile was like a blooming flower, and there was a certain charm to her that just warmed your heart.

"Okay, let's eat. If chopsticks are too hard, feel free to use a fork."

"Don't mind if I do. Now let's see..."

It seemed she'd given up on the chopsticks as soon as she saw me pick them up. She picked a shrimp tempura first, then put some tempura dipping sauce on it as per my advice. Her eyes widened as she bit into it, and her smile grew as she continued chewing.

"Mm, so sweet! There's a wonderful fragrance that seeps out with every bite! Oh! It's supposed to go with this brown stuff?"

The takikomi rice was made with in-season ingredients, and she thought that, too, was sweet and delicious. The tempura's crispy outer texture, the chewy rice, and all the other different-tasting dishes repeatedly got a round-eyed reaction out of her.

"My, there's so much food, but I could just keep eating and eating! There isn't much meat, but it's all so delicious. I'll have to refrain from trying the fish though, there's just no way I could eat it raw."

"Try it, it's good too. In fact, the fish is the main dish of this meal."

She gave me a look of obvious skepticism. Some people just couldn't eat fish, so I decided not to press it. Even some Japanese people couldn't stomach it, including my mother.

It seemed she did have some interest in it though. She gingerly stabbed a piece of red sashimi with her fork, dipped it in some soy sauce, then placed it into her mouth with a reluctant expression. A couple seconds of chewing, and her face immediately dissolved into a smile.

“Mmf, so sweet! This isn’t what fish tastes like where I come from. How does it taste so good here?”

“Mixing ingredients and cooking them all together can really bring out the taste of each dish, but in this case, I think it’s the flavor of the ingredients themselves. If you can handle fish, we should go have sushi some time. It’s a type of dish representative of this country’s cuisine, so I’m sure you’ll like it.”

“Ooh, I want to try it! Promise you’ll take me, Kazuhiho!”

I’d never seen Marie smile so cheerfully before. It was rare to see her like that in the other world, but I did admit this made it all the more special.

We ate our steamed egg custard and miso soup, then enjoyed the view of the cherry blossoms outside. Our stomachs were now full, and the pleasant warmth of the spring was beginning to make us sleepy. It felt like time spent in luxury, and Marie seemed to agree.

“We were only eating, but it felt so eventful. Say, are those beautiful flowers always blooming like that?”

“No, only once a year. You can only see them bloom around this time of year. What do you say we change our plans and go enjoy the scenery? The park is really beautiful this time of year with thousands of cherry blossom trees. You know, if you’re interested...”

It seemed I didn’t even need to ask since Marie’s face was brimming with interest and her hands excitedly clasped mine from across the table. She looked like a child who was eager to go to an amusement park or something.

And so, I led her by the hand and went to the counter to pay for the meal. As the waitress guided us to the front, Marie tugged on the sleeve of my shirt.

“Umm, how do you express gratitude in your language? I want to show my appreciation for such a sumptuous meal.”

“Oh, I think a simple ‘thank you’ should do.”

She repeated the words to herself under her breath a couple times before giving an awkward “tank, yoo,” but the waitress smiled warmly. I also mentally thanked the waitress for showing Marie some Japanese hospitality. Though, she

was an elf instead of a foreigner...but I guessed that'd still make her foreign to Japan.

Maybe Japan is quite the impartial place in that sense...

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It was the middle of a weekday, and I'd arrived at the park in Ueno with an elf who was very interested in cherry blossoms. A nearby riverbed might have worked too, but we might as well go somewhere we could enjoy a full view of them.

We exited the parking lot and found ourselves surrounded by cherry blossoms, and Marie began tottering around as she stepped out of the passenger's seat. I closed the passenger door and followed after her.

The rows of cherry blossom trees were as impressive as their reputation, and to see so many of them that could fill your entire vision was rare even for Japanese residents. It seemed they were trying to fill up the clear, blue skies. There were also many children running around joyfully in the warm sunlight.

"Ah, the weather's perfect. We may have come at the best possible timing."

I called out to Marie as she caught up to me, but she seemed to be a bit out of it. I stood there wondering why she wasn't responding as we continued walking. Then, she suddenly grabbed my elbow. I hid my slight surprise and waited for her to begin speaking.

"So these are cherry blossoms? They're amazing... There are so many spirits I've never seen before, it's making me lightheaded."

I'd almost forgotten she was a Spirit User. I'd also heard there were spirits for cherry blossoms, and I wondered if she'd been narrowing her eyes because she saw something different than humans. I followed her gaze to a flower petal drifting in the sunlight filtered through the foliage, and my thoughts turned toward a faintly sweet smell.

"Cherry blossoms are special in Japan, and everyone enjoys this time of year. You just came out of my dreams by chance, but I hope you enjoy our best season to the fullest. And also, welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf."

I was trying to get a reaction out of her, but she simply stared at me before breaking into a smile. Our steps felt somewhat lighter, and we slowly began walking along the rows of cherry blossom trees. They really were beautiful.

The trunks were black, giving off a good contrast to make the pink pop even more. The festiveness of the decorative lanterns was also exciting to see (or maybe all the excitement was from the person I was walking with). This would've been a very different picture if I were alone.

"I've never seen such beautiful flowers before. It's still a bit scary, like I'm dreaming right now." That was why, she said in a low whisper, she wanted to hold on to me as she was, and I certainly had no reason to refuse her.

It was quite warm for this time of year, and it seemed everything was in full bloom. It was probably thanks to her that we were lucky enough to be here.

"You know, I wouldn't have been able to see all this if I didn't take the day off work. It's hard to say whether Japan is an orderly country or not, but it is a beautiful place."

She nodded. She didn't know much about it yet, but she shared my appreciation for its beauty. But I suspected even I didn't know much about Japan. Just as I was surprised by this scenery, I'd only really seen it on TV and in magazines and visualizing my own version of it. Having walked around with her today, I felt like I finally got to truly see it.

She seemed to enjoy it as much as I did, and complimented its beauty over and over again. She let out a cheer upon seeing the eastern building known as the Five-Storied Pagoda, with its wooden, intricate design adorned in a backdrop of cherry blossoms. We walked around until evening, and by the time the smell of the food stalls stirred our hunger, she'd fully enjoyed the warmth of spring.

"You must be tired from all the walking. Why don't we take a seat on that bench?"

We bought a light meal at a food stall and sat on a bench that just opened up, relishing the view of falling cherry blossoms. The gently drifting petals were dreamy in a way, and the mouthfuls of soy sauce-flavored roasted corn was making us sleepy.

Eventually Marie became much quieter, and I looked over to find her sleeping peacefully. She'd been in high spirits all day, and must have been exhausted from all the excitement. Her body tilted to the side, and she leaned onto my shoulder. She was breathing softly, and seemed to be more comfortable than when I'd found her in my room. It honestly made me happy to be able to see her rest, and I couldn't help but mutter, "Rest well. If every day was like today, I think I'd like going out more often."

It was possibly my cowardly side that was the reason I didn't like to go outside. It wasn't so much the city, but I didn't like strangers looking at me. It just made me uncomfortable. I had to make a conscious effort to act normal when I was in public. I much preferred the dream world where I was free of judgmental eyes. But for some reason, all I felt now was a sense of peace.

With her warmth next to me, I absentmindedly gazed at the cherry blossoms in the silence.

The sun had set a good while ago by the time she woke up. I covered her up with my jacket, but she might have felt a chill now that the warm sunlight was gone.

The leaning elf slowly opened her mystical purple eyes, then looked at the night view of the cherry blossoms with fascination.

"Wow..."

This was when the lanterns really shone. They illuminated the walkways with an almost magical air to them, filling the area with a peach-colored light.

I wondered how the falling petals appeared in the elf's eyes. She was staring in fascination with a glimmer in her eyes and her mouth slightly open. It seemed she couldn't look away from that phantasmic sight as she let out a sigh with her head still resting on my shoulder.

"I could just gaze at it forever... Could my world have been this beautiful if there were no monsters?"

"Who knows? The scenery is different in every country. Besides, if there were no monsters, you might have had conflicts with other people. Even this country was once defeated by a bigger one."

Conquest was like an addicting drug: Once you had a taste of plundering the riches of other countries, it eventually became the norm. In that sense, Marie's world was standing on a precarious balance.

As I mulled over these thoughts that were unbefitting of our current locale, she whispered a question into my ear.

"Kazuhiho, what's going to happen if I can't go home?"

"I was thinking about that while you were resting. If you can't go back, maybe you could live with me and visit all sorts of places. This country's full of food and culture, like hot springs and castles. What would you think about that?"

I said it without putting too much thought into it, but she seemed to take it differently. Her cheeks grew more and more red, and I didn't notice right away that she'd pulled her hat down further over her face.

"That sounds fun," she said while still leaning on my shoulder. "I wouldn't mind that."

I felt strangely uplifted, and looked up to the cherry blossoms while the elf and I shared the warmth of our bodies with each other.

For some reason, the view looked different when I was with her. Maybe I was just imagining it, but it looked so much more peaceful and relaxing.



It had gotten dark, so we went home for the day. Marie removed her hat as soon as we got back to my room and shook her long ears. She had a cheerful, liberated expression as she stretched out her other limbs. Then she started walking around barefoot.

She understood her ears would draw a great deal of attention, so I was thankful she was willing to cooperate on that front. But since she didn't look remotely Japanese, she'd been drawing attention even with her ears hidden.

"Now we just need to find out if you can go back to your world. But do you want to take a bath first? I'm sure all that walking has had its toll on you, so it should be pretty refreshing."

"Oh? You even have a bath in your room?"

She followed me into the bathroom with wide, curious eyes. I turned on the switch, and she watched in amazement as the tub began filling with water.

But I, on the other hand, was feeling a bit lonely. If she were able to go back, we probably wouldn't get to spend time with each other like this again.

"Marie, if you do go back, do you think it'll be for good?"

"Huh...? Oh, why is there hot water shooting out of there? And, wait, I thought I saw you push that button... Don't tell me...you finally learned how to cast spells without incantations?"

"No, not exactly. Hot water comes out when you press this button. So wash your hair and body in here, then soak in the tub for as long as you want. But, back to what I was saying, when you go back..."

"Oh my, this is too much luxury! I'm not even a noble and I can bathe whenever I want? Are you sure this is okay? I hope this doesn't make me a depraved elf for indulging in such luxuries..."

Oh, she's not listening...

It seemed I'd underestimated her reaction to the bathtub and now was a bad time to bring up her leaving. She was staring at the tub with schoolgirl-ish glee; I wouldn't be able to get through to her like this. That was exactly why I was "Kazuhiho."

For now, I'd let her pick a scented bath water additive and left her to wash herself. There weren't any fan service elements here of course, but I was free to fantasize about whatever I wanted.

After a short while, I began hearing a cheerful humming coming from the bathroom. It was a strange feeling, since I'd never let anyone else use my bath before. Actually, the fact that anyone was here at all was a rare occurrence.

But I digress.

I couldn't ask her the important questions, though it was just as important to give her proper hospitality. I already bought her spare pajamas and underwear, so it was time for me to prepare a simple dinner.

An easy and delicious meal I always recommended was katsudon.

It didn't get much easier than buying pork, eggs, onions, and seasonings, then mixing them all together. All you really needed to be careful of was to avoid mixing the eggs too much and overcooking them. But even though it was nice and simple, I did have some time to waste while I waited for the rice to cook.

I was just throwing eggs into the frying pan as the bathroom door opened and a steamy-faced Marie stepped out. I glanced at the clock, indicating she'd enjoyed the bath for about thirty minutes. Her skin was so pale, and seeing her cheeks all flushed like a kid's was an adorable sight. She seemed to take a liking to the texture of the bath towel, and our eyes met just as she was taking a whiff of it.

"I'm done! That bath felt wonderful. See, my skin looks so pretty now!"

"Hmm... But Marie, you're always pretty. I can't really tell the difference to be honest."

"There you go saying those things with that same sleepy-looking expression again."

She hid her face with the towel and gave me a little glare. It must have been hot, because Marie was fanning her cheeks as she approached me.

"Oh, what smells so good? Don't tell me you're cooking something, Kazuhiho?"

“Yup. It’s almost done, so take a seat. Since you seem to be okay with soy sauce, I think you’ll like much of the cooking here.”

Marie peered in to see what I was cooking as I spoke, and her face loosened into a smile. Her guard seemed to be down after taking a bath because she didn’t notice one of her pajama buttons was undone, and I could see her rosy elven clea... Ahem, I-I shouldn’t be looking there...

I managed to bring myself under control, then scooped some rice into a bowl, followed by some cutlet with oozing eggs. Throughout this process, the elf stared with eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

“This is going to be delicious. I can just tell.”

“Why are you muttering like that...?”

It was kind of cute how she wrinkled her nose with each sniff. I loved that I’d been able to see her girly and childish sides ever since she came to this world. I doubted I’d have ever seen her like this in some ruins or a labyrinth back in hers.

I finished up the dish by garnishing it with whatever greens I had, and brought the bowl over to the waiting girl.

“Here you go. Let’s dig in at that table.”

“Okay!”

She always replied with such a cheery smile at times like this. I admired that smile as we moved to our chairs, then picked up chopsticks and a fork. I placed some green tea on the table, and our little dinner began.

“Itadakimasu.”

“E-Eatadakimaws...” She awkwardly repeated the customary pre-meal expression after me, then quickly began throwing food into her mouth.

Katsudon was a simple dish, but that was also part of the reason for its popularity. The cutlet soaked in the oozing eggs and spicy-sweet sauce was gushing with flavor as soon as she bit into it. Its flavor filled the elf’s mouth, and she furrowed her brow in surprise as she struggled a bit. More of the flavor burst out with every bite, and mixing it with rice wickedly enhanced its

sweetness with its high calorie count. Marie ate like a growing girl, and she couldn't help but break out into a happy grin.

"Mmm! So goooooood!"

"I'm glad you like it. Food doesn't taste quite as good in your world, seeing as there aren't many seasonings available."

"It's so delicious! This is definitely the best thing I've eaten all day. Nn, it's melting in my mouth!"

Ohh, I'd gotten the number one ranking for the day. That was quite the honor. This was the case with most cooking, but nothing beat the combination of good ingredients and freshness. I felt this was especially true in cases like gyoza. The simpler the dish, the more important those two elements became. Though, today's cutlet was rather cheap so I couldn't really talk big myself.

"You're easy to please, Marie. I can make something like this whenever you want. The reason I tend to bring bento to your world is because even the ingredients are a little iffy there."

"So that's why you always carried those in your bag... I get it now. If you're used to food like this, any other type of dish would taste rather bland. That reminds me, assuming we'll be testing if I can go back to my world later, we should try to figure out why you're able to bring food and drinks over."

I replied to her with a small grunt. Thinking it over, our worlds weren't completely separate, considering I was able to bring bento over there like she mentioned. She herself was also able to cross over to this side, so there must have been a reason.

"Was there anything you weren't able to bring over before?"

"Hmm... Well, I couldn't bring my watch or a flashlight when I tried. Oh, it's this thing that lights up."

She seemed to be accustomed to Japanese civilization after walking around town, so a mere flashlight wasn't enough to surprise her anymore. She mulled over what I told her as she chewed her food. One of her fingers tapped the table, which probably meant the gears were turning in her head.

“Maybe things related to your civilization or technology are a no-go. Bento and juice are probably just simple enough that they can get through.”

“That’s possible, but I couldn’t bring a pen or notebook like these either. They’re definitely not as high tech but they still didn’t transfer over.”

Bringing items with me didn’t involve some sort of advanced ritual. I only needed to leave them next to my pillow; I’d tried it many times already. Some of the few things I was able to bring over were...

“Food and drinks. Interesting...”

“You think so? I can’t really bring anything else, so I don’t think those would be too helpful.”

“But think about it: If only food and drinks are permitted, there must be someone managing these things. That probably means there’s a reason you were able to bring me here, and it’s likely there’s some role or meaning given to you too. Maybe you’ve been granted some sort of mission?”

“Huh...?” My mouth stayed agape as I froze in the middle of taking a bite of my cutlet. “Umm, I don’t understand... Like, a bento mission? But you already ate it all yesterday.”

“And it was very delicious... Ah, no, forget about the bento for now. Have you ever been asked by someone to do something?”

I did get what she was trying to say. I never thought about it, but I’d been enjoying my adventures with rules set by someone, saying I was able to go into a dream world and only bring over food and drinks. But of course, I’d never heard of such a mission. I told Marie as such, and she seemed to accept it right away.

“I’m not surprised. If you did remember being tasked with something like that, I’m sure you’d notice they were no ordinary dreams. Let me change the question then: Was there an event that enabled you to enter your dreams?”

“I’ve been playing in them since I was young, so I can’t remember. In fact, I actually thought it was normal until today.”

We both tilted our heads in deep thought. Our investigation quickly ran into a

dead end, and all our discussions ended up leading to an “I don’t remember” for an answer. It sounded like some politician’s response, but I couldn’t do anything to change that fact.

“Oh well, let me know if you do remember something. I’m sure this is something important.”

“Got it. I’ll be sure to tell you if I do.”

I told her that, but I wasn’t confident I ever would. I’d never be able to pinpoint such a memory in all my twenty-five years of living.

Moving on, I started putting away the now-empty dishes. I leaned forward on my elbows, and Marie’s purple eyes grew a bit wider as she noticed the change in my demeanor. Perhaps she saw something in my sleepy-looking eyes, because she brought her face closer, imitating me.

“In any case, we need to deal with the problem in front of us first. If we are able to get you back, what are we going to do after? Have you thought about what’s going to happen once we wake up?”

“What do you mean...? You say that as if there’s a big problem to deal with.”

She took a sip of her tea, then slowly moved her lips away from her cup. When she looked back at me, there was a look of realization in her eyes.

“I can’t believe I let myself get carried away and forget something so important!”

“Right. When we awaken in the dream, we’ll be in the same place we were before. Right inside the arkdragon’s den.”

This was the most important point. How exactly would we escape the dragon’s den alive? If we couldn’t figure that out, I could hardly say I’d gotten her home safe.

I put the notebook from earlier onto the table, and our secret meeting began.

Fortunately, we had multiple opportunities to figure it out. As long as we woke up on this side even if we died, we could try different approaches over several attempts. But I was sure the dragon would catch on to our methods and try to capture us eventually.

The notebook was filled with various branching possibilities, and each of them were marked with an “X” at the end of their paths. No matter what option we chose, this was a legendary-class dragon we were dealing with. If we were to survive, fighting wasn’t an option.

“So, I’ll have to decline the idea of taking a dragon egg as a hostage too. Even if we somehow manage to temporarily escape, it’s not going to let a couple humans who know its sleeping place live.”

“Agreed. If we aren’t careful, we’ll always have to watch our backs and I probably wouldn’t ever get any sleep. More importantly, I was hoping you could tell me what you’ve read about the arkdragon.”

After having a discussion for nearly an hour, we came to the conclusion that escape would be extremely difficult after all. So, to do that, I had to find out what I could about the enemy.

The girl tapped a finger on the wooden table, then directed her gaze at me.

“About that... I think I’ve read something like this before. For starters, it has a higher intellect than humans. It can generate a never-ending supply of magic simply by breathing. It has destroyed islands and erupted volcanoes in the past, all as a result of countless battles with demons and humans, and...”

I waved my hand to indicate that wasn’t the sort of information I’m looking for. I knew what I was capable of, and facing the dragon head-on with combat prowess wasn’t one of them.

“Do you know anything more like trivia or anecdotes that can tell me more about its character?”

“What? Character? What are you talking about? You expect a dragon to have personality?”

The elf’s eyebrows scrunched up in confusion at my words. But she kept writing with her pen, perhaps to gather all our thoughts or simply because she enjoyed the way it felt between her fingers.

“I don’t know what type of information you’re looking for, but I have heard its scales can be sold for an astonishing price.”

She tilted her head as if to ask whether that would do, and I motioned for her to continue. We just needed to start small, and we might end up discovering some key piece of information.

“It also has the ability to generate magic. It’s so powerful that any magical medium who uses it becomes famous and their feats are recorded in many pieces of literature. Anyone who ever manages to obtain one would be extremely wealthy as well. And...I’ve read it’s taken the shape of a human to enter the city before, but that probably isn’t true. There’s no way a commoner would be able to recognize an arkdragon.”

“Wait, I want to know more about that. If that’s true, there must’ve been a reason the arkdragon stayed there, right?”

It wouldn’t just go to a city for no reason. There must have been some object or information or even a fortune that couldn’t be obtained without going there.

But the elf let out a sigh. “Actually, they say it didn’t do anything. I’ve read that it spent a few days there then just disappeared. It was in Ozloi, the port town, I think.”

“Ozloi, huh... It’s a good thing I’ve traveled around in that world. I’ve actually visited there once. I’ll never forget the delicious taste of the barley malt liquor there. The tavern owner was really nice, and even let me drink despite me being underage.”

I thought back fondly to the memory, but the elf sitting in front of me seemed unhappy. Okay, maybe in a life-or-death situation—or rather, I guess in this case it was just my insomnia that was the problem—I shouldn’t be fantasizing about alcohol in the middle of an important meeting.

Wait a minute...

There was no discerning feature in that place except its commerce and good liquor. If the arkdragon visited and left without doing anything...

“Could it be that was the reason for the visit...?”

I voiced my question out loud and looked toward the refrigerator next to my kitchen. The elf’s eyebrows were furrowed in an odd shape from watching my actions.

In any case, it was getting late, and I decided to head to bed and give a shot at a first attempt.

Ahh, I completely forgot...

The thought lingered in my head as I just stood there, motionless. There we were, looking at the single bed under the indirect lighting from the downlight.

We were about to sleep together.

I had no intentions of trying any funny business, but, as a man, I couldn't stop such thoughts from popping into my head.

"Wow, it looks so comfortable!"

Meanwhile, Marie was full of innocent excitement as she shook the bed with her butt facing my direction. She moved the blankets aside to get under them, then let out an "Mmmm!" of delight. Then she turned her purple eyes toward me and said, "Come on, Kazuhiho," beckoning me toward her.

I'd never thought I'd see a beautiful elf girl holding her hand out toward me like that...

She urged me to hurry again, which made me give in and take her hand. Our fingers twined together, and as I got closer, I smelled a distinct feminine aroma.

Is this okay? It is, right? Don't let me down, me.

I cursed my pathetic sense of self-control as I got under the blankets. My face must have been beet red. Marie peered at me with a curious expression, but I couldn't possibly tell her it was from having her cute face next to mine.

"Now, it's time to start our experiment. Hmm, should I be holding onto you?"

"Yeah, probably. We were holding each other tightly when we were hit with the dragon's attack."

I felt my rational brain regaining control when she mentioned the word "experiment." Yes, this was just an experiment. Nothing more.

"Let's try to recreate our poses from that time. Come here, Marie."

Maybe I let myself feel a bit too at ease; it seemed that was the wrong thing to say.

Marie looked at my awaiting arm as if realizing something, and her face gradually turned more and more red. Her expression was nothing short of captivating, and we found each other staring into each other's eyes.

"...Okay." The elf's single reply was as cute as a blooming flower.

She slowly inched toward me, then placed her head next to mine. We embraced each other in our arms under the blankets, and, as our bodies pressed closer together, I could feel her slender frame and small protrusions on her body.

"So... warm..."

Her voice seemed to indicate she was already feeling sleepy. Her softly thumping heart sounded like a little bird. The blanket quickly grew warmer as our bodies exchanged heat, and even our breathing seemed to be in sync.

Eventually, my eyelids closed. Going to sleep much earlier than usual was probably because her drowsiness had infected me as well.

We were close enough for our foreheads to be touching as we quietly fell asleep. But I ended up never asking her the most important question of whether she would still continue seeing me. As I thought about that with slight regret, the apartment soon became filled with the sound of our sleep...

Chapter of Elf, Episode 3: Magi Drake

First came the feeling of drifting downward. Then I heard the sound of an elf breathing in her sleep. The dark apartment had become even darker, and the sensation of the soft, warm bed felt long forgotten. Instead, I felt a cold, hard sensation against my back as something rigid and sharp dug into it. I found myself in empty darkness, and noted aloud that my theory was right.

There were times when I'd woken up in a different spot from where I died, but that was only when I was in a place that would be stuck in an endless loop of death, like when I fell in a sea of magma. In cases where I woke up peacefully like this, it was usually in the same spot.

"Hmm, it may be true that someone is overseeing this place."

As I spoke, I noted just how rested I felt. We both yawned, then slowly got up on our feet.

"Well, uhh... I guess it's time to start our mission."

"I'm going to need you to get it together. Keep talking all sleepy like that, and you're going to make me lose all my motivation."

I received a disapproving comment from beside me, and a light spirit appeared shortly after. A robed elf appeared like a candle illuminating the darkness, and we smiled at each other despite the horrible situation we were in. It seemed we cleared the first of our problems at least.

"I'm glad you were able to get back safely. I'm really sorry for putting you through so much danger."

"It's all right, I had fun. The delicious food, cherry blossoms, and comfortable shoes... They were all wonderful. Thank you for that."

I didn't realize she was such a nice, straightforward girl, and I couldn't help but stare at her genuine smile. Even though it was only for a day, I was glad at having the chance to get to know Mariabelle for the enchanting woman she was.

But standing here like this was just asking to be found by the dragon. And,

sure enough, giant claws extended from the cliffs just below us, shaking the ground as they climbed their way up. Her obsidian eyes were full of rage, and black fire flickered in her mouth full of sharp fangs. The surrounding rocks melted as the flames touched them, and it seemed we were about to meet a similar fate.

Upon seeing us looking up to her while holding each other's hands, however, the arkdragon blinked, seemingly taken aback. Realizing this, I collected myself and spoke with the calmest voice I could muster.

"We're sorry for trespassing in your home. I only wanted to see your eggs, and I brought her along with me, albeit against her will. Could you please at least allow her to leave?"

My words could be understood by the dragon, but not Marie. I'd known of the "dragon guards" thanks to the lizardman we met as soon as we entered the ruins, and figured the arkdragon would understand the language of humanoid reptilians.

I'd also heard that dragons protecting their eggs acted based on powerful protective instincts. The question now was how to placate those instincts. We'd spent some time the night prior to think up a plan, but the most important thing we concluded was to show we weren't hostile. Then, we could take the arkdragon by surprise and calm her down. Luckily, our planning seemed to pay off, because her intimidating growl quieted down and the blazing flame began fizzing out. The obsidian eyes staring at us seemed to have an inquisitive look to them. I was secretly relieved to find Marie was right, and the dragon didn't seem to be just another heartless monster. To use the "secret weapon" for this mission, there was a fair bit of tact that would be required.

"It may not be much, but we hope this will help appease your anger."

With that, I produced a plain bottle of beer that could be found anywhere in Japan. If the stories were true, she may have an interest in barley-based alcohol.

Opening a bottle in front of a dragon was quite a strange sight. But considering our lives were on the line, there was no way we could burst into laughter right then. The only thing that should be bursting were the bubbles

from the beer bottle.

The dragon's large snout grew closer, then took a whiff. The beer loaded with malt smelled of alcohol with a faint bitterness to it. Perhaps it reminded the dragon of the port town, because she continued to breathe in the smell. Her eyes narrowed, and her breath seemed to become somewhat more mellow. Soon, a deep, guttural voice echoed through the caves.

"Hah, hah... Quite an interesting mortal you are, to speak the tongue of the lesser dragons and know of my interests. Not to mention I've found you here, unharmed, when I surely incinerated you just yesterday. Reveal the answers to these mysteries, and I will spare your lives. What say you?"

"Yes, gladly... Marie, she says she'll forgive us."

She must have been nervous despite her tough front, because her knees grew weak and she sat down on the floor. She then put her hands to her chest and let out a sigh of relief.

The dragon beckoned us with her enormous talons, and we descended into her den.

The bottom of the cave was surprisingly comprised of a smooth, rocky stretch that seemed to be well-polished. It's said she only appears once every 1,000 years during her spawning season, so the lizardmen may have been taking care of the place.

The dragon lowered her head to our level with her stomach flat against the ground. Before us was a face full of giant fangs. She held three black eggs, and we both let out a "whoaaa" in marvel of their size and obsidian luster.

"Hah, hah... Such peculiar mortals, to wish to see my eggs. You are quite the temerarious ones, but many have lost their lives from excessive curiosity. Do tread carefully from here on."

The area was very warm, much like the breath coming from the dragon's nostrils. The ground was also warm from geothermal heat, almost like a bedrock bath.

"Is she warming her eggs?" Marie spoke up. "The spirits here are quite active. Dragons can control spirits freely, much better than we ever could."

“Huh, I didn’t know that. Well, I still don’t even know what spirits are, to be honest...”

I couldn’t see them myself, but there were apparently countless spirits flying all around us.

The dragon deftly turned her egg around with the tip of her claw as her eyes turned toward Marie and I.

“Hmm, a resident of the dream world, you say? I’ve heard of such beings before from an acquaintance of mine. I assumed they were delirious, but... Hah, hah, it appears to be true.”

Oh right, I’d charged against a dragon for fun a few times before, but I couldn’t even land a single hit before being turned to ashes by this one, so I doubted they were mad at me.

“Yes, I...oh, and Mariabelle here, both are. Yesterday, we had such a bizarre experience as we went to a world known as Japan together.”

The dragon blinked curiously. The patterns on her obsidian body undulated as she breathed. The movement seemed to have a sense of regularity and peculiar beauty to it.

“Hmm, you are interesting indeed. It is quite boring while I wait for my eggs to hatch. And I have been wondering not just about that barley alcohol of yours, but also...that smell. Child of man, what is that you are hiding?”

“What? Noth... Ah!”

Come to think of it, I did smell a sweet, appetite-inducing aroma. I realized I knew what it was and opened the bag that had been left on the ground, releasing the fragrance into the air. The bento I’d packed for lunch seemed to have been warmed up by geothermal heat to the perfect temperature.

“Oh, is that the leftovers from last night’s katsudon?”

“Yeah, the one I left by my pillow... I’m sorry, this bento is the source of the smell. If it bothers you, I can get rid of it.”

“Hmm? No, I do not mind. It is not unpleasant in the slightest, but my nostrils are much too sensitive... Hrm... It is too difficult to speak in this form. As well,

the drink you brought as a token of apology will hardly moisten my tongue before it runs out.”

Speaking with a mouth as big as a car did seem quite tiring. It seemed the dragon was no longer cautious of us. It was only natural, considering there was no way we could even harm her. I didn’t know if they existed in this world, but I’d rather leave all that serious slaying stuff to heroes and the like.

The dragon called out with a strangely high-pitched voice and began speaking mysterious, hard-to-understand words. I had no idea what was being said because I could only understand the language of lesser dragons, but it sounded like: “Become humanoid do io namaff emokeb.”

“Dragon Magic?! It can’t be... I’ve never heard it in person before!”

It seemed the elf was still afraid, seeing as she clung onto my back as she spoke. I didn’t know much about magic myself, but...I wished she’d realize that robes are thin, so it didn’t do much to filter the sense of her body pressing against mine. I certainly wasn’t going to complain, but I wasn’t entirely used to girls, so my body just tensed up.

“Kazuhiho, you may not know this, but a high concentration of magic is being condensed right now. A mere mortal couldn’t dream of ever reaching magic of such heights... Look, it’s about to activate!”

I looked where she was directing my gaze and saw the dragon’s chest gleaming.

“That’s not attack magic, is it...?” I vaguely wondered to myself as something unbelievable unfolded before me.

It looked like the dragon spit out some shining, human-shaped object, but it quickly developed a skeleton, muscle fibers, and flesh, transforming into a woman’s body.

“What?! D-Did that person just get born right now?!”

“No, that’s a draconian! I’m not sure if you’re familiar with them, but they’re born by using a Dragon Core. I never would have guessed the legendary draconians truly existed!”

Ah, she was right, I really did have no idea what that was. Or maybe my brain stopped working because I was so enamored by the draconian's beauty.

A gorgeous woman with waist-length black hair had appeared before us. She was completely nude due to being born just moments ago, and I found myself gaping at her fit body, ample breasts, and the striking obsidian eyes looking back at me. Sorry to say, but compared to Marie's breasts, which were tightly pressed against me, hers were far more... Oh, now's not the time!

The only apparent differences between her and a human seemed to be the horns resembling a head ornament, spikes jutting out along her spine, and dragon-like tail. A crackling sound echoed out, and the beautiful woman was soon adorned in armor resembling the arkdragon's tough hide. The armor itself was shaped like a dress and had a complicated design allowing it to maintain its high defensive properties while sustaining mobility and range of motion.



The woman adjusted the armor to a proper fit, then turned to me and spoke. “Hmm, that should do it. It has been quite a while since I’ve birthed a form such as this. Tell me, do I appear strange from a human’s perspective?”

“Oh, uhh, not at all, you’re very beautiful.”

The arkdragon’s eyes widened for a moment as she laughed lightheartedly.

“Hah, hah, then I suppose there is no problem. Well, child of man, I will have that drink and treat of yours now.”

Her smile was ladylike, but had the intensity of a dragon behind it. Because of this, my spine went rigid and, with no other choice, I gave in to the dragon’s... *Wait, what?*

“Wait, do you mean my katsudon? But my cooking is far from worthy of being served to an arkdragon such as yourself.”

“Nh, you whelp! Of course I wouldn’t desire food such as... No, no. Ahem. *A sample.* I have never eaten human food before. Therefore, I wish to sample it.”

What? If she didn’t need to eat it, there was no need to sample it either. But she kept glancing at my bento with the same look in her eye that Marie had from last night.

Y-Yeah... If she wants it, I don’t really mind...

“Wh-What is she saying?” Marie, who had hidden behind me long ago, whispered into my ear.

Ah, maybe I shouldn’t tell her the dragon wanted the katsudon. Well, that *was* the truth, so there wasn’t much that could be done about that in the end.

As we whispered back and forth, the dragon seemed to mistake our conversation for a debate on whether or not to give her the bento. She suddenly had a flustered look on her face, then raised her index finger.

“H-Hm. Yes. I did not say you would go unrewarded. No, I would not presume such arrogance. How about I bestow one of my scales to you? Not one of the scales on the ground that has run out of magic, but one still on my body.”

“Oh, are you sure...? Marie’s been wanting one, so that would be fantastic.”

“Yes. It will grow back in no time. In any case, I will have the lizardmen clean my sleeping place once my eggs have hatched.”

The beautiful woman thrust out her hand with her palm up, as if to say the deal had been made. I couldn’t refuse, so I handed her the bento and the draconian smiled in response.

I’d found myself in a strange situation. There, in front of me, the dragon was sitting on the back leg of her true form’s remains and placing beer and a bento on the front leg.

How had we gotten to this point? I’d thought we were on a life-or-death mission until just recently. But I did prefer to not die, so I gladly served the arkdragon like a waiter. I poured the golden beer into a glass I’d brought with me, the arkdragon peering into it without blinking all the while. Despite all that she must have seen in the thousands of years she’s lived, the fine bubbles fizzing on the surface seemed to interest her greatly.

“Hmm, so this is the so-called glass of recent days. I see it allows one to enjoy this beautiful, golden view through the container.”

“Yes, it’s glass specifically for beer. I believe drinking it after taking a bite of the food is the best way to enjoy it.”

I was right to bring a fork in case Marie needed it. As a side note, it was strange that glassware and chopsticks would return to my pillow when I woke up, but that was something I’d have to look into later.

As advised, the dragon tossed the cutlet into her mouth first. It was nice and steamy from the residual heat of the ground, and juices full of umami seeped out of the fragrant pork meat. The dragon’s eyes widened immediately, and I watched speechless as the humanoid dragon’s tail slammed against the ground. She then let out loud “Mmmmmm!!!” writhed around for a bit, then began digging into the food at full speed.

“Hng! Nng! Good! So goooooood!”

Seeing a black-haired beauty stuff her face like that was quite the sight. The scene of her mealtime was far more intense than we imagined, and Marie and I could only stare without uttering a word.

As the dragon happily chewed her food, she finally remembered the main event. She looked at the bubbling beer glass and let out an audible gulp, her obsidian eyes glimmering with anticipation. Finally, the amber liquid was poured down the dragon's throat. The savory katsudon being washed down with the chilled beer made a fantastic combination. The bitter taste of barley did take some getting used to, but that was no issue for the arkdragon, considering her love for beer.

The bitter taste would quickly turn to delicious flavor, and you couldn't help but tilt the glass and drink heartily. The carbonation included from the brewing process made it all the more refreshing. If you let out a contented sigh, the aroma of would barley pass through your nose. This could be the reason why a beer tasted so good after a long day's work.

"Urrrgh. This is! H-Hm...not bad. A passing mark, I would say... Do all humans eat such treats as this?"

"Oh, no. The cooking was homemade, and the alcohol is from Japan. I don't think you'd find these things sold normally here."

Upon hearing my response, her nicely shaped eyebrows drooped sadly as she muttered, "A shame. I was considering conquering a human habitation..."

Th-That was close... I nearly got some settlement annihilated.

Well, I was still glad she seemed to like it.

Marie, who'd been watching the events unfold, asked me a question as I put a hand to my chest in relief.

"Did she like it? She must have, considering how good your cooking is. So, what were you discussing with the draconian earlier?"

"Oh, she said she's going to give us one of her scales as thanks. You've been wanting one, so I thought it'd be nice."

Marie's eyes widened in surprise, then she whispered, "A bento for a scale of the arkdragon?!"

From what I heard last time, a dragon's scale seemed to be extremely valuable. Though I personally didn't know much about that.

“It’s incredibly valuable. In fact, a mage would probably give everything they have to get their hands on one. A magical item that can supply you with magic can increase the limits of your capabilities, so people will pay as much as they can.”

“Yup, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

It was hard for me to visualize such a vague price when all I was interested in was traveling and seeing the sights. Maybe this was the result of having the mindset of, “I’d rather go around enjoying this fantasy world than dealing with other people.”

Clang!

A melancholy sound rang out. I turned to the source and found a draconian looking at an empty bento box, seemingly on the verge of tears.

Ah... That dragon was really easy to read when she was in humanoid form. It was making *me* sad just looking at her.

“It’s all gone...”

“Oh, I do have another one.”

The beauty whirled around to face me, then swiftly extended her hand out toward me. Suddenly, she seemed to realize something. She raised an eyebrow and picked up a rock from the ground.

“I will, of course, repay you appropriately. How about this rock? I admit I do not understand their worth, but humans seem to think highly of these.”

“Umm... Marie? Are you okay trading for that rock?”

The remaining bento was supposed to be Marie’s so I thought I’d ask for her input. I showed her the blue stone the draconian gave me, and Marie peered at it curiously.

“What is this blue rock... It looks like it changed to this color. No, it’s more like... something seeped into and solidified inside it... Kazuhiho, could you ask her what this is?”

“Excuse me, what is this rock?”

“A rock that has been soaked in my blood. As you know, I have laid my eggs. The blood from then has since been absorbed into the surrounding rocks.”

Huh, so dragons have blue blood...

Hardened blood, or a katsudon. I had no idea which was worth more. I asked Marie for her input again, and, for some reason, she became expressionless and very still.

“Huh? Marie? What’s wrong?”

“...ly...”

“Come again?”

“G-Give her the bento for that rock. Quickly...”

Marie’s eyes gleamed eerily. Unable to refuse her intense, somewhat scary pressure, I nodded enthusiastically and told the draconian we would take her offer. The dragon’s face lit up with a brilliant smile in response.

“Yes, yes! I knew you two would understand! We have a deal then!”

As I handed her the other bento, the draconian embraced it against her ample breasts as if it were a gift from a lover, then gave it a tender kiss. Immediately after, she demonstrated her far-from-ladylike appetite as she devoured it, and I was again taken aback by the extreme difference from her outward appearance.

I was admiring how intense a dragon’s mealtime was when I heard Marie mumbling something to herself.

“Dragon’s... Dragon’s blood... Dragon’s blood...for a bento...”

She was staring at the rock she’d received with a blank expression on her face.

Uhh... Yeah, she has a weird intensity of her own, I thought to myself.

And so our mission was complete, though I had no idea we would end up with gifts of dragon blood and a dragon scale instead of running for our lives.

“Child of man, you are welcome to return. And next time, you will bring more of this ‘bento.’ Three...no, four of them,” the arkdragon told me as the iron

gratings were opened. Her eyes were full of intellect, despite her rather silly comments...but I decided not to dwell on that too much.

“Then I’ll see you again. Thank you for your hospitality.”

I waved goodbye, and our meeting with the dragon came to an end. But as we left the ruins, I noticed Marie was staggering around haphazardly.

“What’s wrong? Are you hungry? Hold on to my hand, I’m afraid you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Yes, thank you...”

She took my hand without hesitation. It was like we were lovers, and I couldn’t help but feel happy about it. I was thinking about how it was a bit of a shame that we were the same height in this world unlike in Japan, when Marie spoke to me in a quiet voice.

“They say dragon’s blood can cure any illness... This and the scale are so valuable that I don’t know what to do...”

“I-I see... Then maybe you should just sell it somewhere or share it with some sick person.”

“...That’s the problem.” Marie shook her head. “They’re both worth a fortune, but people will definitely raise questions about how I acquired them. It would be impossible to keep it a secret. That’s just how valuable they are.”

She seemed incredibly troubled for someone who had just obtained objects of such value. I thought it was strange, and looked up to the ruins in the darkness. Then the answer hit me.

“Oh, I get it... Then people will find out about the magi drake’s sleeping place.”

Marie nodded.

I heard magi drakes only appear once every 1,000 years, when it’s time to lay their eggs. Someone powerful could see this as their opportunity to attack. But this was the legendary arkdragon we were talking about; anyone who challenged her definitely wouldn’t go home unscathed. But would she be able to fight and protect her eggs at the same time...?

“Ah, so that’s it. I finally understand why this place was reduced to ruins.”

“Hm...?”

I must have piqued her curiosity, because her eyes turned toward me.

“Once every 1,000 years, the arkdragon lays her eggs. The people of these ruins must have tried to get their hands on them then.”

“So the persistent dragon pursued them down to their underground city, the residents fled, and she’s stayed there since... It would normally be eerie to think about, but considering the city was wiped out 1,000 years ago, it all lines up.”

Something I said must have helped her make up her mind about the dragon’s gifts, because she suddenly seemed to regain her usual demeanor. I watched in confusion as she unclasped my bag and put the items inside.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll decide what to do with this item after the magi drakes are grown and leave their nest. And it’s definitely safer for you to hold on to it.”

“What? I hope I don’t lose it...”

Marie giggled, then hugged my arm. Compared to when we were in Japan, however, her breasts were pressing against me at a much higher position.

“If it happens, it happens. Don’t worry, I wouldn’t get angry at you. Some day, we could brag in some pub and say: ‘We’ve met the legendary arkdragon before.’”

“Hmm, but all we did was watch her eat katsudon... Well, I guess we could at least brag to the kids.”

Her smiling face froze with my comment, then her face turned red. I had no idea why she reacted that way, but I thought she looked very attractive.

By the time we’d gotten outside, in each other’s arms no less, the sun was already beginning to set. Then our stomachs growled audibly, and I realized we hadn’t eaten anything all day.

“Why don’t we go to Sissle? They’re well known for their light meals. So much so that you could eat as much as you want and never get full.”

“Yeah, that might be nice once in a while. Oh, what about lodging for the

night? I'll be going back to Japan, but don't you need to worry about where to stay?"

I peered over at her face as we walked toward the town. There was something I couldn't ask her the previous night...

Will this be goodbye?

I spoke to her casually, but I was actually feeling quite nervous. But the elf girl's ears perked up as she laughed cheerfully.

"No, I don't need to worry about that either. I'm going to your country with you after all. And just like you promised in the beginning, I'll have you teach me your language. I mean Japanese, of course."

I was taken by surprise, but a part of me expected it too. For some reason, I had a feeling we would be spending much more time together. For example, I'd come home from work and an adorable elf would be waiting for me, making some bento. Then we'd depart to another world together. Wouldn't that be a wonderful life?

A grin spread across my face as we walked toward Sissle, but Marie had a perplexed expression while she bombarded me with questions. Before we knew it (possibly because my footsteps felt so light), we'd arrived at our destination much earlier than expected.

Chapter of Magic Stone: Prologue

One night...

A child of the Neko tribe returned to his underground home. It was too dark to even see the moon, but, to a half-beast like him, it may as well have been the middle of the day. Sure enough, hanging from his waist was an entire bird. Its feathers had been plucked clean as soon as he caught it of course.

The Neko tribe was incredibly weak as a species. They didn't stand a chance against monsters, and they absolutely avoided humans. That was why they circled around areas far from their home before finally returning to their hidden cave. If a predator discovered their home, it would certainly cause grave consequences.

"Oh, you're back. That's a nice bird you've got there."

As the boy entered the cave and walked into the hall, his grandfather greeted him with a smile. The child laughed happily as his grandfather praised him and pat his head.

Their skeletal structures were too similar to humans to describe them as bipedal cats, and they were too animalistic to describe them as humans with fur. Nimbleness was crucial when it comes to hunting, so even an adult was about the size of a human child.

They meowed as they rubbed their faces against each other and exchanged scents, then began preparing for dinner. They cherished their peaceful, uneventful life, which was what they'd always fought to protect.

But that night, their life was about to come crumbling down around them...

As they sat surrounded in the glow of broken lanterns after their meal, the grandfather produced a single rock from his bag. That object was the most wondrous thing he'd ever seen. The rock glimmered in fascinating colors as light reflected off it, and the child let out a "wow" in awe.

He'd also had wine for the first time in half a year, so his mood was particularly good that night.

“Well now, why don’t I tell you of the olden days before we go to bed. This is our story that’s been passed down through the generations.”

The child still had a mouthful of bird meat as he peered into the elder’s outstretched hand, and his eyes glittered as he noticed the large object sitting there. It wasn’t very neatly cut for a jewel, but, depending on the angle, one could see all the way through it. There was something distinctly ancient about it as his grandfather said, and he couldn’t help but touch it with his little clawed paw. Then, the spot he touched glowed faintly. Seeing this, his grandfather’s mood improved further, and the elderly man laughed with a face full of wrinkles.

“Ohoho, it seems the rock likes you. Yes, our people once handled what’s known as a Magic Stone at Ujah Peak. This was hundreds of years ago.”

“Magic Stone... Hundreds of years ago...?”

The child recognized a hint of bitterness in his grandfather’s voice and looked up. Before proceeding with the story, the grandfather pushed the Magic Stone with a furry paw to change its angle. Bluish-white lights were scattered all around the cave, like stars in a night sky. The unbelievable sight made the furs on the child’s body stand up in surprise. But as he watched in amazement, his puffed up tail eventually began drooping.

“This Magic Stone is particularly special. And, sadly, it’s also the very one that led to the demise of our village...”

The child nuzzled up to his grandfather upon hearing the disquieting words, as he always did whenever he was scared. His little heart finally seemed to calm down after having his head pat.

“Legends say a monster awakened because this was discovered. Our ancestors were scattered, driven out of their homes, and humans aimed to take the few remaining Magic Stones they had.”

The reason the catastrophe occurred was still unknown. However, it was said that the ancestors had discovered the Magic Stones deep underground and took them home. Fortunately, the monster wouldn’t pursue them once they left Ujah Peak. Ever since, the Neko tribe had lived far from the land that was once their safe haven, spending their days like they were still fleeing from

something.

The child couldn’t stop thinking of the folk tale, even as he lay in bed. His room, which was made of grass and fur twined tightly together, warmed up as soon as he curled up there, but the story he’d just heard was looping in his head.

Why did his grandfather still keep that Magic Stone? And just what exactly was it?

It gave off a radiance full of life, and was brimming with energy when he touched it. The desire to touch it again, as well as the horrifying image of the monster, kept him from drifting off to sleep.

His ancestors had met a terrible fate indeed... But that same fate was looming for them too. Survivors of the Neko tribe had a tendency to be targeted. Their rarity and timid nature made them valuable for trade, and some of them were suited to refining magical catalysts.

This child was quite suited indeed.

The cave was immediately engulfed in fire. Bandits had tracked down their home and laid down a trap. The Neko tribesmen were driven out by the smoke and easily captured. The Magic Stone that had been passed down over the generations fell into the bandits’ hands, and the aged grandfather was quickly disposed of.

It took ten minutes. There was no time to even shed a tear.

The child was bound in chains, representative of the tribe’s very fate...

Chapter of Magic Stone, Episode 1: It’s Gyoza, Ms. Elf

I heard that for English speakers, the Japanese language is one of the harder languages to learn. There have even been efforts by the Japanese to simplify the language over time, so it must have been even more difficult back then.

In any case, the view in my room had become quite interesting. And by my room, I meant my 1DK condo in Koto Ward, Tokyo, where an elf from a fantasy world was sitting on my bed.

Her long, white hair was always silky and damp even without applying any oils. Yet she barely did anything to take care of it, which made me wonder if humans and elves differed even down to their hair.

Her eyes were full of intelligence, and were a pale purple color like two amethysts. Anyone who saw her wake up would surely be enraptured, as if witnessing the moment a colorful flower bloomed.

“A-I-U-E-O...”

But in that moment, it seemed some of her charm was missing. Her hair was a bit frayed, and the thin, indoor clothing she wore was wrinkled all over. She wrote in her notebook as she listened to the sounds coming from the TV. Apparently, this was her way of studying Japanese by learning pronunciation and letters at the same time.

I watched her aggressive study method as I returned home from work, and loosened my suit’s tie.

“I’m home. I got some ground beef on sale, so I’ll make some gyoza. Do you want some alcohol, Marie?”

“Gyo, za? Hmm, I’m not sure. I actually get inebriated pretty easily. I’ll take something that’s easy to drink, if you don’t mind me spouting nonsensical things.”

I already had a feeling she’d be a lightweight...

Today was Friday, my favorite night of the week, so I was feeling pretty good. I put the ingredients I'd bought into the refrigerator, organizing the vegetable compartment as I thought about Marie's request.

Something that's easy to drink, huh...

I thought wine would be my best bet for alcohol that an elf from another world would be used to. White wine should go well with gyoza too, and I could even bring out some cheese.

Looking at her, she clearly seemed to be an underage, yet beautiful girl. But she was an elf who was over a hundred years old, which made her well over the legal drinking age...or at least I thought so.

Yeah, probably...

There were no special laws that applied only to elves, so there was no point in worrying about it.

As those thoughts crossed my mind, the elf in question spoke to me.

"Kazuhiho, I, am, Mariabelle."

I was taken aback at her unsteady Japanese. I nearly dropped my pack of ground beef, but caught it mid-air in a fluster. Seeing this, the elf had a satisfied grin on her face.

"Didn't you just start studying two days ago?! You've already started learning how to put sentences together?"

"No, I just learned lines that may come in handy first. My method is to learn a sentence first, then develop the language from there."

The girl's happy smile widened as my surprise grew. Her smile was more beautiful than the one I saw when I first met her, and it felt like a sword piercing through my heart when it caught me off guard. She, herself, probably didn't even realize just how powerful her smile could be.

"Develop it from there, huh? I guess I see where you're coming from. When I learn the language of another species, I begin by finding a starting point. Then, I sort of spread my knowledge outward and fill in the blanks from there."

I poured some white wine into my glass to sample, then headed into my

bedroom. The only thing dividing it from the kitchen was a low cabinet, so Marie noticed me right away and looked up.

“Oh, your clothes are so nice and gentlemanly. May I smell them?”

“What? You mean my suit? I was going to have you smell the wine... You have a bit of a smell fetish, don’t you, Marie?”

“How rude. There’s nothing strange about smelling things you aren’t familiar with. Now get over here so I can smell you.”

That sounded very much like a smell fetish to me...but I didn’t say that out loud. I walked over without any further protest, then she grabbed me by the fabric around my stomach and took a couple whiffs.

Hmm, being smelled by a pretty girl sure feels strange...

She buried her nose into my shirt, and I could feel the air on me as she breathed in and out. It tickled, but strangely, seeing her narrow her eyes contently didn’t make me feel bad at all.

“Thank you, I’m satisfied now. And... Right, the drink seems okay too. It doesn’t seem like there’s any additives in it either.”

“Oh, you mean the stuff they put in to hide the smell? I can’t stand those either. I’d rather just drink water than pay money for that.”

Marie nodded in agreement, then sat up from the bed. Together, we chose the collared, cherry-blossom-colored pajamas she wore, and she was quite fond of the fabric that didn’t irritate her skin. She’d been spending a lot of time laying around the apartment since.

I looked in the notebook on the bed, and it had various notes written inside, such as the alphabet and the greeting she said to me earlier. It seemed she wanted to learn all the basics first. I flipped through the pages and spoke some words I’d heard somewhere before.

“They say it takes over 2,000 hours to learn a language that’s drastically different from the ones you know. Which means that even if you talk for ten hours a day, it would take over 200 days to learn one language.”

“Hmm. Then I suppose that means it would take me about half as long.

Maybe even less if I really try. So I'll set my goal to be able to hold a conversation within two months."

I was surprised by her confidence, then I realized where it was coming from. She had me to speak Japanese with, and so long as we went to the dream world together, she'd be able to study while she slept. Add her intelligence to the mix, and it was definitely plausible.

But at the same time, there was a question that came to mind...

"I've been wondering, why do you want to learn Japanese? It's not going to be of any use in your world, and it's not like it'll get you any recognition from the Sorcerer's Guild."

"Because I think this country is so wonderful. It can be a bit noisy, but I love the beautiful scenery, peacefulness, delicious food, and how comfortable it is here. What more reason would I need to learn the native language here?"

I was glad to see she seemed to really like Japan. And if she really did learn the language, we'd be able to go out to movies or play games together. That sounded like a lot of fun, so I decided to do what I could to help her.

But as I began heading toward the kitchen, I froze. I'd just realized that her words meant she'd be living with me for at least two months. I could hardly contain the childish glee that was welling up inside me. It must have shown on my face, because she was staring right at me...but there was no way I was going to explain myself.

"A-Anyway, you must be tired. Why don't you take a bath? I'll have a nice meal ready for you by the time you get out."

"Hehe, thank you. I'm looking forward to this 'gyotzah' food you're making."

I wanted to correct her and say it was "gyoza," but I couldn't say anything when she bumped into me and hugged me around the waist.

Boy, she is one adorable elf...

Though in about 45 minutes, the elven beauty would be shouting, "Delicious!" and stomping her feet around.

While I prepared bentos for our adventure, Marie leaned on the back of a

chair with half her bottom hanging off the seat. She always had an intellectual vibe to her, but she seemed to be a bit above the clouds from the combination of tasty food and white wine. She sat there with a dreamy look on her face, then spoke to me with slightly slurred words.

“Hehe, that was delishious, Kazuhiho... I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart...”

“I’m glad it suited your elven palate. It’s inexpensive to make, so let me know if you ever want some again.”

The ingredients don’t cost much, but the only drawback was that it took a while to wrap the fillings with gyoza wrappers. But I was in a good mood because it was Friday, and it was fun seeing her reaction, so I didn’t mind the extra work.

“Whaaa, that was inespensive?! I just don’t understand this country’s food... But tha’s okay, I’m very happy with it.”

She was partially getting up, but her body slouched down again. She wore quite a satisfied look on her face. I could see her bellybutton peeking out of her disheveled pajamas, but I decided not to call her out on it because she’d just given me a compliment.

The slurred way she was talking due to the effect of the alcohol was actually pretty cute, and it made me want to add more drinks to our dinner menu from now on.

As I mulled over the thought, the girl turned her eyes toward me while resting her head on the back of the chair.

“Kazuhihooo... Is it true you’re level 72?”

“Yep, it’s still the same as when I told you before. I never actually asked you this, but what level are you, Marie?”

“...Twenty-seven... Listen, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. It’s just very hard to level up while learning both Spirit Magic and Sorcery. This makes me a class known as Spirit Sorceress, which can only be attained by a select few. I even heard my predecessor had already passed away long ago.”

Something I said must have bothered her, because her eyebrows were creased together. She was speaking pretty quickly now, but it almost sounded to me like she was making excuses.

“A Spirit Sorceress, huh. Sounds impressive. I could take you to a recommended hunting spot if you’d like. With your skill, I think you could raise your level by five or so within the first day.”

I posed this suggestion to her, but she didn’t reply for a while. As I waited for her response, I packed the leftovers from dinner into bento boxes and let them cool down. I began washing the dishes, and eventually I saw the elf getting up out of the corner of my eye.

“...You know, it took me about seventy years for me to get this level. Even if it’s you, I’ll be angry if you’re just saying that to mess with me.”

“But I just need to pull in mobs and let you finish them off, right? I thought it’d be easy if we started off with some monsters around level 40 or so.”

I thought that would be a simple task, but I might be wrong. I turned to the elf and tilted my head questioningly, and found her looking at me with slightly widened eyes.

Marie joyfully got under the blankets in the room dimly lit by the downlight, and I entered the bed after her. I understood how it’d look to an outsider, but we needed to do this to get to the other world.

Today, I had the additional duty of helping her level up. If I wasn’t able to do that, I’d probably be demoted to just a sleepy-looking guy that couldn’t keep his word.

But...I do admit there was probably no need for me to stare at her butt as she got into bed. I didn’t want to make excuses, but, as a man, I had no choice. Yeah, that was it.

“I’ll just put the bento here... Hmm, but it may smell a bit because it’s gyoza.”

“There’s no need to worry. We’ll only be thinking about how delicious it is when we’re eating it. Though it is a shame it won’t be as crispy as it was when it was freshly cooked.”

“That is a shame, but nothing can beat freshly cooked food. I did make some fried rice, which is still good when cold, so you can look forward to that.”

The girl smiled in the darkness. She must have really been looking forward to the bento, because she put her arm around my neck and scooched closer to me. I pulled her closer too, and we listened to each other’s heartbeats.

Maybe it was the warm body next to me, but I’d been falling asleep much faster as of late. I wondered if I’d still be able to sleep like this if she was ever gone...but that was probably just the cowardly part of me speaking.

I could hear her softly thumping heart and felt her slender arms and legs intertwine with mine under the blanket. My eyelids grew heavier from the comfort of her warm embrace.

Zzz...

As if sinking into water, my consciousness soon fell into a dream. Still embracing each other, we traveled deep into the world of dreams...or rather, to another world. All while hoping for another day full of fun and joy...

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Chirp chirp, chirp chip.

I groggily opened my eyes, and found a little bird hopping around a field of grass as if on a little stroll. It was a bird known as Lupil, and its main diet consisted of bugs found in trees. They weren’t that uncommon, but it was rare to see them up close because of their timid nature.

I reached into my pocket for some bread crumbs as usual, then scattered them toward the little visitor while still laying down. It gave me a quick *chirp* in thanks, then picked up a crumb with its beak and flew off.

Maybe it’s because we had so many drinks last night, but judging from the angle of the sun, it seemed like morning time was about to be over.

“What a cute bird... Weren’t you feeding a bird before too, Kazuhiho?”

I heard a whisper in my ear, so I rubbed my sleepy eyes and turned toward the source. There, I saw a pair of lips open up and yawn cutely. She was small in stature, but her lips were vibrant and attractive like a flower, and watching

them made my cheeks heat up.

That's right, we wake up in the same way we fall asleep...

I needed to keep my guard up or my heart would skip a beat in surprise. The sight of the elf in the morning was so beautiful it woke me right up.

I secretly took a deep breath, then replied to her.

"I tend to feed them whenever I see them nearby. But anyway, good morning, Marie. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, of course. Hehe, though we did just fall asleep on the other side."

I moved the brand-new blanket off us, then took her hand to stand up together. I looked around to find the grass fields stretching all around us, and there was a farm in the distance. There must be a village nearby.

"Oh yeah, we decided to sleep here when it became dark. I seem to be developing a habit of camping out from all the time I'm spending with you..."

"And to think, you used to laugh at me for it. Here, Marie, your drink and bento."

She thanked me as she took them in her hands, and we each put our meals into our bags. We'd repeated the process several times now, so it seemed we'd gotten used to the routine.

With our luggage neatly packed, I pulled out a somewhat simple map and spread it out in front of us. It was a cheap one that could be bought anywhere, so I didn't mind if it was slightly inaccurate.

"The hunting spot I mentioned earlier is over here. They're the ruins that are about two countries away, called Ujah Peak."

"Don't tell me you plan on having us walk there? That would take at least a week, even by carriage."

"No, I'll use a mobility skill. As you know, I travel all the time I'm pretty good at these things."

Put simply, my mobility skills could be divided into "long-range movement" and "short-range movement." Long-range movement allowed me to travel once

a day by chanting the god of travel's name to his monument. Then, the time it took to get to the destination would change depending on the distance there. Short-range movement traditionally allowed movement to a point within one's field of view, but I'd heavily modified it to suit my needs, so it wouldn't be much use this time around.

"Huh, you've been leveling quite the unusual set of skills. Most people would opt to train skills more suited to combat. I suppose people who spend all their time traveling tend to be strange in some way."

"But I think mobility-type abilities are pretty strong. It does seem to have a bad reputation because it's mostly acquired by traveling merchants though. The movement is restricted by weight, but we should be fine because you're so lightweight."

I stroked the bracelet on my wrist, and a status screen appeared before me. It was probably because of these game-like effects that I didn't think this could possibly be a world that actually existed somewhere. The residents here were used to it, but I had a feeling this whole world was being managed by some entity. I didn't question it since there wasn't much I could do to find out more, but I'd like to solve the mystery some day.

My focus for the day was to help the elf level up. With that thought, I reached my hand out to Marie, who was all ready to go.

"Okay. Let's go, Marie. Hold on tight."

"Yes, I'm ready. But I must say, I'm surprised you can cover the distance of two countries. You could probably use your skill to make so much money if you wanted to."

"That's okay, I'd prefer not to work in my dreams. Okay, here we go... Trayn, the Journey's Guide."

The moment I activated the skill, the scenery blurred into a vague image. The grass fields warped and became translucent, and the ground beneath us disappeared.

"Kyaaa!"

I heard Marie's high-pitched scream, and we fell down a layer to a world

underneath...

The world had darkened around us. I stood holding Marie sideways in my arms, and eventually landed on solid ground. The sudden descent must have scared her, because I could feel her trembling as she clutched onto me. I softly tapped her shoulder to let her know it was okay now.

She timidly raised her head, and I suspected our surroundings may surprise her. It was almost like a giant cave, but we were enveloped in complete darkness except for the occasional holes from which vegetation could be seen.

As I looked up to the sliver of blue sky that was still visible, our surroundings slowly began accelerating. The light up ahead flowed away behind us, and Marie followed it with her eyes.

Vooooooom...

The sensation of traveling through complete darkness with extreme speeds felt somewhat similar to riding a train in the subway. But seeing how Marie's hair was barely being rustled, it seemed the wind and acceleration was quite mild. She seemed to finally get accustomed to it as she loosened the tight grip of her fingers.



“Wow... Incredible... It’s pitch-black, but it feels as if we’re moving a city a minute. Do merchants see this scenery all the time?”

“I’m sure some of them do. It takes a long time to learn this skill, so they’d probably need to decide to become a traveling merchant at a young age.”

As I spoke, I put the flower I picked earlier into my inner shirt pocket. It was customary to offer a flower picked during one’s travels upon arriving to the monument, and I secretly found the practice enjoyable.

As I mentioned, those who decided to become a traveling merchant at a young age were very likely to learn this skill. But there were many who disliked traveling due to its strenuous nature. As a result, there were only a few who actually put the ability into practice.

Marie seemed to be out of it from the unusual sight, then finally seemed to realize she was being held up sideways. She whispered that she was fine now, so I finally lowered her to the black ground.

“Stay close, just in case. It seems we’re okay on the weight limit, but I don’t know what would happen if you stray too far from me. I usually travel alone after all.”

The elf nodded.

There was darkness all around us as we drifted at high speeds. Light occasionally filtered in from the outside, but immediately drifted back behind us with a *vooom!*

The girl seemed used to the sight already, and her robe wavered as she turned around.

“I never knew long distance movement was so useful. So, how long will it take us to get to the other side?”

“Hmm... With this distance, I’d say about twenty minutes. It varies a lot, and I hear there are some people who have spent about a year in here.”

She seemed a bit spooked by my comment. Gods tended to be fickle, so there wasn’t much you could do about that. But the round-eyed expression on her face was pretty hilarious, and I had to cover my mouth to hide my laugh.

“That’s nothing to laugh at... Though I do suppose we’re a special case. If something does happen, we could simply go back to Japan. There’s that phenomenon that changes our waking location if necessary too.”

“Exactly. Now, could you show me your status screen, Marie? I want to be efficient with our leveling.”

“I suppose, but promise not to tell anyone about it. You may not know this, but I have many rivals that I’m forced to deal with.”

The Sorcerer’s Guild apparently has a ranking system based on levels. With Marie’s valuable Spirit Sorceress class, she was sure to get plenty of negative attention from those around her. They must have based it on levels because they couldn’t beat her in importance or abilities. This also seemed to be the reason why she was always telling me how busy she was. But boy, the Sorcerer’s Guild sounded pretty scummy and scary. It made me glad I avoided settlements in general, and I mentally sighed in relief.

Marie stroked the accessory around her wrist, and a blue-white monitor appeared in the darkness. She was navigating the controls to grant me viewing permissions. The blurry light eventually turned into letters, allowing me to read Mariabelle’s abilities.

“Kazuhiho, I’d like to see your abilities too, if you don’t mind. I’ve never seen anyone who’s level 72 before, so I’m very curious. And, about forming a party...”

“Of course I don’t mind. Oh, but we don’t need to form a party. My experience gain was way more efficient while I was solo.”

“But aren’t we going to fight together? I couldn’t possibly do it by myself, and we wouldn’t even be able to chat through a mind link without forming a party.”

It’d probably be easier to teach her by showing than telling, so I held off on answering her for now and aligned our status screens side by side, comparing them.

“Advanced Chanting, Improve Accuracy, and Improve Memory, huh? Looks like you really are specialized for Spirit Magic and Sorcery. Oh, and once you level up, you should learn this skill called ‘Grand Experience.’ It’ll increase the

amount of experience you gain.”

“Hmm, but as I mentioned earlier, I have many rivals to compete with. Keep in mind I need to increase my abilities right away.”

“But if you come to a point where you don’t need it anymore, you can just reset it when you level up. I’ll leave the decision up to you, but that’s my recommendation.”

She still seemed hesitant but looked me in the eye for a moment, then nodded.

I was actually a bit excited to go leveling up with someone. I’d never played online games before, but I imagined this was what it must have felt like. Cooperating with each other, having discussions, and losing track of time in the game...

As I thought about it, Marie pointed at the status screen and looked at me with a questioning expression.

“Hey...what is this ‘Illusory Swordsman’ showing under your class? I’ve never heard of it before.”

“Oh, really? I guess it’s like...a swindler, kind of. It’s a bit unorthodox, but really fun.”

As soon as I replied, she burst into laughter. I could only stare blankly as she giggled while holding her stomach.

“Ahaha! What kind of vague class description is that? You always look so sleepy, so I thought it meant you fight while snoring in your sleep!”

“I was born with this face, you know... But I am technically in my dreams, so I can’t really say that’s wrong either.”

I played along with her, then we couldn’t hold it in any more and burst into a fit of laughter together.

Now, according to Marie, the advanced classes that stemmed from Knights were the most popular. Magic Knights and Holy Knights in particular tended to be in positions of importance, and there were countless applicants for the roles every year. But whether or not they’d be suited to those classes was a different

question altogether. Being a Knight didn't mean one would own land, but it allowed them to be employed by the kingdom, providing a steady source of income.

Due to their proficiency in coordinated attacks, they tended to shine in wars against monsters and humans alike. As for me, I avoided environments that would teach me those types of skills, so I may have leveled up quite strangely by their standards. I'd never even fought someone of the same level as me, so I didn't know how strong I was.

As for "Sorcerer" types like Marie, they lived to unveil the mysteries of ancient secret arts, and were often hired by the country in an effort to stay ahead of the game. When it came down to it, they were also the ones who boasted the highest firepower during a war.

"War... What a scary thought. I've joined in a few of them before, but now that I know this world is real, it'll be hard for me to participate again."

"I don't want to participate in a war either. If I was ever forced to, I would leave the Sorcerer's Guild."

I was slightly taken aback by that. Leaving the Sorcerer's Guild came with great risks. Any highly ranking individual was that much more conspicuous, and there would be an effort to prevent their secrets from leaking to other countries. She'd probably be able to resolve any such issues with money at her rank, but...

"Oh, I guess you have that dragon's scale if that happens, so you'll be okay."

"No, that would be a waste. In any case, what's this? 'Fishing Level 59'? And you have 'Speak Language' taking up one of your precious skill slots? You're not taking this world very seriously, are you?"

"Ah! Uhh, well, you see...that's actually one of my few hobbies... I can say with confidence that fishing is the best way to enjoy the great Mother Nature to the fullest. And languages is an important ability to widen your world."

Uh oh, I sounded like I was blubbering excuses now. But it was true that I'd just been playing around all this time, and I did feel a tinge of guilt when questioned about it. And, as expected, Marie gave me a look that said, "Men

really are stupid.”

I mean, I could remove the skills, but I couldn’t bring myself to. They really saved my butt in the past... but I guess now wasn’t the time for that. I decided to talk about more important matters, but not just because I wanted to change the subject from fishing.

“I know, why don’t we travel around Japan together? I have some consecutive days off next month because of this thing called Golden Week. It doesn’t have to be super fancy, but what do you say to a little domestic tour?”

“Oh, that sounds nice! But I’m still not very used to cars. I would be happy if we could keep it somewhere close.”

She had a point there. She’d barely spent any time in cars so far, and her first ride tired her out so much she fell asleep. It’d probably be better to go for a drive around the city, then pick a farther destination if there weren’t any problems.

But that left me with the issue of money. I was just a humble salaryman, so I couldn’t just go on vacation whenever I wanted. I told her as much because there was no reason for me to hide it, and Marie sighed.

“Aww... It’s a shame we can’t simply bring the money from this world over to Japan. If I could also bring magical tomes, that would have been the perfect way to study.”

Yikes, she was planning on studying even in her dreams? Even if it was possible, I’d think it was insane to bring work from my company over to this world.

Elves lived for a long time, so I thought they should just separate work from play and live a laid-back life. The money issue could be resolved if I advanced in my career, so there wasn’t much point on discussing that further. I spent the rest of the time helping Marie learn Japanese and trying to teach her the joys of fishing, but my efforts for the latter ended in failure.

I started to feel a rumble, signifying our destination was close. We closed our status screens and checked to make sure we didn’t leave any of our belongings behind. There was obviously no lost and found here, so anything we forgot

would probably be lost forever.

Ujah Peak, the ruins I recommend for leveling up, was about an hour's walk away now.

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The Ujah Peak Ruins...

This place was once a quarry. It had gained attention due to the fact that magical stones used for making magical items could be mined here. A fort was built and the surrounding area was secured to protect the yields from other countries. But for some reason, magic stones stopped being mineable there, and the ruins became progressively more dilapidated over 200 years. Those who visit this place can surely still feel the presence of the ores resting beneath the land, for magic stones never run out by their very nature.

Most people will light up with curiosity after hearing folklore such as that, and the elf was surely no exception. At least, that's what I thought...

"It's hot..."

That was her only response.

To be fair, the sunlight was coming down hard on us, and there was nothing but brownish-red, burnt rock, sand, and parts of the crumbled fortress around us. Beyond the haze of heat shimmering in the distant sands, there were pyramid-shaped mountains. We'd been walking toward them for around an hour, and her mood only seemed to be getting worse.

There was a divide in the tall mountain as if it had been cleaved with a giant kitchen knife, and we were heading straight for the hole there. Remnants of what seemed to be the fortress were scattered here and there, but the worthless ruins had been abandoned long ago.

Since she clearly wasn't enjoying the desert, I thought it'd be best to get through them as quickly as possible.

"There's an oasis beyond that divide up ahead. It should be much nicer once we get there. Try to endure it just a little longer, Marie."

"Yes... Of course... I will try my best to endure you right now."

Why did I feel like crying...?

I knew drab-looking places like this weren't popular with women, but I didn't realize she was this intolerant of the heat.

I see, so women and elves dislike extreme weather...

It made me worry about how she'd handle Japan's summer, though that was still several months away.

We continued walking on the rough sand with those troubled thoughts on my mind, then stepped foot into the ruins. We finally had shelter from the intense sunlight, and it seemed she was at last able to take a breather. The air carried by the wind was still as hot as ever, but there was now a sense of relief in her expression.

Maybe I was sort of hanging on her smile, but what could I do? Men are destined to have their lives swayed by the wills of women.

The elf must've been curious about the layout of the area that was sandwiched between two cliffs, because I looked over to find her looking around.

"It looked like a mountain from afar, but this place is very different from the inside."

"Yeah, I hear this place was basically a coal mine, but it had its own unique culture. The remnants all over the place really make it feel like some sort of ruins."

It felt like we were starting to get used to the area, and we observed our surroundings as we began walking with lighter footsteps. The winding path led further beyond, and there was just enough clearance for several adults to walk side-by-side. This area seemed less weathered, and we were greeted with vestiges of civilization as we continued on.

"There's someone's home, and even an altar here. It looks like this wasn't just a quarry, but people actually lived here for a long time. So can magic stones still be obtained here? I'm curious about them now that I know they can be used to refine magical items," the elf inquired as she put her hands together at the altar. But all I could do was tilt my head questioningly.

If there was news that magic stones could still be found here, this place would surely be filled with those who wanted to get their hands on them. The country that owns these ruins even released it for adventurers to freely enter. It seemed to me the country was banking on the slim chance of someone discovering magic stones for them.

“But maybe there really is something here. Maybe I’m imagining it, but I just have this feeling. Our goal for today is to raise your level, but would you be interested in staying a couple nights to investigate?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so. I never realized how important climate is. Personally, I’m more concerned about getting dried up than finding some ores.”

Yeah, I had to agree with that. I was pretty insensitive to pain in this world because it was a dream, and I wasn’t actually taking damage in reality. But hunger and thirst were a different matter, and they could be extremely troublesome. Just as eating in this world filled my actual stomach, being hungry here would obviously make me hungry on the other side. That was one of the reasons I avoided areas that became dangerous over an extended stay, like deserts.

“But up ahead, there’s the oasis I mentioned earli—”

I stopped before I could finish my sentence. In that moment, I sensed what felt like multiple pairs of eyes staring at us. It was the stare of a hunter eyeing and looking down on their prey. I heard hushed whispers and the faint sound of clinking metal, but they stayed still, perhaps waiting for the right time.

I let out a soft breath just quietly enough so Marie couldn’t hear.

Bandits were common everywhere, and I’d dealt with plenty of them ever since I was young. At first, I played their game and begged for my life, but there was just no end to them. I eventually decided to just run away from them, and by now I’d mastered the art of vanishing like mist as soon as they showed up.

Oddly enough, the people who appeared in these hunting spots were always high level, which meant they shouldn’t be easy targets.

“Is something wrong, Kazuhiho? Maybe it’s the lighting, but you look a little scary right now.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

It seemed I had a rigid expression from focusing so much on sharpening my senses. Marie squished my forehead with her finger, which actually felt pretty nice.

Because of the unforgiving heat and lack of anything like an underground labyrinth, the Ujah Peak Ruins I knew was fairly deserted except for the hunting area. Could it be that it had changed since the last time I was here?

In any case, it wasn’t like I was worried. I was sure I could get us out of any trouble coming our way, so I decided to proceed with helping Marie level up for now. Besides, I’d already used Trayn, the Journey’s Guide for the day, so it’s not like I could have used it to go back.

I decided to forget about it and change the subject.

“So, Marie, how does your Spirit Sorcery differ from normal magic?”

“Well, let’s see... When you hear ‘sorcerer,’ you imagine someone shooting offensive magic out of a staff, right?”

I listened to her speak as we walked through the rough sand, and nodded along. Most sorcerers I’d encountered were pretty much just as she described. They’d mumble some incantation, then shoot out some fire or ice spell. Marie also had a staff, so I was sure she used some way to convert magic into damage.

“With Spirit Sorcery, I act as a medium to make pacts with certain spirits. This allows us to summon spirits, like this...”

A low rumbling noise could be heard, then a ball of fire appeared at her feet. A mouth suddenly emerged from it, then it writhed around as if in protest. Next, what seemed to be a short tail, hands, and feet grew out, forming the shape of a lizard.

“Oh, a fire lizard? Heh, it’s so cute and round.”

“Right. First, I formed a pact with the spirit, then I can transfer my magic to it...”

Marie lightly tapped the lizard’s head with her staff, then uttered an incantation in the language of spirits. The lizard was enveloped in a pale light,

and it let out a “graawr.” I looked at its forehead to find some sort of crest inscribed there.

“There, now I can release my magic with the fire lizard as a medium. The definitive difference between us and sorcerers is that we can stock magic preemptively. Apparently I have good compatibility with spirits, so depending on the amount of magic required, I could keep several of them at a time.”

I let out an impressed “oooh” and applauded her. Marie raised her head with a proud expression. I didn’t really notice it before, but I was beginning to find these childlike mannerisms of hers cute.

But now that I knew what Spirit Sorcery was, it did seem quite useful to be able to prepare magic beforehand. They could be activated without incantations with the proper set up, and if she could summon several of them, they could provide some reliable firepower as she leveled up. I’d always heard it was a valuable class, but now that I saw what they could do, it really made me realize how much potential they had.

I gave Marie a smile full of such expectations.

“Well now, Ms. Elf-With-a-Promising-Future, let’s raise your level as much as possible today.”

“Yes, I look forward to it, Kazuhiho.”

I was always one to only think about myself, but I was genuinely happy to be able to help her out. Thinking about it, no one ever really depended on me. It was also exciting to think just how much she could grow in the future.

But before we get to the hunting spot, there was something interesting I wanted to show her as a reward for enduring the hard trek there. It was a privilege reserved only for travelers.

As we turned along the road, it became brighter as if we were emerging out of a tunnel. Our destination was an open area the size of a schoolyard with sunlight reaching down thanks to the lack of a ceiling, except it wasn’t nearly as hot as it was before. A green oasis awaited us, and the elf let out cheerful cry.

“Ahh, it’s so cool and refreshing! I never expected something like this to be here!”

“Hehe, this is the oasis I was talking about. Look, there are even water veins in the walls. These overflow like mist and create vapor in the heat.”

I pointed at the moist, black walls, and a gentle breeze blew toward us. The elf jogged over, then basked in the mist and spread her arms gleefully. She seemed childlike in her joy, but anyone would be happy to be here after such a rigorous journey.

I walked up alongside her, then pointed directly above us. “This is the center area of the mountain, and there’s a gaping hole up there. Maybe this place was made by chance when someone in the quarry struck a water vein and all the water exploded out.”

“Nnh, it’s still sunny, but it’s nice and cool here. I didn’t realize how incredible a misty heat like this could feel. Maybe I could achieve something like this with water spirits?”

“Oh yeah, you may be able to make any place cooler if you could control vaporization.”

The elf showed me a truly haughty expression with a “hmph!”

I’d personally love for her to learn it, so she could make Japan’s summers more bearable. I told her as such, and she gave me a troubled look for some reason.

“About that... I still feel a wall between me and the spirits over in your world. There’s a sense of distance to them, as if I went back to when I was a child.”

“Oh, I get it. It’s probably different between here and there, just like in my case. You must be the equivalent of level 1 while you’re in Japan.”

It was nothing more than conjecture, and still left many questions unanswered. For example, why am I able to speak Elvish in both worlds? Though, since that was a simple matter of language, it may be entirely different from fantasy-like abilities.

“Man, if only I could use my long distance movement in Japan. Not only would I get to work quicker, I’d get to keep the comp for my commute too.”

Yeah, that comment would probably get me in trouble with the HR

department...

Anyway, since Marie could speak the language of spirits, I thought there'd be a chance she could control them even in Japan some day.

"Yes, I don't know if I can do it, but I'll try my best to communicate with the spirits over in Japan. It's not as if it's going to cost me anything."

But I had to admit, it was hard for me to imagine her controlling spirits in the middle of Koto Ward. I was tilting my head and struggling to do just that, when I felt her put her arm around mine. Her eyes were glimmering, and I could tell she wanted to go to the oasis full of palm trees.

"You're a bit strange. Just a little while ago, I was always cooped up in the study with my nose in a book. But lately, I've been out enjoying tons of food and scenery, and even seeing the culture from other worlds with my own eyes. I feel like I've been so fortunate lately."

"Same goes for me. Every day has been really fun, and I've been lucky to see so many sides of you."

In response, she made an expression that said she wasn't sure if she should be flattered or not. She then looked a bit troubled as she blushed a bit, but in the end nodded wordlessly.

As we continued on, I noticed the ground underfoot was now moist and much greener, forming the perfect walkway for Marie and me to stroll on hand-in-hand.

You could learn so much about Ujah Peak by walking along the trail. The oasis could be considered a place of rest and recreation, and civilization must have developed around this spot. Bits and pieces of former buildings could be seen surrounding the area, but they were now partially engulfed by plants and caked with moss. It seemed what was once civilization had turned to ruins, eventually transforming into a plain oasis.

I stepped onto some low plants and headed toward the plateau near the outer walls as the gentle breeze blew around us. I lead the girl by her hand, standing at a position where we could look down to the oasis.

"They even made buildings on the surrounding cliffs... Hey, how do you think

they climbed all the way up there? I don't see stairs anywhere."

"I heard they used to use ladders back then. Wood degrades faster than other materials, so only the buildings are left hanging here. If those wore out, they'd fall and take out the lower parts with them, so there are some sections that are cleanly missing in vertical strips up top."

The elf wiped her sweat and nodded in understanding.

The stone stairs were just barely in tact up until this point, but they were in pretty bad shape, so we had to climb with caution. But it was only a little more than two stories high and the ground below consisted of sand, so falling wouldn't be too big a deal.

"So, why aren't we supposed to go near the water in the oasis? It looks so pretty."

"Oh, because monsters appear from there. You still remember that we came here to level you up, right, Marie?"

A few seconds passed, then she nodded.

Yeah...she definitely forgot about that.

This was something anyone who visited this area should know already. The monsters spawned endlessly, so this spot became well-known as a place for farming experience.

"We're lucky there isn't any competition nearby, because I don't really want people to see my method. Anyway, wait on this plateau, okay? Shoot your magic when I give the signal."

"Wait a minute! You do know that I won't get any experience if I steal your kill without us forming a party, right?"

"Yeah, I know. That's why you need to wait for my signal. It'll be much quicker to just show you than explain."

Marie tilted her head questioningly.

The tropical-looking trees around us provided plenty of shade, so we could relax even away from the water. The climate sensitive elf seemed relieved by this and smiled at me.

“Well, off I go!”

“B-Be careful, Kazuhiho!”

She looked a little worried, but the monsters in the area were around level 40, far lower than my level 72. I waved my hand and told her it was all right, then hopped off the plateau. I slid down the rocks and headed toward the oasis carelessly, completely forgetting about the warning I’d mentioned moments before.

It was said monsters in this region stayed in hiding to wait for adventurers to feed on. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed like there was more to it than that at times. It felt like they attacked people who approached not because they were hungry, but to defend...

Vshaaa!

Just like that, an infamous Koopah appeared. The opponent that came into view along with a big splash of water was a round, bipedal, dinosaur-looking creature. The name Koopah wasn’t very intimidating, but the thick skull protecting its head was more than ten centimeters thick, and the sharp, jagged teeth growing out of its beak were simply horrifying. They were unfortunately not very intelligent, so I couldn’t enjoy a conversation with this particular monster.

“Level 42, huh... Not bad, I guess.”

It made a threatening croaking noise, then began kicking the sand as it advanced toward me. For a creature that was over two meters tall and weighed over 300 kilograms, it was surprisingly nimble. As for me, I was thankful for its speed, because that meant I could get back to the plateau where Marie was waiting for me all the quicker.

First, I needed to damage it just enough so it wouldn’t die...

Hmm, let’s try attacking it once.

I kicked the sand and swiftly flanked the monster, which coiled back in surprise. It immediately realized it was outclassed, but still turned to me in an attempt to bite me. The open beak was full of sharp little teeth, so one bite from that thing probably would’ve shredded my flesh.

“Hup!”

I took a swing with my blade to test the waters. It cleaved into the monster with one satisfying blow. My attack turned out to be fatal due to the level gap, and the monster waddled a few steps before perishing on the ground. Blood began pooling on the ground, then, after a few moments, the Koopah vanished in the typical monster-like fashion.

“Hmm, looks like I need to angle it a bit more. Just enough to expose the heart...”

I swung my sword in front of me, adjusting my form as I repeated the motion. Executing a perfect swing every time could be a pain, so I decided to activate my primary skill, “Reprise.” I had about twenty skill slots, and three of those were currently unused. And this was...

Vshaaa!

A sand column rose up just beside me, and another Koopah that was a bit bigger than the previous one appeared. I’d forgotten that they had a tendency to attack anyone standing still from underground. They chomped on any seemingly unsuspecting bystanders like me and tried dragging them underground, but...

“Oh, good timing. Hmm... maybe like this? Ya!”

I avoided the hard bones and sliced cleanly through its muscles. It seemed to turn out pretty good this time. The flesh was cut wide open, revealing its weak point inside...though it wasn’t a very pretty sight.

Reprise, the ability I activated earlier, was a skill that allowed me to repeat a certain action. I could memorize a certain attack pattern as I did earlier to perfectly replicate a previous attack.

“This is more of a beginner skill, but it’s pretty useful to have.”

I just liked how it let me level up even while zoning out. But I’d added a whole bunch of skill slots, so most people probably wouldn’t find it as... Oh, I should finish it off first so it didn’t needlessly suffer. I dealt a finishing blow to the Koopah’s heart, and it easily perished.

“Now that I’ve memorized the motion with Reprise... Hehe, it’s time for the leveling fest to begin.”

It was as if the Koopahs were drawn to my smile, because several more popped out from the sand. But they were akin to dishes being served on a conveyor belt, and the ensuing battle could hardly be called exciting.

I breathed out in a steady rhythm as I jogged across the sand. There are few things I hate more than running marathons in Japan, but my stamina was far greater in this world, so I didn’t mind running here.

I was heading toward the plateau where Marie was waiting, and I looked over my shoulder to confirm the Koopahs were still following me. I mentally praised them for still trailing after me, and almost wanted to give them a treat for doing so.

“Too bad for them, they’re getting the stick rather than the carrot.”

I suddenly stopped and turned around. I no longer ran out of breath as a level 72, and I easily weaved out of the way of the mouths full of teeth as I sliced their bodies with my blade. I cut them open with a satisfying *slash*, and the Koopahs fell with heavy thuds and rolled down the sandy ground.

“Hey, are you all right?!”

It seemed Marie wasn’t very accustomed to battle, and she was cautiously peering over the plateau. I waved to show her it was okay, then pointed at the incapacitated Koopah’s open wound with my sword.

“Aim here, Marie!”

“But I won’t get any experience since we’re not in a party together!”

“Just give it a try, trust me!”

“If you say so... Flame Spear!”

As she shouted the command, the fire lizard opened its mouth and launched a spear-shaped fire bolt at the dying Koopah. Like she’d pointed out, defeating the monster normally wouldn’t grant her any experience. The trick was for me to disappear right now as if I was never there to begin with.

“Well, see you later. Over the Road.”

In that moment, I activated my second primary skill, an ability that allowed me to instantaneously move myself to another location. I didn't feel any wind or sense of acceleration during the movement, so it seemed to work similarly to teleportation. However, the way the view changed in an instant could be nauseating until you got used to it.

"Oh, looks like it worked. Good."

As I thought, the Koopah's body emitted a faint, white light as soon as I moved far away from it. That was the light that indicated I exceeded the distance limit, and the monster was no longer in combat with me. I'd used the skill as a means to escape in the past and thought it may be useful for helping others level up, so I was glad to see my hunch seemed to be right.

This Over the Road skill's main purpose was to help one pass through particularly dangerous routes during travel. It allowed me to move to any spot within my field of view, so I could even bypass a giant boulder that may be blocking my path. I'd modified this skill to be castable in an instant, but the travel distance was limited to fifty meters as a trade-off. There were many other limitations to it, and I can't even wear most armor because of the strict weight limit restriction.

Fwooosh!

Marie's magic struck the Koopah's heart, and its interior was engulfed in a bright, red flame. The monster cried out as it perished, and its experience reward was wholly granted to Marie. And so, after removing myself from combat, I was free to go search for the next batch of fodder to the sound of monsters exploding in the background.

Efficiency was crucial when it came to leveling. Though, to be honest, I got sleepy when working in silence for long periods of time, so seeking efficiency must be my brain's attempt at keeping busy.

The sun was slowly beginning to set.

At first, Marie had been raising her staff, taking aim, and shouting "Flame Spear!" with a serious expression, but her voice was becoming quieter and quieter from the lack of challenge. After repeating the same situation over and over, she eventually squatted down in the shade, stifling yawns as she

periodically issued commands to her spirit without a word. It seemed she'd fully settled into the role of a conveyor belt operator.

There was a big difference in levels between Marie and the Koopahs to begin with. She was level 27, while the monsters' levels were in the 40's. She was defeating enemies that should be nearly twice as strong as her in one hit and reaping the experience rewards for herself, so I was able to frequently enjoy the level up music as she fought.

One by one, again and again, she finished off a monster with its heart exposed. She seemed bored out of her mind, but efficient leveling was typically repetitive and unexciting. Though, this method wouldn't be possible without something like my mobility skill, so maybe what we were doing wasn't very typical at all.

She was defeating a monster about once every minute as expected and leveled up after about twelve minutes. Twenty-four minutes later, she leveled up again. And another level thirty-six minutes after that. Forty-eight minutes later, then sixty-two minutes later... Eventually, she flashed a symbol of two hands forming an "X" at me from atop the plateau, indicating she'd run out of magic power.

Or, judging by her expression, maybe it meant she was too sleepy to go on any longer.

Whichever it was, I sheathed my sword and returned to the plateau to find an exhausted elf sitting there.

"Hey there. Looks like you gained exactly five levels, just as I planned."

I spoke to her in a cheerful tone, but she gave me a look as if she'd just eaten something bitter. I wasn't really expecting that, and stood there with a bewildered expression...

Chapter of Magic Stone, Episode 2: The Magic Stone's Light

The room was dark and muggy, with countless cracks in its stone walls. The cracks had been continuously degraded over time by the intense sunlight coming down from above and the humidity coming in from the oasis.

A bearded face peered through one of the many, mossy cracks in the wall. From there, he could see two kids having a meal together, and he couldn't help but sigh at their carelessness. It was as if they'd come just to have a picnic in middle of the fields that were aimed at advanced adventurers. But considering they were still alive, it was obvious they were no ordinary children.

The sun-tanned man observing them smelled of old sweat, and it was clear he hadn't wiped his body down in days. His companions were in a similar state, with the same keen looks in their eyes and dangerous air to them.

"The hell's with him?" the man spoke as he continued watching the two with his cold eyes. "He's so scrawny, but the kid's a monster."

"He has to be level 50...no, 60 or so. Koopahs are quick and tough, but the elf that's with him is a sorceress. She must be using a spell to lower their defense. Even then they're mowing those Koopahs down crazy fast."

The man who seemed to be the group's leader stroked his beard, deep in thought. Then his yellowish eyes focused on the two's belongings, and he activated Scavenger's Eyes. This was a skill that targeted objects, making it difficult to detect. In addition, users of this skill weren't very prevalent, so very few people had means of protecting against it. However, the skill only revealed the value of the targeted object.

Inside the bag were the extraordinarily valuable blood and scale of an arkdragon. The leader's eyes glinted at the treasures, then opened his sticky mouth.

"Oho, that's some juicy treasure in that little bag! Boys, get ready for action."

The group's excitement grew at those words. If the leader said so, then the

two were sure to be loaded with valuables.

Though the fact that the group of men were smiling confidently despite being outleveled was highly peculiar. One of those reasons was the chain they held in their hands. They yanked on it forcibly, and something resembling a small blanket came rolling out of the darkness. Then it moved, revealing a slender person wrapped in a robe. The person was far smaller than the rest of the group, and the thin limbs peeking out from under the robe were trembling in fear.

The leader approached the slender one, who turned away from him and curled up into a ball. This made their already small frame seem even smaller.

“Oh, come now... There’s no reason to be scared, right? This is a very important job for all of us. If we don’t earn coin, we’ll all starve to death. I mean, how many people have you killed already? What difference does another brat or two make?”

“Ah!”

The eyes staring out of the hood widened in horror, and the figure’s body continued trembling. The group of men laughed crudely at the sight of the robed one’s terror, then began thinking about how they’d spend the loot they’d soon obtain. They could get some new weapons, but they still had the numerous weapons they’d received in the past. So, they decided, it was about time they spent their money on something other than equipment.

It seemed those children were unaware of the fact that the ruins they were in were designated a danger zone by the country. There had been many reports of unresolved kidnappings and other cases, with numerous people who’d never returned from the oasis...

And today, new victims were about to be added to that list.

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It was lunch time, but there was a dark expression on Marie’s face. She always happily enjoyed her bento, but this time, there was an air of gloominess about her.

Did I do something to upset her?

I began sweating at the thought as I watched her, then she bitterly muttered, “Five levels in a little over three hours... And it took me years just to gain one level...”

“Yeah, um, congratulations. I had a feeling you could do it, and your spells were impressively fast and accurate.”

There was a bit of flattery in there, but it was also my honest sentiment. I’d spent many years in this world, but it was my first time witnessing Spirit Sorcery. In my opinion, she had an incredible amount of potential.

As expected, the ability to prepare an incantation beforehand to enable her to cast the spell as soon as battle began was a huge advantage. Her spells were also highly accurate, as her careful and thorough personality suggested, and she never missed a shot while fighting such a high number of monsters. She did have the disadvantage of having a slower leveling rate, but she basically had to level both Spirit Magic and Sorcery at the same time, so it was to be expected. But the amount of promise she was showing more than made up for it, so I’d definitely say she was a late bloomer.

The final, overall evaluation of the class was, “A sorcerer who can attack preemptively... Sounds pretty interesting.”

I was snapped out of those careless thoughts when her purple eyes glared at me, and I began sweating profusely. Her slightly puffed out cheeks were adorable, but there was also a strange sense of intensity to her.

“...What point was there in all those years I’ve spent until now?”

“B-But you still had to raise your skill levels separately, so your hard work paid off in that sense, right?”

I told her as much, but Marie still seemed discontent as she let out a “hmm...” She then let out a cute “hmph!” from her nose, and began speaking calmly as if she changed her mind.

“No, that’s not right. I should just tell you how I truly feel.”

Wh-What now? Was she angry about something? I watched her with my heart thumping, then the elf drew in a breath and began confessing.

“My colleagues at the Sorcerer’s Guild were always bragging about their levels, so it feels great to surpass them! I’ve been getting fed up with those good-for-nothings whose only talent was leveling! Well, unfortunately for them, I’ve now not only beaten them in ability, but in level as well!”

“O-Oh... That, uh, must have been rough...”

Marie poured out her frustrations with an intense look on her face, and boy, that sort of meritocracy sure seemed scary... It sounded like a nightmare to an ordinary person like me, and reminded me of the fiercely competitive university entrance exams.

The Spirit Sorceress seemed to be feeling better after confessing her honest feelings. She was much more cheerful after letting it all out, and we resumed our lunch with wry smiles.

“But it’s a shame we were separated for so long. I’ve been looking forward to talking with you as we level together. You’re fun to be with, you know?”

“Huh, am I? But, I feel the same way. I’ve never gone leveling with someone before, so I was actually feeling excited the whole time.”

I smiled as I told her so, and the elf’s expression became even happier. Her light purple eyes seemed to glimmer as she smiled at me with them, and it felt like everything around her seemed to grow brighter.

Marie’s beautiful eyes were looking into mine as she spoke again. “I may be a hindrance to you now, but one day, you’re not going to know what to do without me.”

Her shy smile seemed to be saying, “Just you watch!” and I had to admit it made my heart race. That smile made me wonder, and faintly hope, whether she would be staying with me forever.

Her cheeks were slightly pink as she showed a bit of her pearly teeth, and I couldn’t help but stare despite my age.

Geez, how can she be so ridiculously cute?

I was going through all sorts of emotions internally but managed to reply, “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

I had to at least look like a calm, collected adult.

And so, we spent some time resting and enjoying tea to help her recover her magic power. The amount of magic power one had varied by person, and Marie's in particular seemed to be on the higher end of the spectrum.

The most common methods of restoring magic were either to rest or use restoratives. But such items were expensive, and I liked spending time peacefully like this, so I doubted we would be using them much.

"Mmm, the wind feels nice. And the scenery is beautiful so long as there aren't any monsters around. It almost feels like we're here for a picnic."

"It's too bad gyoza and fried rice aren't very picnic-like foods."

"But they're delicious, which is all that matters. Even the rice is full of flavor, and I'd love to have it again some time."

A cool wind was blowing in from the oasis, and Marie seemed to be looking much better. I suspected her unusually irritated state earlier must have been affected by her depleted magic power to some degree.

"This would be a nice leveling spot if not for this heat. And, luckily, there's no one else around either."

"Yes, the view is nice, and I think I like deserts a bit more now. Although that sentiment may be completely reversed when we have to head back down that road."

I laughed in agreement to the fickle elf's comment.

At the same time, I realized that was what was different from my life up until recently. I didn't have to worry about anything when spending time alone, so I rarely ever laughed like that by myself. I looked up at the clear, blue sky, thinking how my life was beginning to change in that sense.

I dusted off my knees, then moved a bit closer to Marie.

"Okay, let's check your skills now... Now that it's level 2... Yup, you got a new skill slot. Why don't you equip this Grand Experience? It's a pretty rare skill, and I'm actually envious you're able to use it."

"Oh, maybe I will use that since I won't have to switch anything out. You

didn’t have any experience-gain-type skills, Kazuhiho?”

I wasn’t too knowledgeable about these things because I didn’t talk to people much, but I’d heard it wasn’t common for people who had mismatched skills like me to get access to it. Conversely, it was more likely to become learnable for specialists like Marie.

“Hmm, I’m not sure why that is, but maybe it’s only suited for certain types of people. In your case, you have many types of skills like fishing, languages, and mobility skills. My skills are all related to each other, so raising one of them can affect the others in some way. Maybe that’s why?”

I thought I understood...kinda?

In any case, the new skills should improve our efficiency even more, which was always welcome for a class that was hard to level like Spirit Sorceress. There was still some time before sun down, so we could probably get a few more levels in before then.

As I thought about it, I felt a chill go down my spine. The Intuition skill I’d leveled up to avoid ambushes from monsters was telling me someone was watching us with ill intentions. I immediately thought of the multiple pairs of eyes that I’d felt watching us when we first arrived.

That’s odd... I didn’t think they were much of a threat at the time.

I was already aware that some shady individuals were in hiding nearby. That was part of the reason why I wanted to continue leveling and close the gap in our power difference. I thought they’d eventually go away, but it seemed that didn’t quite go as planned.

Suddenly, I saw something glinting overhead.

“What is it, Kauhiho?”

“Over there. There’s someone over in those buildings...”

I looked up to find someone standing at the building near the middle of a cliff. Both of us stood still, brows furrowed, observing whoever it was.

It was hard to see because of the heat’s haze, but their skinny limbs were visible under the dirty cloth garb they were wearing.

As I watched, I noticed the chain around their hands and feet, and caught glimpses of fur that would suggest they were a half-beast.

“A half-beast child? And...are they holding a magical catalyst?” Marie uttered.

I squinted to find the child was indeed holding a stone in their hand. That must have been the thing I saw glinting earlier. But what was a child doing in a place like that?

We continued watching, when the child threw the stone into the air. The light grew even stronger, until...

Rumblerumblerumble...

A tremor echoed out from the bottom of the oasis, and as Marie and I huddled together, a hole slowly opened up in the ground before us. It formed into a cone-shaped pit, and something appeared to be emerging out from its depths.

Sand was blown into the air as a giant head became visible. The head alone must have been at least two meters, with numerous eyes lining the side of it. Its writhing body emerged soon after, and it coiled up like a snake as it sprayed sand all over the oasis.

Grrrk...

Grrrrrrk!

It opened its tentacle-ridden mouth and roared out loud. Sand flew into the air in a radial wave, and we felt a strong shock as it fully appeared from the pit.



“Ah!”

Its roar alone felt like we’d been punched in the head. Marie let out a cry, and I held her in my arms to protect her. The monster must have heard her, because all of its many eyes turned toward us at once. The sight was enough to make my hair stand on end, despite being a seasoned adventurer.

“It sees us!”

It weaved around as it approached us, crushing any trees along its path.

I couldn’t think of what to do. I’d already used up my long-range movement ability for the day, and the weight limit restricted me from using my short-range movement.

“Wait, I know! Marie, stay still!” Before she could answer, I held her tight in my arms and waited for the monster to get closer.

The massive creature was coming ever nearer and opened its mouth so wide it seemed like it would split apart. Then, immediately after, a turbid current of boiling sand was shot toward us. We were engulfed in the stream, and even if the heat was enough to melt through steel, I’d never let go of the girl in my arms.

It was the only way.

In order for us to get out of there alive, I had to embrace the elf and die with her, as we did when facing the arkdragon.

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Marie and I sat up in my bed. We stared at each other with sleep still in our eyes, simultaneously letting out sighs of relief. I thought, “Boy, I’m glad that was just a dream,” and hugged the slender body next to mine without thinking, when I heard a little “Eep!”

I did just wake up, but maybe I got a bit carried away. The warmth I could feel through the pajamas was just too comforting, and after staying still for a bit, the girl gently hugged me back.

Still in that position, Marie whispered into my ear, “That was insane... My heart is still pounding, as I’m sure you can tell.”

“Yeah, I have to admit I was surprised too. What in the world was that thing?”

I couldn’t tell since the dream had already ended, but those bandits surely had to have been looking all over for our corpses and belongings right about now. Too bad for them, we were a special case. Our belongings completely disappeared as soon as we transferred back to this world, otherwise our clothes and even underwear would be left on the ground each time.

“Oh, it’s six in the morning already.” The elf’s round, purple eyes looked up to the wall. “I suppose the timing was just right, in a way. Are you going to get ready for work now, Kazuhiho?”

Despite how real the dream felt, I unfortunately still had to go back to the realities of Japan. The girl understood this and reminded me of work, despite the craziness that had just happened in the dream world. However, I shook my head in response to her question.

“No, I have the day off since it’s Saturday. I could help you with your studies, or... Oh, why don’t we go out today? Let’s see, where’s a place you may enjoy...”

I moved the blanket and opened the curtains as I thought about it. It was beginning to get brighter outside, and our weekend in Japan was about to begin.

Chapter of Magic Stone, Episode 3: A Restful Weekend I avoided turning on the TV after waking up because I wanted to enjoy the afterglow from playing in my dreams for just a little bit longer.

I sat on a chair and relaxed as I sipped on a warm drink. With night to look forward to, I returned back to my normal daily life.

“Would you like a warm drink, Marie?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I feel like royalty, having drinks served to me in the morning.”

Like with the TV, my habits had been changing as of late. Nowadays, I woke up with an elf from a dream world next to me, who would reply to me whenever I spoke to her. It was as if my dreams had been extended, and even my life after waking up was becoming somewhat enjoyable. I spent less time yearning for night to come, and the only part of my routine to remain was my morning drink.

It was already quite bright outside, but it was still a bit too early to prepare breakfast. I got up from the bed to begin enjoying my day off, and decided to warm up some milk in the kitchen. It may be a bit childish, but I did love me some warm milk. I drank it every once in a while, but its simple yet delicious flavor surprised me sometimes.

I wondered whether an elf would prefer honey or sugar, but ended up going with the former. Fruits were just about the only sweets available in her world, and honey was a luxury item that was hard to obtain in large quantities. Considering this, I was sure she’d enjoy the honey and milk.

Ding! I took the two mugs out of the microwave and brought them to the bedroom—that is, I walked past the low cabinet dividing it from the kitchen. The elf was sitting on the edge of the bed, quietly observing the world outside.

The word “picturesque” came to mind, and it was perfectly fitting for the scene. The morning sun was shining through her white hair, each strand radiating like silverwork. Her pale skin and amethyst eyes made her seem like an art piece or fairy. It almost felt like talking to her now would ruin the picture-perfect sight, and I felt a small lump in my throat as I spoke.

“...Here. Be careful, it’s hot.”

“Oh, thank you. Sorry, I was a bit out of it.”

“It’s okay, we went through so much earlier. Drink some, it’ll help you relax.”

A gentle fragrance filled the air, and her purple eyes peered into the cup with curiosity. She took a tiny sip to taste, then broke into a cheerful smile.

“Oh! This faint sweetness is so tasty. It doesn’t have any odor either. What type of milk is this?”

“It’s cow milk. There isn’t much of it where you live, but I think it’ll become more common over time. I don’t think it’d taste just like this though.”

With that, I sat on the bed next to her. It seemed she was staring at the little birds on the balcony through the window. They chirped at each other, then flew away after making eye contact. The spring sky was reasonably clear, and it seemed to be a good day for an outing.

As I thought about it, the elf looked over at me.

“You said you have the day off, but does that mean you lost your source of income?”

“Uhh... Well, it’s not like contractual labor. It’s more like I’m in someone’s permanent employment. I get to take two days off every week.”

She seemed to be thinking about it, and I suspected that, in her mind, I had a master that was making me work. Though I supposed my boss and superiors were somewhat like that...I’d say it wasn’t quite the same. Maybe I’d teach her about Japan’s societal structure some time in the future.

She seemed to like the warm milk, and she happily continued taking little sips from her mug. I also took a sip, and it made me feel a little fancier than usual.

“What do you say we go to the library later? It’s basically an athenaeum that’s

open to the public. I'm sure it'll come in handy for studying Japanese too."

"Sure, I don't mind. But shouldn't we prioritize actually speaking the language?"

"Yes, but I thought if you found a book that interested you, it may help you learn faster."

The elf nodded and seemed to understand my reasoning.

In my case, the desire to converse with Marie was my motivation for learning Elvish...though it would've been a bit embarrassing to say to her face. But I know curiosity and interest are powerful things that can make learning much more efficient.

She was completely relaxed by the time she finished drinking her milk, and we decided to go out for breakfast soon after.

As soon as we left the condo, Marie stiffened slightly. Although her ears were hidden under her hat, people turned to stare at her otherworldly appearance. To top it off, those vehicles known as cars that she didn't quite understand were all over the streets. I was beginning to wonder if she'd be okay, when the girl slowly took a step forward.

"Oh, don't look so worried. I'm an elf who gets to spend time in the world of humans. I'll be okay so long as you're here with me."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now then, would you like to hold hands?"

Marie seemed slightly embarrassed, but nodded in response. There was a notable height difference, but I felt like there wasn't much distance between us at all. I felt her slender fingers as our hands intertwined, and she whispered, "Okay, let's go." That's all it took for my footsteps to become that much lighter.

"Yeah, let's go around and walk along the riverbed. We could drive there, but I'd rather enjoy my day off and go on a walk with you."

"My, aren't you a smooth talker. Do you always talk like that with... Hmm, no, you probably don't. You would probably just make them yawn with those sleepy-looking eyes of yours."

Did my face really look that sleepy? Though of course, I was far from capable

of smooth talking anyone, and would probably look ridiculous if I ever tried. It'd be cruel to expect such things from an ordinary Japanese guy like me.

We began seeing more trees along the way as it grew a bit darker outside. We continued walking a bit farther to find a promenade along the riverbed and walked through the carpark gantry onto the dirt path. There was a newer walkway that was better maintained, as this side just had flattened dirt. But to the elf, she still couldn't quite consider it to be "nature."

"Aw...they've even built things on the river. It's pretty, but the spirits here don't seem very energetic."

"Flood control is very important in this region. There used to be a ton of flooding incidents way back when. I heard it's been happening since the Edo period, so they've been working hard to keep the rivers under control for nearly 400 years."

Marie sighed with a look that was a mixture of surprise and exasperation. She then stared at the river again, her gaze moving from the top of the stream to the bottom. Her face looked as if she could see the brave souls who'd stood up to those floods in the past.

"So, you can see water spirits too, right? Do you know what they're saying right now?"

I leaned onto the fence next to Marie and asked her as the wind rustled her hair. However, she shook her head sideways and said, "I can't quite hear their voices. I think I need to interact with them more. I'm thinking of giving it a try when I have some time, but—"

She suddenly stopped for some reason, then stared at something in front of me. Thinking it odd, I turned around, then saw something that was a common sight in the downtown area.

There sat a cat, looking up at us from the base of a tree. Judging by the collar around its neck, it didn't seem to be a stray. It was probably just out enjoying a morning walk.

"Oh, a cat. Now that I think about it, there aren't any similar animals in the other world."

“Aww, so small! You’re called a ‘cat,’ are you?”

The cat meowed affectionately, then looked up at Marie with its round eyes. Its nose was light pink, and its fur seemed soft and fluffy, like a little chick covered in down feathers.

“Are you a boy? What’s your name?”

She seemed very much like the half-fairy elf she was as she slightly squinted her eyes and whispered quietly. Marie was much calmer than most girls my age, which was probably because she’d lived for over a hundred years.

“Hehe, so cute and tiny. Are there many of these cats around?”

“Yup. This is the downtown area, and a ton of people own cats around here. There are some strays here and there too, of course.”

Marie hadn’t noticed because she was looking at me, but the cat stretched its body, then decided to walk over to her. It leaned in toward her outstretched finger and took a sniff. She seemed a bit surprised as she realized what was going on, then slowly broke into a smile.

“Ahhh...”

“I think it’s giving you a greeting. Don’t touch it yet though. Cats will let you know when they want to be touched, so you need to wait.”

She wriggled a bit as the cat’s fur tickled her skin, then looked at the cat with a sparkle in her eyes. I think I heard that cats tended to like people with a calm demeanor and small stature. Marie was of a slighter build, so maybe she was more likely to be liked by them.

The cat eventually moved in to nudge its face against her fingertip. Marie looked up at me wordlessly, but her eyes said, “Well? Can I touch it now?!” I couldn’t help my lips from curling into a smile as I nodded in response.

“Okay cat, I’m going to touch you now... Ohh, so soft...”

As she gingerly stroked the cat, it pressed its face against her as if to demand more petting. She scratched the cat between its chin and collar with her slender fingers, to which it meowed in bliss. Its movement seemed to become much more relaxed, and it began purring audibly. The vibration caused by the purring

seemed to be overwhelming for her, and she leaned back to look up at me with wide-eyed glee. I'd never seen her purple eyes so round, and seeing her cheeks go pink with childlike excitement was almost too cute for me to handle.

The cat seemed to be getting comfortable, because it rolled over and revealed its stomach to Marie. Seeing this, her joyful smile grew into absolute elation.

"Hehe, you like being rubbed here, don't you? Mrooow."

An elf who was so engrossed with petting a cat was a peculiar sight. The image of Marie meowing like a child looped in my head. It was as if she wanted to destroy my cheeks from smiling so much.

I was at a loss for what to do. I tried so hard to contain myself, I was starting to quiver.

The cat eventually seemed to have enough, because it stood up and walked away with a final "mew." The elf watched it walk away with a disappointed look, and didn't stand back up until several minutes had passed.

"Ahhh... Did you see that? So, adorable!"

Her cheeks were red as she spoke with a joyful voice, and she ran her fingers up and down my arm as if she were still petting the cat. The ticklish sensation was too much, and I finally burst into laughter.

"Pfffaha! Yeah, that cat was adorable. That was great!"

"Right? Riiight? It was incredible! *Sigh...* I wonder if that cat will play with me again... Oh, let's come back here again, Kazuhiho!"

There was a look of determination on her face, as if she were taking on an important mission. She seemed proud of discovering this meeting place with the cat, and I nodded in response.

I took her hand, which was now warmer than earlier, and decided to keep walking down the promenade.

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There were many public facilities like libraries in this region, among them being a terrace where you could read books. But those places were more common in areas that were more recently developed, so they would've been a

little too far of a walk. I was only there today to find something Ms. Elf would enjoy, so I took her to a local hole-in-the-wall.

“Ah! I-I wasn’t surprised by the automatically opening doors or anything... I merely had a vocal reaction because the glass moved is all.”

I didn’t mind her surprise; I figured she would be.

Marie seemed to be pushing back against modern Japan or something...

She looked around several times before entering the library. There were few people inside since it had just opened for the day, but the building was nicely air conditioned. The walls were lined with arts and crafts made by children and flyers featuring different books. The elf girl stared at them with great interest, so I looked along with her. She seemed to be drawn by the colorful paper. She took a pink origami piece in her hand and let out a sound full of amazement.

“This ‘library’ place is far different from what I had imagined. I thought it would be darker and dustier. Sunlight is basically poison for books after all.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that. I’ve never been to athenaeums myself, but I think you’re right that leather and paper are sensitive to sunlight and heat.”

Books in the other world had to be written by hand, so they were naturally quite expensive. Only those with a social standing such as nobles and sorcerers were allowed to enter a facility similar to this. There were some stores that sold books to the general public in the cities there, but they were still far from being considered mainstream. The fact that libraries here seemed to be geared toward children had also greatly surprised her.

“Let’s check the directory first... Hmm, I think a book with tons of pictures would be good... Now, where’s the children’s section...”

“Your world must be quite advanced if children can read books.”

Right, there was no printing technology in her world. But you could say only valuable information was stored in their books as a trade-off. At least, I thought that was what she meant, but Marie shook her head.

“No, I’m talking about the literacy rate. Only about thirty percent of the population can read in my world, and books are usually only used by nobles and

us sorcerers.”

“Oh, that’s right. But not being able to read doesn’t really affect life over there, huh.”

It was a given for a sorceress like Marie to know how to read. Their mission was to unveil the mysteries of the secret arts, so deciphering those bundles of information was an elementary part of their role. As for nobles, they had a duty to learn so they didn’t get cheated by deceptive wording in contracts when managing money and properties. The general population didn’t have such important missions or jobs to do, and was more concerned with what to eat that day.

I supposed the only other type of reading people would need to do would be on their status screens. But even in those cases, they could simply have other adventurers or their guild teach them what each term meant. I doubted any of them found joy in the act of reading. This mentality could probably be flipped upside down if such a thing as manga existed in their world though...

“Okay, Marie, let’s head to the children’s section for now.”

“...Hold on just a minute. Do you intend on making me read a book written for children?”

“Ah, I just thought there may be something you’d like there. If there isn’t, we can walk past that section and keep looking around.”

She narrowed her purple eyes, and I realized I’d put her in a somewhat unhappy mood. I could tell she was apprehensive about looking at books for kids as a Spirit Sorceress.

In the end, I invited her to just check it out, and she followed me reluctantly.

As soon as we entered the reading room, a familiar sight entered my vision. Though it’d been some time since I’d been here, I’d visited the place often since I was in elementary school. The nostalgic sight and smells brought me back to those bygone days...

One thing I appreciated was that the receptionist greeted us without persistently staring at the elf girl. It was great knowing she was considerate of people’s personal space so they could come in to read peacefully.

“Huh, I recognize her...”

If I remembered correctly, I’d spoken to the same receptionist a few times in the past. But today was about Marie, so I decided to leave the catching up for later.

“Beautiful... So many colors...” Marie uttered with wonder as she walked between the bookshelves.

The rows of books all had colorful spines, and the elf looked at each one with a look full of curiosity.

Then, she froze. I turned to face her, and her purple eyes were locked on to a single point on a bookshelf. I took a few steps back to see where she was looking, then realized what had captured her attention.

There was a cat on the cover of one book.

It was looking at us with its clear, round eyes, and looked just like the real thing, albeit wearing a nice hat. Marie had just played with a cat earlier, revealing a side of her that I didn’t get to see often.

“Did you find a book you like?”

“N-No, it isn’t like that. It’s just that the vivid colors happened to draw my eye.”

I replied with an “mhm” as I picked up the book she was staring at. It was heavier than I expected, and it was clear by looking at the back cover that it had been published overseas.

“Why don’t we check it out? It’s nice and colorful on the inside too.”

“I said I’m not interested...”

She kept shooting curious looks my way as she said so. I smiled at the way she tried to hide her interest and flipped the page over. Then, the feeling of the cat’s story coming to life could be felt through the open pages.

“If I remember correctly, this series is about a cat that goes on adventures in different countries. It was much more popular before, and I remember it being checked out all the time,” I told Marie while she stared into the book.

Then she directed her round eyes at me. “What, it’s not popular anymore? But it’s such a beautiful book...”

“There are trends in picture books too. But it’s still possible for it to become popular again... Why don’t we take a seat for a little bit?” I gestured toward the round chairs nearby, and we sat down next to each other.

It had become much brighter outside, and the sunlight reflecting off the ground had warmed up the room. It felt a bit strange that an elf from a fantasy world was holding onto my sleeve in the middle of a room full of picture books.

“This cat looks just like the one I saw this morning. It’s so cute, but the book...”

“Why don’t you give it a read? Books actually want people to read them, you know.”

I flipped to the next page, and the cat had stepped out to begin its adventure. The elf moved in close enough that our cheeks were nearly touching, then peered into the picture book.

“I wish I could, but...I still don’t understand how to read the characters.”

“This is a custom in other countries, but I hear you’ll have a nice dream if you read before going to sleep. If you pick a book you like, I can read it to you back home.”

Marie blinked a few times, then turned to me. “We’re allowed to borrow these books? But someone might dirty them, or even steal them!”

“True, but *we’ll* take good care of them. We can only borrow them for a limited time, so let’s come back to return them together.”

She tugged on my sleeve a couple times with the same expression she was showing the cat earlier. I imagined she was thinking about unraveling the world inside the picture book before drifting off to sleep. I told her it was decided and closed the book, then offered it to her. She held it preciously in her hands, her smile seemingly brightening the room as she adorably replied, “Okay!” Even the receptionist seemed to be blushing and enjoying the elf’s happy expression.

“Thank you, I can’t wait!” It was almost as if flowers were floating and dancing

around Marie’s head.

“All right, then let’s go look for something else you might like.”

I decided to skip over the fact that it was usually children who had books read to them before bedtime...

In any case, I actually wanted to read to her. I could picture her sleepily rubbing her eyes while asking me to read one more chapter... Hmhm, I couldn’t wait.



As I watched Marie enthusiastically compare two picture books, I had a thought: Hm, so Marie is interested in illustrations...

When I thought about it, enjoying art was something reserved for a select few, like nobles. It was a profound form of entertainment that most wouldn't consider to be for children. That must have been why Marie realized its charm in this library for the first time.

Thinking about it further, I realized many children first learned language from picture books and anime. In that sense, anime may be a good way for her to learn Japanese too. But I had to avoid boring her with something that was too childish. I needed something interesting and enjoyable for both children and adults...

Then, it came to me.

"Hm, that might work. I think I'll rent a movie on the way home."

Right as I uttered to myself, the elf girl stood up from her chair with books held carefully in her arms. After taking her time to decide, she settled on three of the books from the picture book series of the cat she'd found earlier. You know, she kinda did remind me of a cat herself, like her whimsical nature and the way she sometimes stared at me with those jewel-like eyes.

She looked up with a questioning expression that only confirmed her cat-like qualities in my mind. She stood there with her head tilted, and I placed my hand on the hat atop her head. It'd be nice if she let me pet her head to my heart's content like that cat did for her...

"You've been thinking for a while. Couldn't find anything else you like?"

"Well, I did find a book with a frog on it. It was quite unfair. Who wouldn't have a hard time deciding?"

I followed her gaze to a book with a smug-looking frog featured on the cover. I made a mental note that she seemed to be fond of cheeky characters like those.

Maybe that meant she'd like some brand merchandise of the characters? It may be fun taking her to that huge facility that was hard to tell if it was in Chiba

or Tokyo... This was giving me all sorts of ideas for places to take her in the future.

“Well then, let’s check out those books at the reception area.”

“All right, let’s get going then!” The elf still seemed to be in the world of picture books, because her footsteps were light as I took her to the reception desk.

The woman at the counter greeted us, received the books Marie presented, then smiled. Her hair went down to her shoulders, and she had a calm demeanor about her.

“Excuse me, I’d like to check these out.”

“Of course. It’s been a while, Kitase-san. I see you have a cute girl with you today.”

I’d come to this place a few times before, so I was already acquaintances with the receptionist. We didn’t seem too far apart in age, and judging by the ring on her finger, she was a married woman.

“Uhh, she’s a relative from overseas. She seems to like picture books, so I think we’ll be back every once in a while.”

“Ah, I look forward to it. Then may I ask your name?” Her silky black hair wavered as she leaned a bit over the counter to peer at Marie.

I realized that was a good opportunity for some basic Japanese practice, so I translated the question to the elf and quickly taught her a few phrases. She repeated them to herself a few times, then began speaking clumsily.

“H-Hallo, my name, is, Mariabelle.”

“I’m Kaoruko Ichijo. It’s nice to meet you, Mariabelle-chan.”

Marie reached out for a handshake, which seemed to be a habit from the dream world. Kaoruko seemed enchanted by the elf’s pale, slender hand for a moment, then stood up from her chair in a fluster. It seemed she, too, sensed something fantastical from Marie.

Marie’s beauty seemed to be straight from the world of fables. If I were to compare her to a mythical creature, I’d say she was most akin to a unicorn.

Kaoruko may have become hesitant to touch such a work of art.

It was timid and awkward, but the two finally clasped each other's hands. It seemed to be a bit much for Kaoruko, because she let out an "Nn!" and squirmed around a bit, with Marie twitching in surprise.

I could see where Kaoruko was coming from though. Marie really was like a cute little doll. I got that just from seeing her move around, so touching her was enough to make one tremble.

The elf looked at me with a puzzled expression. "Kazuhiho, why did she put 'chan' after my name? Did I not communicate my name correctly?"

"Oh, no, I guess that's just something you put at the end of a cute girl's name."

She tilted her head questioningly, so I gave her a quick lesson. I told her that Kaoruko put "-san" at the end of my name because it's used to address men and women who are of similar age or older. Conversely, "-chan" is mainly used to address people who are younger.

Marie nodded thoughtfully, then turned to Kaoruko to speak. "Nice to, meechu, Kaoruko, chan."

Oh, right... Kaoruko would be younger from the elf's perspective. But not only did Kaoruko not mind being addressed that way, she was about to get KO'd by Marie's cute, stuttering speech. She tightly wrapped her arms around her own body, then raised her head after letting her emotions settle down. Strands of her black hair were out of place on her face, but she seemed to regain her cool, receptionist demeanor.

"...Kitase-san, it's far too much for me to handle when she directly addresses me with my name like that."

"Yeah, I get it. It's quite troubling for me because she doesn't even realize what she's doing."

Kaoruko looked at me with eyes full of empathy. I was feeling a strange sense of happiness to find someone who understood my pain, when she suddenly seemed to realize something and her look turned to one of suspicion.

“D-Don’t tell me you two have—”

“N-No, no, we haven’t... I wouldn’t even have the guts to do something like that.”

“So, you *would* do something if you had more courage then?”

Oh man, I definitely shouldn’t have said that...

But...it made me consider her question. In my mind, I wanted to avoid destroying my relationship with Marie above all else. It wasn’t really a matter of if I’d make a move or not, or whether I had the guts.

“She’s a really sweet girl. I’d never think of doing anything that’d disappoint her.”

“Yes, I know this isn’t my business, but I think you should maintain that relationship for a while... Now, about your library card. Have you changed your address since the last time you were here?”

Oh, now that she mentioned it... I’d actually moved once since the last time I came here.

I pulled out my driver’s license and began the paperwork for an address change. As I handed her my license, Kaoruko had a look of surprise on her face.

“Oh...? This address... So you live there too?”

“Huh? Are you saying you live there as well?”

Her eyes went wide and she nodded.

Now *that* was a surprise. I never realized we lived in the same place.

Marie tugged on my sleeve, and I looked down to find her giving me a dubious look.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, I just found out she lives in the same condos as me. I think she’s married, so she probably lives with her husband.”

“Ah, so she’s a neighbor. Those condo buildings have houses below and next to them, so it’s hard to tell who lives where.”

It was true that the concept of getting to know your neighbors was dying out in modern society. I'd personally never had that sort of relationship with my neighbors, and I couldn't say I was really interested in one. So while our condo had a management association, I didn't attend their meetings for the most part. I told Kaoruko as such, and she nodded in agreement.

"The management association is mainly about cleaning and fire drills. No one is obligated to attend for social purposes."

"That's true. I tend to spend all my free time on my hobbies anyhow..."

I wasn't too big on social relationships. Being considerate could be tiring, and I'd have to worry about not giving people a bad impression of myself.

But, wait...why didn't I feel any aversion to being with Marie then?

"Hm...?"

She seemed confused as our eyes met, but I didn't have the answer. I'd never felt that being with her was bothersome, and even taking care of her was enjoyable for me. I really didn't expect to find such a question buried in my thoughts...

As I thought about it, Kaoruko spoke to me. "Would you two like to go somewhere together some time? Um, I'd like to get to know Mariabelle-san better, if I'm being honest."

"Oh, uhh, I see..."

I was a bit taken aback by her invitation. It was a strange situation. This woman I hardly knew had invited us to hang out, and her eyes were completely fixated on Mariabelle and seemingly ignoring me. I couldn't help but feel oddly let down. It was sorta like a girl talking to you just to ask you to give a love letter to some other guy.

Still, I decided to consider her offer.

"Okay, sure. Can I get your contact information then...?"

Interacting with other people may be a good way for Marie to study Japanese. This could also lead to her going to the library to talk with Kaoruko while I was away. With that in mind, I decided to take her up on her offer.

But man, exchanging contact information with a woman did make me kinda nervous. Just the act of adding each other on social media was apparently an incomprehensible exchange from the elf's perspective. She blinked several times, then caught a book in a fluster as it started slipping down.

"H-Hey, what are you doing?"

"Well, she says she wants to get to know you better. That's why I'm giving her my contact information. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, of course I don't mind, but..."

Her soft fingers slipped in between mine under the counter. I felt as if she was depending on me as she tightened her hands around mine, and my heart started beating faster for some reason. It felt as if a little bird had landed on my finger.

"It's okay, I'll be by your side through and through. I think you're about to make your first friend."

I remembered she had a bit of an introvert personality. She avoided crowds and interacting with others, so she was kinda like me in that sense.

She unconsciously squeezed my hand, then finally looked up to me. "All right then. Are you going to teach me the proper greeting for this situation?"

In the corner of the book room, the elf awkwardly spoke words of greeting. When I thought about it, that was her first time interacting with someone who wasn't me. Actually, would that cat be the first...? Or the waitress maybe...

The two shook hands again, and it seemed like the elf had taken one more small step into the world of Japan.

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We left the library with the book bag in hand. Some kids walked in as we were leaving, to which I smiled and wondered if they were heading for the children's section too. Marie had a similar reaction while walking next to next to me now that she understood what sort of place the library was.

The sun was almost directly overhead now, and it was a good time to start thinking about what to eat for lunch. I turned to Marie, who was hugging the

book bag in her arms, and said, “I want to stop by a shop before we go home. I can also hold on to the books if you’d like.”

“Sure. I can hold the books myself though.”

I had already begun reaching for them, but got shot down. I retracted my hands that had nowhere to go, then Marie said, “You can be a bit overprotective at times, you know. I think you’re forgetting that I am far older than you.”

Of course I remembered, though maybe I was starting to forget as the days went on.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, but there was still a sense of dreaminess to her. Her gaze lowered to the books in her arms, then she let out a happy sigh.

“Haah... It was so adorable... I feel so fortunate to be able to take such cuteness home with me. These libraries are wonderful places, aren’t they?”

“There’s a limit to how many books we can check out at once, but we can borrow them as many times as we want. Let’s come back and find books together again.”

She nodded and smiled warmly. It seemed the girl let her guard down and showed me that beautiful smile whenever she was excited about something. I smiled at the sight of her holding the books preciously and continued walking with her. We couldn’t hold hands with her carrying books, but the happy aura emanating from her was putting me in a good mood too.

When we got back to my room, I decided to take out the DVD I picked up on the way home. Marie was staring at the packages lining the store shelves earlier, but she seemed more enthusiastic in the library. I thought I should hold off on watching live action movies with her until she became a little more accustomed to Japanese and other forms of entertainment.

First I had her sit on the bed, put a cushion behind her back, then played the video on my LCD TV.

“Is that the ‘rental DVD’ you rented in that store earlier? What is it going to show on the TV?”

“Yup. Picture books show still images, so these are basically moving images. It’s a bit bright in here, so I’m going to close the curtains.”

A drink and some popcorn would’ve been nice, but I didn’t want to spill any on my bed.

And so, the video started playing. It was a movie for an anime that’s well-known and enjoyed by children and adults all around Japan. Many families watched it together, and many people who grew up watching it still enjoyed it into their adulthood. Since she liked cute picture books, I was sure she would enjoy this one too.

Sure enough, she let out an excited noise as the cheerful opening music began playing. The happy tempo and lighthearted tone were aimed at children, but the elf widened her eyes with joy.

“This music is so cute...” she uttered, then leaned a bit closer.

Unfortunately, my TV wasn’t very big because it was designed for one person. But it wouldn’t fit in my room if it were too big, so there wasn’t much I could do about that. It wasn’t really an issue if we watched it from a close distance anyway.

The blue sky was displayed as the music ended, then it slowly began introducing the characters. I particularly enjoyed how expressive the characters were. They could even evoke annoyance or portray laziness with a simple expression. It was part of what made the characters seem more human, despite being just characters in an anime.

I personally didn’t watch much anime, but the liveliness of the characters alone made it enjoyable. The girl, too, seemed to be immersed as she stared and blinked repeatedly.

“The pictures... You were right, they’re moving... Is this magic?”

“No, I think it’s mostly hand-drawn. A bunch of people got together and made each of those moving pictures like craftsmen.”

I didn’t think even magic could make something like this. It was full of the creator’s soul, which could be said to be the core of any good story, and was what drew its viewers in so strongly. It was like a picture book in that sense, and

the elf was pulled into the story whether she wanted to be or not.

There was no magic in my world, but this had something to it that wasn't too far off. These worlds created within these fictional stories had a sort of mysterious charm of their own.

"H-Hey, what are those kids saying? Can you teach me, Kazuhiho?"

She looked at me and the TV screen restlessly, and it was clear to see she was captivated. I wanted her to become more interested in Japanese, so I didn't explain everything though. I told her the basic flow of the story, then let her figure out the rest from the vibes of each character. She seemed to somewhat understand what they were saying, nodding here and there in response as she lost herself in the story. She let out a quiet cheer during the peaceful scenes and reacted in surprise at the mysterious characters. Before she knew it, she'd grown to care about the young protagonists.

"Hehe, that person reminds me of you. His sleepy-looking face looks just like yours."

"Huh, you think so? I think he's more awake than I am though."

We continued watching and laughing together, and she tugged on my chest when asking to explain something to her. As we repeated this, we naturally ended up in a position where I was holding her in my arms. Her soft, slender body was leaning on mine, and her beautiful, white hair was touching my chin. My body eventually grew warmer as we watched the movie in comfort.

"It's almost like I'm inside the story..." the girl spoke quietly, in a slow and relaxed tone.

"Yeah, I know the feeling. It was like that for me too."

My voice was calmer than usual, and the elf looked slightly up toward me. I'd also relaxed my body and begun enjoying the movie before realizing it.

However, with a good story comes even greater conflict.

As night settled in, the distinct mood of Japan after dark showed itself, and the elf's body grew tense. The loneliness depicted by the protagonist walking by himself seemed to spread to Marie, and she held me tightly. Her soft body was

pressed against mine, and I could feel her heart thumping like that of a little bird's. She had a somewhat sweet scent to her, and being in such close proximity with her made the aroma all the more prominent. I suppressed the feelings it invoked and hugged her back softly, then whispered to her from above her head as if I were the narrator.

"Ah!"

She raised her voice as a cute character joined the story. It was just the type of creature she was fond of, and it made her embrace me a little tighter. She was completely absorbed in the story, and her gaze went back and forth from the TV to my face with a look that asked me to explain what was going on. I didn't know why, but it made me want to laugh ever so gently.

The characters eventually overcame their conflict through hardship, and the girl let out a sigh of relief as it came to a happy conclusion. Her body finally moved away, which was a bit of a shame, but I was also glad to see the happy smiles on the characters' faces.

The same opening song played at the finale, and I grinned seeing Marie sway her head side to side along with the merry music. She continued watching until the music ended, and when the ending message showed up on the screen, she was finally allowed to leave the world of the story.

She didn't move for a bit, so I asked her, "How was it?" But it may have been an unnecessary question to ask. There was a dreamy look to her when she finally turned to face me, and it seemed she now understood the draw of watching movies.

"Yes, it was very entertaining. I didn't understand most of the conversations, but I'm glad I was able to experience that."

With that, she jumped into my arms as if to express her high spirits. Maybe she was invigorated from watching the movie because there was a surprising amount of power to the movement, and I ended up being pushed down onto the bed. She sat on my stomach and looked down at me with those beautifully glimmering purple eyes.

"It was as if those pictures were alive. Such a strange feeling."

“Yup. It’s because they weren’t just pictures, they were telling a story,” I whispered to the girl as she pressed her cheek against my chest with a fascinated expression.

I felt like touching her white, flowing hair then, and gently pushed some strands behind her ear with my finger. She seemed to enjoy it, because her eyes narrowed sleepily as she let out a warm breath.

“Yeah... Umm... Ah... I like books too, but I like using my imagination more. Because imagination is limitless, you know? I think what we saw was more like being shown around the world of someone else’s imagination.”

“Ah, that’s a simple but interesting way to put it. There are many forms of entertainment like that in Japan. I think you’ll be able to enjoy many more of them once you learn more Japanese. There will be so many things to enjoy, you wouldn’t be able to count them all.”

The elf suddenly lifted her head, and broke into a beaming smile.

“I’m definitely going to learn it. It’s a downright shame I can’t understand them now, and it makes me sad. Say, was that something I could enjoy again? I’d like to rewatch it if possible.”

“Yeah, you can watch it as many times as want. I’ll show you how to use the remote. I’ll go make a light meal for us, so go ahead and knock yourself out.”

That was good to hear. It seemed she now had an interest in both anime and literature in Japanese.

It had been a while, but I enjoyed watching it with her too. Though the most fun part of all was seeing her reactions.

As I made preparations in the kitchen, that merry opening song began playing again. I could hear the elf humming, and when I turned around, I saw her swaying along with the music. I almost laughed at the precious sight, but I needed to resist the urge and focus on the cooking. If there were no one else around, I probably would have been doubled back in laughter already.

I wanted to make something we could eat while watching movies, so I decided on pancakes. They’re easy to make, and I already had honey I could use.

As I cooked, Marie asked me questions from the bed, like what the meanings of certain words and phrases were, along with the detailed nuances of their usage. One thing I noticed was that she never asked the same thing twice. She had a brilliant mind to begin with, and she now had the charming world on the screen to guide her motivation. She was basically cramming all the info she could before, but this way, she would learn naturally while enjoying herself. I was sure she would pick up knowledge like a sponge absorbing water this way.

Yeah, I definitely made the right choice.

I placed a tray on her lap and had her eat the pancakes that had been cut into portions. Despite being absorbed in the story, she let out a “sooo delicious!” and melted into an adorable smile.

After enjoying the anime and pancakes, she flopped back onto the bed. She wriggled her body left and right, then reached out for my hand as I got closer.

“Sorry, I’m so happy I can’t get up right now. Can you help me?”

I laughed and told her I’d be happy to, then took her slender hand and lifted her to a sitting position at the edge of the bed. I always thought she looked like a doll, but she really did in that moment.

She dreamily let out a warm sigh, then looked at me with half-lidded eyes.

“That countryside was so pretty, with such a wonderful nightscape. Was that part of Japan too?”

“Yeah, but I think it was from a long time ago. Actually, I think my grandpa’s house looked like that place.”

Marie’s eyes snapped open, and she stared at me. Her expression had changed from a minute ago, and was now full of anticipation.

Hmm, I was planning on taking her somewhere during my vacation in May, so maybe that was the place to go.

“Then would you like to go there for my vacation next month? We’ll need to take a mini-trip before that to get you accustomed to it though.”

“Oh, oh, I want to go! That is, if I wouldn’t be bothering anyone...”

She seemed to be dying to go, but she was mature enough to be considerate

at the same time.

But still, I'd already made up my mind. She was clearly raring to go, so what sort of man would I be if I didn't make it happen?

"Then let's go to the countryside where my family lives. I hope you look forward to it, Marie."

Her face seemed to glow with joy as she leaned in to hug me.

I could totally feel her breasts when she pressed against me from the front like that, and, well...it just made me freeze awkwardly.

When Marie took a bath that day, I could hear the theme song from the anime coming from the bathroom. It was just so adorable, I suspected she was trying to break my face from me smiling so hard. Luckily, she couldn't see me, so I was able to get away with grinning like an idiot.

I chuckled to myself as I continued cooking.

Tonight, I was making some keema curry with a little extra spiciness. I added garam masala to the onions as they began losing their opacity, and an appetizing aroma filled the kitchen.

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Our eating schedules dictated we have light meals in the morning and lunchtime in Japan, then heavier meals at night and for lunch in the other world. The two worlds may have been different, but I seemed to share the same stomach in both of them which was why I had a total of four meals. It was just the right amount with my daily caloric intake being equivalent to three full meals a day.

"Actually, that may be eating a little more calories than three meals worth. Though it's not like I've been keeping track anyway."

Regardless, I had a feeling I ate a little more than the standard.

I wondered if Ms. Elf would be troubled if she gained weight. Personally, I thought she was a bit on the thin side and could use a little more meat. But maybe it'd be healthier to eat delicious food and work it off with exercise rather than worrying too much about the calories.

I sampled a bit of the spices in the frying pan and adjusted the taste. I had some white wine to enjoy as I tasted my cooking, which was a privilege reserved for whoever prepared the food. Cooking always tasted best fresh, so I was thoroughly enjoying the pre-meal snacks and drink.

Suddenly, my feet felt strangely unstable.

“Hm? It definitely shook just now. An earthquake...?”

Earthquakes weren’t an uncommon occurrence in Japan. I was already quite used to them, having experienced them since I was young.

I stopped the fire on the stove and turned on the TV next to the bed. The emergency tone was playing right when I tuned in, and it seemed to be a magnitude 4.0.

“That one was kinda big. I’m a bit worried because people say the foundation is a bit weak around here, but...it should be fine for now.”

I nodded, then I heard the bathroom door being opened loudly.

Opening the door right next to the bedroom revealed a sink and dressing area, with a toilet to the left and bathroom to the right. I was watching TV, but naturally, my eyes slowly moved to the source of the noise.

“You’re done already? That was fas—”

I turned around to find Marie’s still-wet body there, and, of course, she wasn’t wearing anything...

I let out an awkward *oof*. Her slim body, beautiful figure, feminine breasts, and colorful...

“Aaaaaahhh!”

“Kyaaaaaaaaahhh!”

I didn’t even have time to run. She screamed even louder than I did and jumped at my chest. I could feel our frantically beating hearts and her body warm from the bath with her soft, bare skin right under me...but I needed to look up. Up!

“I-It shook! The bath just shook! Why?! Ahh, I’m scared! I’m so scaaared!”

“Oh, y-yeah, it was, an earthquake. I-It’s okay now, that was just a little tremor.”

“No, no! How can it be okay? The ground just shook. What if everything collapses and we get crushed?!”

In reality, I really was about to get crushed already, by another, more bountiful force.

Even now, her fresh-out-of-the-bath smell and feeling of her bare shoulder made me painfully aware of her femininity. My thoughts were so turbulent that the earthquake was the least of my problems.

“Okay, but Marie, your clothes!”

“Huh? A-Ahh! C-Close your eyes! Or, wait, just keep looking up at the ceiling!”

I would’ve liked to tell her it was no problem, but it took all my willpower to restrain myself.

I could feel her body finally move away from mine, then I heard the bathroom door closing.

Peace at last...

I sat heavily on the bed, then my body went limp as I lied down. I was exhausted.

After some time, I noticed the elf had left some water droplets and her scent on my chest. I muttered between heavy breaths, “I... I did it... Good job, me...”

Sheesh, I did not see that coming...

I then realized I had completely forgotten about earthquakes. Japan is one of the world-leading, earthquake-prone countries, and it was my fault for not giving her a heads up. I should also teach her evacuation routes and how to deal with them when they occur.

I let out another heavy sigh, then I was finally able to stand up again.

When she came out of the bathroom, we both lowered our heads in apology. To be honest, I was just glad she wasn’t upset at me.

Marie was in her pajamas now, sniffing the smell of the room. She somewhat

reminded me of the cat we'd seen in the morning. It seemed the spices I used for dinner were still foreign to her, and she was trying to find the source of the unfamiliar scent. That behavior, again, reminded me of the cat.

"So that scent *is* from your cooking. Is it just me, or does your food smell stronger and stronger each day?"

"It's a dish that's becoming recognized as traditional Japanese cooking, called curry. This one's a bit different than the typical kind though."

Most households used store-bought roux, but I had used a ton of spices commonly found in traditional Indian cooking. Hm, maybe she would have liked what was considered "normal" curry better? But I'd made sure to not make it too spicy, so it should've been all right.

She looked at the food curiously, so I handed her a plate. I wasn't a big fan of naan, so I made some yellow-colored rice to go with it instead. It wasn't so much that I disliked it, but there was just something about eating curry with bread. I mean, why not just eat curry bread at that point?

The elf continued sniffing where she stood. It seemed to make her salivate because she made an audible gulp. Her stomach then let out a cute growl, which she couldn't hide with both her hands holding her plate.

That was what I loved about spicy foods. Just smelling them stirred your appetite and made your stomach growl. Your body automatically gets ready to eat, and won't be satisfied until you do.

"That's odd, I suddenly feel so much hungrier. Is it because of the strong scent?"

"Yeah, I used a bunch of different seasonings for today's dish. They say hunger is the best spice too, so I'm sure you're going to enjoy it. I'm a bit worried if it might be too hot for you though."

She seemed a bit confused, but I could also tell she wanted to dig in already.

And so, we moved over to the table next to us. I noticed the faint smell of soap as I got near her. We each pulled out a chair, sat down, and said "itadakimasu" together. Her pronunciation had become much more eloquent, probably because there were so many opportunities to use the phrase.

“Nn...?!”

She scooped some curry with her spoon and took a bite, then her eyes widened. She sat there frozen for about ten seconds, then finally began chewing again. She swallowed it down with some water, then turned her round, purple eyes toward me.

“It’s...spicy? Tasty? Hm, which is it? I’m not sure how to describe it, but...”

Marie trailed off, then stared at her curry. She gulped, then as if she couldn’t resist the temptation any longer, she took another bite of the spicy curry.

“Mmm... It’s spicy, *and* it’s tasty. Oh, wait, the chicken is fragrant and tastes somewhat sweet as well. M-Mmm, so delicious!”

“Ah, it looks like you can handle it. I’m glad.”

She seemed to have entered a loop of alternating between spiciness and tastiness.

It felt like I’d been checking the elf’s reaction more often whenever we ate lately. Watching her expressions was entertaining, though I know it would be rude of me to say as much. I also wanted to know what types of flavors she enjoyed eating. I thought a part of me felt it would be a waste if I didn’t catch her reactions in that case.

“Nnngh, it’s so hot! But I can’t stop eating... This curry is just bursting with flavor!”

“Now that I think about it, the desert region in the other world uses similar-tasting seasonings. Food spoils faster in hot weather, so maybe that’s why they tend to use so many spices.”

Marie looked at me with rounded eyes, then stared at the ceiling for a minute. She chewed slowly as if to savor the taste, swallowed, then shouted, “Ah!”

“That country... I mean, that monster at the oasis! I can’t believe it just happened yesterday and I was so busy enjoying my time that I forgot about it again!”

Yeah, I thought she might’ve...

Then, as if she had gotten over it already, she looked at me with her damp hair wavering in front of her face.

“Do you think we’ll wake up in the same place as before?”

“I’m not sure. I have sometimes woken in a different area before. But if I had to guess, I’d say it’d probably be in the same spot.”

Hm, the curry didn’t taste half bad, if I said so myself. There was a definite kick to the spice, but it was balanced out by the sweetness of the tomatoes.

Yup, I thought, *chicken definitely goes best with this curry.*

My carefree attitude seemed to peeve the elf. She kept chewing and enjoying the meal, but her brows furrowed as she narrowed her eyes.

“You know... Mmg, mm... You seem awfully relaxed about this, but... *gulp*... I hope you realize that, even though we can come back here, we’ve still been facing mortal danger.”

“I get what you’re saying, but I don’t think it really counts as mortal danger. I mean, we can go back to the oasis without anything to be afraid of now.”

I doubted there was any chance of us taking down that mysterious giant snake. Marie seemed to know this, which was probably why she seemed so flustered.

But seeing that I maintained my carefree attitude, she let out a “hmm” and mulled over what I just said. She seemed deep in thought, so I decided to help her out.

“Here’s a hint: There’s something we can do today that we couldn’t do yesterday.”

Marie pouted with a spoon hanging out of her mouth. She was clearly a bit unhappy about being unable to find out what I was getting at. But suddenly, her expression turned into a smile.

“Oh, I know! You got your long distance movement skill back. You can use that to get us out of danger now!”

“Exactly. That’s why there’s nothing to worry about.”

She raised her arm triumphantly, having protected her pride as a spirit sorceress.

And so, I opted to let Ms. Elf enjoy the day as much as possible. It's said that time is money, but I was now clear of the restriction that allowed me to use the skill only once per day.

"I've heard there's one condition in which skills can become unusable, and that's when the presence of a great, aberrant entity is nearby. Maybe the gods have decided not to interfere, because the god of travel didn't respond to my call when we faced the arkdragon. The monster we faced yesterday shouldn't be a problem though."

"Hmm, I see. Either way, we'll have some time before the enemy shows up, so we should be all right. You always look like you're on the verge of falling asleep, but it's good to know you do think about these things."

"Oh, yeah. I've prepared a few ways to escape from situations like that, just in case. The problem is..."

There were still some unanswered questions pertaining to the oasis. Marie was astute enough to figure out what I wanted to say before I could voice it and waved her spoon as she began talking for me.

"Yes, the problem isn't how to escape from there, but what to do about that child. It seemed to be a half-beast, and the chains around their hands and feet tell me someone was forcing them to summon that monster on us."

"I don't know how a child summoned a monster like that, but that magical catalyst must have something to do with it. I really want to find out what the deal is. So, I was wondering..."

She nodded and inched closer, and we talked with hushed voices as if in a secret meeting. About a half an hour later, our plans had been made.

I rinsed off my sweat after taking a bath, then headed toward my bed. I suspected I'd be spending slightly less time in the dream world than usual.

There was one more request from the elf for me to fulfill before going to sleep. She was already on standby in bed and looking at me with an expectant expression. There was a bit of shyness in those glimmering, jewel-like eyes as

they looked up at me.

Yes, I still had to read her a book, as I'd promised earlier in the day.

"I get to enjoy a story as I fall asleep? I can't wait!"

I was looking forward to it myself. Although I'd never read to someone before, I was sure she was going to appreciate the experience.

Marie moved her head closer to my pillow as I sat down next to her. I tapped her forehead playfully, then held the book above us and began unraveling the world within.

It was the book we'd borrowed from the library during the day. Out of the wide selection available, the elf had chosen the one with the lovable art style that I held in my hands.

The binding was thick and sturdy. The smell of paper filled my nose as I opened it, and the black cat that was the main character was there looking at us.

"Hehe, let's begin then... *The Black Cat and the Country of Night*."

The elf clapped her hands in the dim illumination of the downlight.

It was a colorful book despite the low lighting, and the black cat's eyes seemed to draw us right in. Perhaps that was just how picture books should be.

I couldn't help but notice there seemed to be a sense of foreignness to the colors, and the combination with its unique writing style seemed to whisk its readers away to some other place.

"One day, the black cat awakened to find..."

I could tell Marie was looking up at the book with great interest. Her mind seemed to be inside the world between those pages as she followed the cat with her eyes. It felt like our hearts were beating together with an equal amount of excitement. We were ready to embark to unknown lands with growing anticipation for the story to come.



“But the stormy sea shook violently, thunder boom, boom, booming...”

It was interesting how the black cat somehow seemed more human than some human characters.

Despite the character’s charming appearance, however, it seemed the fate that awaited him could hardly be called smooth sailing. He was tossed around at the mercy of his fate like the waves of the ocean, but bravely faced it head on. The book kept us guessing about what would happen next, and we just had to keep turning the pages to find out. It was just that good.

After we got through several pages of the adventure, I heard Marie yawning cutely next to me.

“Wait,” she whispered in my ear and complained. “Your voice is making me sleepy...but I want to know what happens next...”

I grinned, but it was too dark for her to notice. In fact, she already seemed to have her eyes closed. I tucked her in up to her shoulders, then she let out a comfortable sigh.

It felt like I’d been spending more time in this world ever since Marie came over here. There wasn’t much that appealed to me about Japan until then, and I’d mostly enjoyed spending time in the dream world. But ever since the elf girl arrived, I learned to find excitement even in this world. Through her, I seemed to be realizing just how fascinating Japan could be. The promise I made with her to take her to my grandfather’s place was just a part of it.

I didn’t realize it before, but both worlds were full of fun and excitement.

Zzz...

I smiled at the sleeping girl next to me, then quietly closed the book.

Good night, Ms. Elf. We’ll continue the story again tomorrow.

I pulled the blanket up to my shoulders and settled into the warm bed. I knew a comfortable sleep awaited me, which was one of the perks of springtime.

Chapter of Magic Stone, Episode 4: Battle with the Band of Thieves Bright light and the sensation of something cold like mist touching my cheek woke me from my slumber.

The Ujah Peak Ruins...

There I was, half buried in the sand at the sunny site that had once been a quarry. My pillow had been replaced with sand, which flowed around me as I struggled to free myself.

I felt well-rested from the sleep, but was troubled to find sand pouring down from my collar bone to my stomach. It was a terrible way to wake up, but, surprisingly, a part of me wasn't too bothered by it. A morning's pleasantness wasn't completely determined by the view or weather.

I looked toward the weight against my chest and found a fairy-like sight right in front of me. It's said just seeing a single beautiful flower can make someone's morning as they wake up. Though this particular flower looked back at me with an unhappy expression.

Marie's vivid lips parted, and she let out a voice of complaint as expected. "I can't believe I fell asleep so quickly! I'll be wondering about what's going to happen in the book all day!"

I suppressed my urge to touch her white hair dazzling in the sunlight.

"Heheh, at least we have that to look forward to tonight. In any case, this sure is a bunch of sand."

The elf moved away, and I stood up after her. Then, just as it did before we went to sleep, the glow of the oasis entered our view from the platform. We looked up to find the sky was nearly azure in color, and even the sandy ground appeared fantastical to my eyes.

The mysterious monster from yesterday attacked us with a wave of destructive boiling sand. I thought we might wake up in a situation like that

again, so I couldn't say it was too pleasant. But knowing Marie was looking forward to the rest of the book made me smile to myself.

Sand poured down from my sleeve, revealing a dully glinting bracelet on my wrist. It was mainly for checking my current abilities, but I could also use a simple command to send a party request to the half-fairy elf next to me.

"There, added. I suppose this would be our first time forming a party together."

"I think you're right. This is somewhat exciting. I hardly ever team up with other people."

She pointed out that was mainly an issue with my personality as I pulled my half-buried bag out of the sand. I pulled her belongings out too, and sand was scattered down from the plateau where we stood.

Teaming up with other people usually just ended up being a source of anxiety for me. Things could get awkward if the conversation lulled, and if a team strategy didn't work, I could be the one who was blamed.

However, I'd like to think things would be different with Marie. I didn't know why, but I just had a feeling, even with the massive gap between a level 72 and 32.

I thought about how I often found myself confused about my own thoughts and feelings lately as I dusted the sand off my clothes.

"Okay then, let's get started. Our mission today is to rescue that half-beast child and defeat the bandits in hiding. If I come to the conclusion that it'd be too difficult, I'll let you know with the mind link chat."

"Right. If that happens, we'll regroup and you'll get us out of here with Trayn, the Journey's Guide. Now, let's execute our plan!"

She raised her voice boldly, then began preparing her Spirit Magic. Glittering specks danced around her robe, and I blinked thinking it was a trick of the eye. She almost seemed as if she were disappearing in and out of view. I rubbed my eyes, then found that Marie had already vanished from view.

"Huh, so this is the spirit of light, Luminous Veil. Guess it really does make you

completely invisible.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be much of a spell if a sleepyhead like you could still see me. I’ll be moving slowly from this point on, but I won’t be able to conceal my footsteps or scent. So, depending on what we’re up against, I may still be detected.”

That made sense. But that meant the places she could hide were limited. Luckily for us, Marie was a spirit sorceress. Few others had the power to profoundly affect a battle by themselves without taking a single step.

“All right, then I’ll be on the move too. If anything happens, be sure to call me with the mind link chat right away.”

“Yes, you be careful too. And be sure to read me the rest of that book tomorrow night.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. The fact that Ms. Elf was looking forward to the book tonight was motivation enough for me, and I began walking toward the oasis with that positive thought in mind.

It was time to begin.

I activated Over the Road from the plateau, and I instantly appeared at the sandy grounds below. As I walked on the sparsely grown grass, I thought about what we would then be doing.

Our objective was to rescue the half-beast child. It was an extremely difficult mission that would require us to overcome numerous outlaws and an enormous monstrosity. Despite my high level, I wasn’t cocky enough to presume I could win a battle when we were so outnumbered.

First, I had to get some distance away from Marie so she wouldn’t be deemed a threat. Then I had to draw their attention somehow. We still didn’t know where our opponents were hiding, and we needed to find that child somehow.

As I approached the waterfront to do just that, the reptilian monster known as a Koopah burst out with an eruption of sand. There was no need to go easy on it like last time, so I butchered it as soon as it appeared, making it shriek out in pain.

“Hm, I think they finally noticed me. Marie, how are the preparations going?”

“Not bad. I’m creating more fire lizards and having them hide in the sand for now, but are you sure you want me to hold back their power?”

“Of course. We want to overwhelm these guys with numbers rather than raw power this time around. If we do it right, this could give us a greater advantage than outright killing them.” I told her so via our mind link chat, then took a look at my surroundings.

According to my Intuition, there were less than ten of them. I sensed the faint sound of voices and eyes looking at me, so I quietly moved away from the oasis. Now I had an idea of where they were, so there was no more need to cause a ruckus by fighting Koopahs.

I tried detecting their presence, but my gaze slowly moved upward. Then, inside the partially dilapidated building, I caught a glimpse of a dirty-looking man as he hid his face from view.

“Oh, there he is. Question is, where could that kid be?”

They must’ve been wondering why I’d shown myself after running away, and where the elf who was with me may have gone.

After spending some time to think about it, it seemed they decided on going with the same approach as before. Well, that was probably the only thing they *could* do.

Just as I sliced up an approaching Koopah into little rings, the ground shook. The sand vibrated with the tremors, and I felt an impact as if something was making its way up from the ground. Then came the piercing roar that made even the Koopahs shiver in fear.

Grrraaaaaarrr!

The booming roar blasted up sand in a radial pattern, but I was one to learn from my past experiences. I took advantage of the fact that I was alone and activated Over the Road so I could escape into one of the crumbling buildings. The building was immediately crushed by the shockwave, and the remaining Koopahs were immediately flattened to dust.

That intensity and those tremors were something else. But as someone who had only trained his ability to run away, the situation was far from unmanageable.

After deftly dodging the falling debris, I shifted myself to the roof of the building, then again to another building in the distance. It was there I saw something glinting from far off: the stone held in the half-beast child's hand.

The child was wearing a tattered robe just like yesterday, with his hands and feet bound in chains.

"It's a bit far, but I have a good idea where the others are now. I think we can begin."

"Be careful, okay? And if you need to retreat, don't hesitate to do so. I'll draw that monster's attention, so you won't need to worry about it for a while."

I replied with a "got it" to the assuring voice in my head.

If I had to guess, that giant monster must have been around level 100 or so. To think a level 30-something elf was going to face it head on...it was like I was in a strange dream or something.

I thought about pinching myself, but I realized I actually was in a dream, so it wouldn't even hurt.

"All right, I'm going now. See you later, Marie."

I gave my parting words to the invisible girl, then stepped on the ground with both feet and activated Over the Road. Not only did the skill have weight and travel distance limits, but I had to physically see my destination and have both feet on the ground. Despite the rather strict restrictions, it was a vital skill when trying to close a gap.

I instantly moved myself to the wall, then shifted to a building that was against the cliff. As I stepped on the crumbling rooftop and flew into the air again, I felt like I was running straight into the sky.

From behind me, I could hear the monster screaming as if to tell me to stop running away. Its bellow was enough to shake the ground, but as I looked down the cliff and observed the sight, I uttered to myself, "Huh...that's actually really

useful.”

There was Marie, making full use of her abilities as a spirit sorceress. She’d already created about ten spirits in total. I’d heard Spirit Magic was about supplying the spirits with magic and firing the magic at enemies, but it seemed they could dig into the sand and travel underground too, like single-shot guerrilla tanks.

The spirits were hidden far from their caster and they fired sporadic magic bolts at the monster, proving to be the ultimate distraction for me. I was astonished to see the monster charging in the opposite direction of Marie as more and more spirits appeared.

In that moment, I felt I understood. Her versatility to adapt to any situation was what set her apart from the average sorcerer. It was thanks to that ability of hers that allowed us to come up with strategies that wouldn’t otherwise be possible.

“That seems like it could come in handy in all sorts of situations. Oh, but more importantly...”

Considering the amount of magic power she had left, I probably didn’t have much time. I had to fulfill my own role, or she’d be giving me a scolding later.

I flew from roof to roof one more time, then found the child from earlier right in front of me.

The hooded half-beast recoiled as I arrived. The child, a boy, was even smaller up close, like a grade schooler.

He backed away from me, terrified. I crouched down to eye-level, then opened my mouth.

“Hey there. Would you like me to help you? If so, I can lend a hand.”

The child twitched in reaction. This time, it may have been out of a faint sense of hope instead of fear. After all, I was talking in the language of half-beasts, which few people knew how to speak.

“What? You know...our language?”

“Yup. It’s a little hobby of mine. I’d love to talk some more, but we don’t have

much time. Now, which would you prefer? Should I leave you alone? Or...”

The chain shook with a metallic *clink* as little paws reached out to me. He was covered in white and brown fur that was so dirty, I couldn’t help but feel sympathy. The tendons on both of the child’s feet were horribly damaged, and he was clearly in no condition for running.

“Please...help me! I can’t take this anymore... I can’t bear summoning monsters with the stone to attack innocent people!”

“All right then,” I replied.

We were too high up for the mist from the water veins to reach us, and it was difficult to even breathe. Whoever lived there long ago may have been of a lower social rank.

Slowly, I rose before the half-beast who was hunched over as if in prayer. The group that was closing in on us from behind were the very men who had been committing crimes in the area. There were about eight of them, each wearing a sunburnt hood and holding broadswords in their hands.

Though they were mangy-looking, their bulging muscles and the sharp look in their eyes told me they were quite high in level. In fact, it made me question if they really were really just some ordinary bandits.

The man who lead the group, who I presumed to be their captain, was perfectly calm despite walking atop the unstable roof ridden with holes. He stroked the black beard on his chin as he approached me and said, “Good job making your way back here, kid. I finally figured out how you made it out of there alive yesterday. You’re specialized in mobility-type skills, and you escaped with the elf just like how you flew up here.”

“Ohh, yeah, you’re actually not too far off the mark there. Anyway, would you mind removing the Dominance from this little guy?”

Glancing at the chains, I could tell he was bound with the power of a contract rather than ordinary metal. In other words, it couldn’t be physically destroyed. If I were to free this child, I needed that contract stone in that grinning man’s hand.

“Then let’s make a deal. Give me your bag full of treasures, and I’ll let the

little twerp go.”

Huh... Why would this guy bother telling such an obvious lie? I may have looked like a kid, but I was an adult on the inside. I didn’t know how they were doing it, but they were clearly using that half-beast child to attack adventurers. There was no way they would give up their golden goose so easily.

It seemed negotiation time was over. Actually, I could hardly call it a negotiation in the first place.

I drew my sword, and they slightly braced themselves. They seemed to assume they were still out of reach, but as their leader had guessed, I was a mobility specialist. I immediately activated Over the Road, appeared at their leader’s flank, and swung my sword without hesitation.

My aim was true, and the contract stone was split diagonally as the noise of steel on sword resounded. I nearly smiled at the leader, but his face fell, and he stared at me with a piercing gaze.

“That’s it. I’m cutting off your arms and legs, then rubbing salt into your wounds.”

The words of a grown man who intend to do you harm can be really scary. Or it would be, if I was just an innocent kid.

The man signaled with a point of a finger, and an overweight man came rushing toward me. He seemed to be the tank of the group, and he flexed his barrel-sized arms before me as he approached. It was like he was asking to get his arms cut off, but my eyes widened as my sword bounced off with a metallic *clang!* The man’s arms had solidified like reinforced plating, and I was surprised to see sparks fly at the impact.

His level alone appeared to be quite high.

I could have attacked his legs as he continued pushing me back, but stopping his pressure would have been no easy task. Before I knew it, the edge of the cliff was right behind me.

“Haha! Fall, you little shit!”

“Oh, okay. See ya.”

He threw his full body weight into one last tackle, ramming right into me...but he passed right through, charging off the cliff alone. The other bandits watching with their mouths hanging open as the “me” that had been thrown into the air became deformed. I became distorted like a painting dissolving in water from the spot that been tackled, then vanished into the air.

This was my final primary skill, Phantom Image, which allowed me to create an illusion of myself. This skill was most likely where my class, Illusory Swordsman, got its name.

Reprise, which let me set and repeat certain actions, Over the Road, which allows me to travel a short distance away, and Phantom Image, which created an illusion of myself, were my three main combat skills.

A loud *thud!* could be heard and sand flew up into the air as the man landed, drawing the monster’s attention as a result. The bandits and I let out an “ah!” at the same time. The man who fell ran away from the monster, and the ground rumbled loudly as it gave chase.

Try not to die, I mentally told him.

The more time the monster spent chasing him, the easier it’d be on Marie.

There was a big, round hole in the mountain that reached all the way down to ground level. The oasis was basically surrounded by precipitous cliffs of sorts, with buildings that were once dwellings still left on the wall surfaces. This was the stage of battle this time, and to be honest...it was so heavily in my favor, I almost felt bad.

“Hey, he’s behind you! Kill him!”

“Aaaaaargh!”

I silently emerged behind one of the bandits, and another raised his voice in warning. Faced with an elusive opponent like me, all they could do was try to watch each other’s back like this.

The man turned around and swung his broadsword wildly, but I had flipped in the air and pierced holes into his feet while dodging two arrows at the same time. An arrow whizzed by my cheek, but I used the full momentum of my spin to slam the flat of my sword into the crown of my opponent’s head. A loud

crack echoed out and the man's eyes rolled over. As he crumpled, I spotted a tall man with a blade in each hand approaching from his shadow. Fighting someone who was prepared to face me sounded like a bother, so I left an illusion and vanished before someone shot another arrow at me.

There were safe spots for me to travel to all around us with no way for my enemies to follow, so I was able to enjoy their screams of frustration as they discovered they had just attacked another illusion. They roared and demanded to know my whereabouts, but all I could've told them was that I was in one of the many buildings nearby. Though I didn't say it out loud, of course.

"There isn't much good footing with everything being so worn down, but they'd have to deal with the monsters if they go down to ground level. This oasis is a good hunting ground, so I'd like to take my time and hunt them one by one."

But still, their leader's action had caught my attention. Without even looking at me, he simply observed the giant monster thrashing around the oasis. It didn't seem like he was just taking me lightly, considering how he had two men guarding his back for him.

"...I have a bad feeling about this. This is why I don't like fighting other humans."

My Reprise allowed me to memorize movement patterns, but it had its limits. As the number of enemies and the tricks up their sleeves increased, it became harder and harder to utilize the skill effectively. It was more suited for facing simple-minded monsters rather than humans.

I thought about going all in and diving toward them, when the leader suddenly shouted, "There, the elf is hiding behind that pillar! Men, get over there and drag her out!"

Then, it hit me: He wasn't observing the monster. He must have been using a detection-type skill to find Marie through her Luminous Veil.

The bandits were bloodthirsty as they leapt down from the building, and didn't even fear the giant monster ahead.

As I watched them go, I felt my overconfidence quickly draining away. Marie

was a magic user, and a low-level one at that. She wouldn't be able to fend off melee attackers. I was in such a fluster, I didn't realize the leader had deliberately raised his voice to bait me into action.

"I can't let you do that. Over the Road!"

I had no other choice but to take them all down. I swiftly moved in front of them and prepared to strike, when the leader shouted yet again.

"Now, roast 'em whole!"

"What...?!"

My surroundings were instantly engulfed in a sea of flame, and a wave of crimson heat set me and the bandit henchmen ablaze. The surface of my skin burned, at which point I immediately realized I was in danger and held my breath. If I hadn't, the flames would have entered my lungs and scorched me from within. In a sense, the experience of getting killed by monsters so many times in the past may have been what saved me.

"Gyaaaaaa!"

But things ended poorly for the others who weren't used to situations like these. The henchmen clawed at their heads as they ran off the edge of the cliff. The sight of them falling off while being burned alive seemed horrifying enough to give me nightmares.

I rolled on the ground to escape the infernal heat, but realized there was something wrong with my right arm.

"Ugh, a debuff!"

My arm was still burning, suffering from a temporary negative effect that reduced the power of my sword attacks by half. For a fire-type skill to have a debuff effect, the caster must have been specialized in fire or they were simply powerful to begin with.

"Hahaaa! Zip around all you want, but you're easy to deal with if I know where you're going, brat!"

I looked up to find his men pointing staves they'd been hiding right at me. Ah, so they'd been hiding the fact that they had sorcerers among them this whole

time. That was surprisingly clever of them. I may have taken them too lightly, assuming them to be nothing but a bunch of ragged thugs.

“Still got some fight in ya, huh? Hey, twerp, want me to guess where you’ll appear next? Right here. You’re gonna show up right next to this half-beast brat... Hey, burn him.”

My eyes widened at his words, and I watched as the men turned their staves toward the half-beast.

This was bad. They’d taken control of the situation, and I felt my options becoming more and more limited.

“So this is why he took out his own men to get at me...”

If he’d aimed at the half-beast from the start, I probably would have assumed it was a bluff. But now, he left an impression that he would do whatever it took to get results, even if it meant killing off his own source of income. Furthermore, he had his men aim at the half-beast right away to force me into action with little time to think.

What should I do here? What would he do if I ignored the path he’d laid out for me? It was obvious: He’d show off his brutality by hurting the child just enough to put the boy on the brink of death. He presented the worst possible path for me without losing anything in turn. From there, he’d be able to take his time in making me do as he pleased.

“...Over the Road.”

With a feeling of disgust for the evil before me, I appeared in front of the half-beast. I slid across the stone roof, and silently looked up from a kneeling position. The bandit leader looked down on me with a face that seemed slightly surprised by my actions.

His eyes were narrowed, with a smile that resembled that of a snake’s. He was probably debating whether to swallow me whole or play with his food a bit first.

“I already know your ability has a weight limit. If it didn’t, you would’ve run off with that half-beast already. Am I wrong? I’m not, am I?”

“...”

He was right. I couldn’t activate my ability because of its restrictions. Trayn, the Journey’s Guide was one thing, but Over the Road was quite strict when it came to the weight limitation.

Just then, another path was shut out.

The terrified half-beast clutched my clothes with pleading eyes. In that moment, my Over the Road became completely disabled. And since my arm was still burned, the temporary debuff was still in effect. Even if I picked up the boy and jumped off the building, my back would be an open target for their sorcerers. I already knew from experience that those sink or swim options rarely ever ended well.

The bandit leader pointed his broadsword at me. I had a feeling his level was very high, and that he could easily slice off my limbs with just a flick of his wrist.



“Haha, you finally give up, kid? Throw down your sword. Now.”

“Sure. Here you go.”

I tossed it aside without hesitation. The man’s gaze was drawn to my sword, which spun in the air as it slowly fell.

I wondered if he considered why I’d given up so easily. Or maybe he was too excited for what was to come, he didn’t even think about it.

If the weight limit is the problem, that was all I had to do...

Discard my sword and take the child instead.

That put me barely under the weight limit, allowing me to escape to the empty space in the building on the other side. With this much weight, that was probably the furthest I could go.

“Hold on tight!” I shouted, then regretted it right away.

In the next moment, I saw there were twenty meters between me and the ground below, and the sheer distance made sweat bead out of my every pore. I was free of gravity for a split second, then the scenery blurred as I was put into a state of free fall. I screamed, and I felt sorry for the half-beast clutching onto me because I couldn’t activate Over the Road at the moment. One of the requirements to activate it was to have both feet on the ground, so that was out of the question. All I could do then was to clutch the child in my arms and brace for impact.

“Aaahhh, damn it! My Magic Stone! What are you waiting for? Go get ‘em!”

I heard the bandit leader shouting, then was met with a sudden, violent impact. My body had been slammed against the sandy ground, and I felt my life draining away. But at the same time, I could hardly see with the cloud of sand being blown into the air. I was too numb to move, but I knew I had to get up and out of there right away. Even though I’d greatly reduced their numbers, the enemy could still shoot at me from far away.

As I balled up a fist in the sand and managed to sit up, I found the child clutching my chest and trembling.

“Wah?!”

“Ah, I’m glad you’re all right... But we need to get out of here, quick...”

I was relieved to see him unharmed and got up unsteadily.

But as if to laugh at my efforts, a shadow loomed over the both of us. I knew it was the monster without even looking up, and I couldn’t help but voice my marvel before the fear set in.

“Wow... So big...” I had to crane my neck just to look at it.

Countless eyes stared at me as it turned its terrifying face toward me. Tentacles were writhing in what seemed to be its mouth. I barely managed to stay conscious as the monster breathed on me, which was blazing hot and kicked more sand into the air.

Despite the horrific sight before me, the sky was a clear, dreamy blue...

This was bad. I couldn’t afford to die there, and I couldn’t use my long distance mobility skill to escape with the child, considering Marie was still in the oasis.

Grk, grrrk... Grrrark...

But nothing seemed to happen, and I tilted my head in confusion. I’d expected to be engulfed in a fiery blast of boiling sand like before. Either that, or I thought it’d crush me with its enormous body.

We stared at it dubiously, then the monster slowly extended its tentacles toward us. There was no hostility in its movement, and it almost seemed like it was looking for something.

I realized the monster had first appeared because of the magic catalyst the child was holding. Then I remembered the bandits shouting about the Magic Stone. The half-beast still clutched it tightly against his stomach even through the fall.

“Don’t tell me that’s *the* Magic Stone? I heard it disappeared a long time ago.”

The child in my arms looked up to me in response. I couldn’t see his expression under the hood, but the repeatedly blinking eyes were clear like marbles.

“I’ve heard of this story. My ancestors dug it up, and the ancient monster that

came after them destroyed Ujah Peak.”

I looked back up toward the monster stretching its tentacles toward us. I didn’t know how important this item was, but that monster had been searching for it for 200 years.

Just then, my vision was filled with a warm light. I looked down to find the bluish-white light was coming from the Magic Stone. It filled its surroundings with a glittering light, and I couldn’t help but stare despite the situation we were in. There was a mysterious warmth to the illumination, and I heard something like a heartbeat full of life.

The half-beast looked up to me with eyes that seemed to request permission for something. It seemed he wanted to return the Magic Stone, which was the origin of this tragedy.

“...Don’t mind me. You can do as you want.”

He nodded, then lifted the Magic Stone up with both hands.

“I’m sorry for calling you all this time. I will now return the Magic Stone passed down from my ancestors.”

The monster began moving even slower as it saw the stone brimming with shimmering energy. Finally, its tentacles wrapped around the stone as if it had finally found what it was looking for.

Grrrk!

As it cried again, it almost seemed like it was trembling in joy. The monster let out a roar, then shook its massive body as it sank back into the sand.

The land rumbled and sand blew about, forming a sandstorm. I held the child against me, and we stayed low until the rumbling died down.

When things calmed down again, the air was filled with complete silence. We slowly rose to our feet, and a surprising sight filled our vision. Despite my exhausted state, my eyes widened as I saw the giant hole left before us.

“Can that be...an underground labyrinth?!”

The giant hole was so deep we couldn’t see the bottom, and the path that seemed to be a walkway spiraled lower and lower into the ground. And that

unmistakable feeling in the air was exactly like that of an underground labyrinth.

What...just happened?

Did giving the Magic Stone to the monster reveal a completely unknown, underground labyrinth? I'd never seen or heard of such a thing before.

We stood there blankly, and the air coming up from the hole felt like the breath of ancient times. It also reminded me of something...

The catastrophe that had occurred ages ago.

"So this is the reason Ujah Peak was destroyed... Seeking the Magic Stone eventually lead to the forbidden underground labyrinth."

The child looked up to me in response to my comment. His animal-like eyes were round and filled with surprise and a faint sense of hope.

Nobody knew why, but the fact remained that an underground labyrinth had appeared. If we traversed through this labyrinth, we may uncover the mystery of the Magic Stone and this city's forgotten past.

A shiver went down my spine as I thought about the undiscovered world, when I finally noticed two things. The first one being that those dirty bandits were still coming right for us. The second thing was that Marie had deactivated her Luminous Veil and was also coming toward us.

"*Huff...huff...* What was that? I heard a loud noise..."

"Hmm... I'll explain later. I'd like to get away from those bandits as soon as possible. Agreed?" I asked the profusely sweating Marie, and her eyes widened as she, too, noticed them. She then told us to get us out of there, and quick. The child was incredibly light, so the three of us wouldn't be a problem.

"Well then, goodbye everyone. Trayn, the Journey's Guide."

"Aaa—"

Their foul voices rang out as we descended into the world a layer below. This world was unmanaged by man—the domain of the travel god, restricted by no one.

The one thing that was different from usual was that I couldn't move with someone holding onto me from either side. In any case, it had been a while since I felt relief from entering that world of complete darkness.

And yet, I still had one worry on my mind...

Could an elf and half-beast get along? Elves valued purity, and some of them expressed contempt for those of so-called tainted blood...

Just then, a gentle wind lifted the child's clothes, flipping off the hood that had covered his face. It revealed two pointed ears and marble-like eyes. His body was completely covered in fur, but Marie immediately raised her voice at the sight.

"Kitty?!"

The child with round eyes was a member of the Neko tribe. Marie's eyes glimmered at its lovable appearance, and she let out a gleeful "aww!"

He just so happened to be the species she loved most right now. I couldn't help but feel surprised by the coincidence of their meeting. It seemed my worries were unneeded, and I was relieved to know the elf would take good care of him.

"Okay, all we have to do now is report those bandits. Let's go eat something tasty after that."

Marie held the Neko child in her arms as she agreed to my plan.

That was quite the eventful leveling session, but I was glad we got through it alive. I didn't think anyone could've guessed we'd get attacked by monsters and bandits, find the legendary Magic Stone, and even discover a brand new underground labyrinth.

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The sandstorm settled, and the teardown of the simple campsite began. The members of the group began pulling out the half-buried cloth and folding it, and each featured a crest on the gear they wore. Sand had gotten on the inside and outside of their clothes, but they continued moving with unchanging expressions.

Among them was an odd-looking individual. This one was shorter in height than the others, with no crest featured on his equipment. He was clearly not from around these parts with his black hair and eyes, and it was odd to see him walking alongside the leader of the group at the front.

The leader said to him, “I see... That must have been quite a disaster for the Neko tribe. They are a timid race, so I’m sure that was a terrifying experience.”

“Yes, and the bandits have inhabited the oasis. They must have learned by chance that the stone can summon the beast, and there have been many victims as a result.”

There were over ten people trekking steadily through the sands, each of whom were tasked with protecting the peace. There was some height difference between the adults and children, but, surprisingly, it was a little one who had resolved the recent incident and even discovered a labyrinth.

“So please, protect that Neko clansman as promised.”

“No need to be hasty. I must first check whether the labyrinth is real before we speak of granting any protection.”

If the story of the new labyrinth were true, the position of the Neko tribesman, Mewi, would change dramatically. And if Magic Stones could be excavated again, Mewi’s ability to refine magical catalysts would be incredibly valuable for the country.

But this was nothing more than a report by some unknown boy. It could have been a lie or some sort of mistake, so there was still skepticism in the man’s eyes.

The boy responded to his dismissive tone by lifting the cover over his mouth up to his nose, then proceeded to walk wordlessly. It seemed the boy wasn’t very good at dealing with adults.

This new region was still out of reach for adventurers and guilds. The discovery of a new labyrinth would make the local authority move first since it was yet unknown whether it would lead to great wealth or immense danger. If there were both wealth and danger, that would be when the Adventurer’s Guild would be appointed to deal with it.

That Neko tribesman, Mewi, had just given the details the day prior. The tendons of his foot had been cut, and he was currently being treated along with an elf girl in the desert country. It was a shame, but it was unlikely he would be able to walk for a while.

Wind howled from the depths of the ground. The giant hole in the corner of the oasis would never be flooded, despite being near a water vein. Its bottom was invisible even in the sunlight, and there was a strange beat to the wind coming from those depths. It was almost like the civilization that was thought to be destroyed long ago was awakening once more.

“It can’t be... No, there’s no mistaking it. It’s an underground labyrinth!”

“How many years has it been since one was discovered here in the country of Arilai? And look, such a high level monster, and it’s only the entrance!”

The group raised their voices in surprise. But even among their excited comments, the boy only knelt and quietly stared at the sandy ground. There were many sets of footprints there, and as his eyes followed them, he found a familiar object.

As expected, it was the sword he’d lost. It was broken in half and seemed to be warning, “This will be you the next time we meet.”

The footprints continued on, leading to the giant hole of the ancient labyrinth. That must have meant...

“Damned bandits... So they finally made their move into the labyrinth,” the boy muttered. It was already expected to be a difficult situation, but now they had to think about how to deal with bandits as well.

His heart beat loudly, like the drums to ancient music. But the boy looked down the gaping hole, then smiled slightly.

Interlude: Shopping with Ms. Elf

There were a few things that had been bothering me as of late. Most of them had been about Marie, the elf girl who had come to the unknown land of Japan.

The cars driving down the roads, the curious stares, and the food—well, I guess the food was fine, but I heard an unfamiliar environment can lead to stress. I was afraid she'd been getting mentally exhausted and she'd never want to come back one day.

Since I obviously needed to go to work, I couldn't always be there to watch after her. It would've been nice if she had a friend, but mingling with the neighbors would come later.

"And Marie's the type to keep things in instead of complaining..." I muttered to myself on the toilet.

That was probably the biggest problem. I didn't know if it was an elf thing, but she could be overly serious at times. Even if I asked her if there were anything troubling her, she probably wouldn't tell me.

That wasn't the only problem. There was about a half day time difference between Japan and the dream world. Morning over there was night here, so about half a day passed whenever we went to sleep. If I slept at 7 p.m., it would be 7 a.m. over there. That meant we were active for twenty-four hours straight. But our worlds seemed to be independent of each other, because I felt completely rested upon waking up.

Still, I was worried this lifestyle may cause her stress. It didn't affect me one bit, since I'd lived like this for the past twenty years and enjoyed it. But this was a completely new life for her, and all her prior knowledge was denied with each passing day as she learned more about modern civilization.

Because of this, I couldn't help but grow more and more worried. I wanted to support her in any way I could of course; there was nothing I wanted more than for her to enjoy her life here. But at the same time, I was made aware of another part of the problem.

"Hm, I guess it all comes down to me wanting her to spend time with me.

Maybe that's the most problematic part of all this."

I stood up and pushed the lever on the side of the toilet. The water swirled with a flushing noise, and I sighed as I left the restroom.

"It's not as if I'm interested in playing with dolls or anything. I grew out of such things long ago." She'd suddenly told me so as we were on the way to go shopping.

This made me pause to think, considering she was saying this as she sat down on the sidewalk while staring at a doll. Usually, that was a line someone would say while passing by with a look of disinterest.

It was a sunny Sunday, with long clouds that seemed like they were stretched by the wind. We were at a well-populated, local shopping district, but it felt like the place had become much quieter compared to before. There were many residential areas in this part of the Koto Ward, and the downtown area had a long history, so the buildings there changed often. A shop with its shutters down turned into a condo, and a convenience store was built there for the new potential customers in the area. Because of this, most of the scenery from my childhood had changed by now.

I stood there reminiscing while Ms. Elf got drawn in by the doll meant to grab peoples' attention as they passed by. She was blatantly staring at it as she continued complaining, crouched right in front of it with seemingly no intention of moving.

It was a windy day for spring, and she seemed a bit cold in her outfit of a collared shirt, skirt, and high socks. But when I peered in to see what she was looking at, I found a surprisingly cute doll waiting there.

"The face is a bit funny looking though. It's kinda pouting like it's annoyed, and its eyes are staring off to the side."

"Hmph. It may have fooled you, but I won't be fooled so easily. This one did something bad. I've been alive for a hundred years, so I can tell just by looking at its eyes."

I was a bit skeptical about her claim, but nodded anyway.

It was a small shop with miscellaneous goods on display. They were nowhere

near as well-stocked as department stores, but there was a reason they were able to stay in business.

People didn't really notice the shop signs as they walked by. The shops were dark for the most part, and few people bothered to peek in to see what sort of wares were being sold.

So how did they attract customers? One method was to use appetizing smells. Stimulating one's appetite was an effective way to loosen their purse strings. This had been effective in several cases, and it was usually game over if they were able to stop Marie in her tracks.

In the case of a general merchandise store like this, putting an interesting and eye-catching item at about eye level was the way to go. This let them slightly control the flow of traffic, and was apparently an effective way to catch wild elves out in the city.

"What are you giving me that look for? I'll have you know, I'm only touching it to check the material. See, it's so fluffy and soft, I'm sure it would be warm even on cold days."

She spoke quickly as she explained, but it sounded to me like she was making excuses.

As she squished the doll's stomach, it made a loud squealing noise that sounded like, "Papyuuu!" I didn't notice at first, but it seemed there was some sort of button on its stomach that when pressed made it squeal like that.

"Ahh! Wha, whoa, whoaaa!" The girl jerked back and nearly dropped it, but managed to catch it mid-air.

I let out a breath of relief. I clapped in amazement to her swift reaction, but she glared at me with her purple eyes.

"Did you hear that? This little one is complaining about you too. He's saying, 'Kazuhiho the sleepyhead will be freezing in his sleep all alone on a cold night.'"

Well, I'd been feeling pretty cozy lately thanks to you. And I ended up in the other world once I fell asleep, so the cold didn't really bother me.

Although these thoughts crossed my mind, the words that actually came out

of my mouth were completely different.

“Are you sure? I thought I heard something else.”

I crouched down next to her. It was spring already, but it was a windy day. When I touched her finger holding the doll, it felt a little cold. I turned the doll over to face Marie, then began talking in a high-pitched voice.

“Take me with you to sleep, and you should be able to sleep nice and warm. Won’t you ask Kazuhiho to take me with you?”

The girl’s eyes widened, and her cheeks seemed slightly flushed. She’d already fallen for the trap laid out by the shop owners there. It didn’t take long for the corners of her lips to curl into a smile.

She cleared her throat, then looked at the doll instead of me. “I-I suppose. I doubt anyone would buy you with a face like that, so I don’t mind asking him for you. But you must behave while you stay in our room. Understood?”

I made the doll nod, then moved it out of the way and stared at her. She stuck out her lips a bit and averted her eyes, which almost made me burst out laughing. She didn’t realize it, but the face she was making looked exactly like the one on the doll.



And so, I walked around the shopping district with Marie as she continued playing with the doll. She was still making the same pouty face as the doll, and I was having a hard time keeping it together.

It seemed Marie was fond of characters with a bit of an attitude, which I realized when we were picking out books for her. Surprisingly, it seemed like she didn't even realize this herself.

"So, do you mind going with me to pick out some clothes?"

"But I don't need so many different outfits. I like these clothes, and the pajamas feel so nice on my skin. I doubt I'll be going out too much, so I'll be okay with a little care."

I shook my head. Even if she didn't mind, I couldn't have a young girl like her living in a single outfit. She did spend most of her time in a robe in the other world, so she was probably used to making due with what she had. But I got a feeling she had some interest in clothing. There were many pretty designs in the spring, and I remembered her looking at the brightly colored fabrics displayed in the store windows.

"Why do you insist on being so frugal, Marie? I really don't mind."

She gave me a look as if the answer were obvious.

"Because I realized you aren't wealthy. I had the wrong impression when I saw how high up your room was, but I can't ask for too much if your earnings are so low."

Ah, so that was her reasoning. But if that were the case... My eyes went toward the doll, but she quickly hid it behind her back.

She always did enjoy shopping. It seemed she was troubled by all the temptation around her, no matter how hard she held back. This only made me want to resolve her dilemma.

Yeah, these things were best addressed as early as possible. Otherwise, she could end up with a bad habit of holding in anything and everything.

"I see. Then how about we go learn about shopping today?"

She looked at me questioningly. "Learn...about shopping?"

I nodded. The problem now wasn't about being too frugal, but the fact that she didn't understand money. So long as she lives in Japan, it'd be useful for her to know what was necessary and what wasn't.

We arrived at the department store, which appeared more like a place of learning than a shopping center in our eyes.

First, we headed underground instead of going to a clothing store. It was her first time seeing an escalator, and she took several deep breaths before hopping on. She then stuck to my back and stared at her feet the whole ride.

"It kept moving by itself like you said! That was fun!" she told me with a smile as she hopped off.

She held the doll from earlier in her hands, so maybe it was this unexpected guest that was making her so cheerful. It seemed buying it was the right choice, in a sense.

"There are tons of rides like that in this world. Without them, larger buildings would be too inconvenient to walk around in and could drive customers away."

"I see, I thought this place was too big, but that makes sense. In my world, the shopping district we were in earlier was the typical size."

By explaining these things, the "weird thing that moves" turned into "a convenient object set there to draw in customers." She understood better when I explained the reasoning behind them, rather than the structural details.

It was a Sunday, so I decided to spend the day teaching her more about the daily life and common knowledge of this world. Maybe that would help alleviate some of the things that had been troubling me this morning.

I began by explaining things like automatic doors, elevators, and restrooms as I did earlier, then had her try them out for herself. Toilets in particular had automatically flowing water and hand-drying machines, both of which were a good thing for her to learn about. Her eyes were wide open when she returned, and when I asked her, "Were you surprised?" she replied, "Yes!" and jogged over to me. She then spread her hands wide as if something incredible just happened.

"It blew out wind so hard! And it was like...my skin was being squeezed. The

sensation between my fingers was tickling me. I thought I was going to scream!”

Oh, so that was the “nyaaa!” sound coming from the girl’s restroom...

I thought to myself that it was a good thing I brought her when no one was around, and took out a handkerchief to wipe the excess moisture off her hands.

“You use those things to blow water off your hands. A towel or something wouldn’t be hygienic with so many people using it, so we have devices that don’t come in contact with peoples’ hands.”

“Hygienic... I’ve seen so many signs in Japan about washing hands and rinsing your mouth. Why is that?”

That was a bit of a complicated question. It was probably better to take my time answering it the next time we went to the library or something.

We arrived at the underground facility, so I decided to show her the food section. Though I wasn’t there to buy anything, so we were just looking around.

“Ah! It’s bright down here! Fruits and vegetables... They sell food here?”

“That’s right. Many people shop in these places; they’re crucial to our daily lives. The tastier and rarer food items tend to be higher in price.”

Matsutake mushrooms were an exception, but...well, I guess that was a personal preference. I hadn’t even properly eaten matsutake before.

It was here I decided to take my time to teach her about the money I used every day. I told her my approximate salary and how much of it was used on food. Then I subtracted the ballpark food costs between the two of us from my income.

“There’s another cost of living called heating and lighting expenses. Lights, water, and even gas can contribute to this cost.”

It seemed she didn’t realize everything cost so much money.

Thinking about it, once water and sewage systems were in place in the middle ages, they tended to be left alone. Maybe they’d collect taxes and do repairs, but that was about it.

Anyway, I subtracted those costs from my salary, along with my phone bill,

car maintenance fees, and taxes.

“They even charge money for water that’s taken from nature? That’s insane. Doesn’t anyone get angry about this?”

“Hmm, I don’t know how things were back in the day, but water in Japan is maintained really well. I’m pretty sure there aren’t too many countries where you can drink clean water from faucets directly.”

“What?! Th-Then what do those people do when they want water?”

“They buy it in stores. It’s more expensive that way though.”

She blinked.

There were also construction and dam maintenance costs to get water to each household, but I decided to tell her about these things the next time we went to the library. She was far better than me when it came to memorization and calculation, so the quick explanation I gave her as we went up the escalator was enough for her to learn already.

As she played with her doll with both hands, it seemed like she was processing the information I’d just given her. I answered a few questions, then finally said what I’d been wanting to tell her.

“And what’s left over is the money I can spend for the month. Though I do need to save some of it of course.”

“Hmm, so that’s how it all works. I’m surprised there are so many details to money management. But I feel like I have a grasp of it now.”

I asked her what she meant, and she answered, “Peoples’ lifestyles are managed by their earnings and expenses. That may not sound too nice, but seeing all these facilities as a part of your daily lives here, it seems to be working rather successfully.”

It seemed she was understanding it quite well now. An average salaryman like me couldn’t grasp the entirety of Japanese economics, but I was sure even those in charge of its management only saw the full picture vaguely.

“So, we made it to our destination: the clothing area. Now that you’ve learned about money, let’s take a look at the shops here.”

“Hehe, this is getting fun. You’re good at teaching. I think you would make a splendid teacher.”

Huh, would I?

That seemed to be a compliment, so I thanked her.

The clothing area had many different sections, like luxury and non-luxury, and sections divided by age groups. There were many expensive shops, but Marie made an “X” with her fingers and said things like “the watches displayed in the watch corner are too expensive.” But unlike earlier, this was the answer she gave only after we discussed my available funds.

“That’s how you manage money. I think it’s more important to think about what you will and won’t buy, rather than deciding not to buy anything at all.”

For example, if I really loved that watch from earlier, I could buy it by making a budget and saving up for it for a few months. It was obtainable so long as I decided on what I did or didn’t want.

“I see, so you need to choose only what you need without wasting money,” she said as she waved her doll’s hand.

It was okay, that doll didn’t count as wasting money. It had the important role of entertaining Ms. Elf from here on.

In any case, I was able to teach her about shopping, a necessary piece of knowledge for living in Japan. As Marie began picking out clothes, she seemed like she got to know and accept Japan just a little bit more than before.

We entered a café to take a rest. Before her was the unfamiliar sight of coffee and next to her were her shopping bags.

I was putting sugar and milk in her cup when she tapped my hand with her finger. I looked up to find the elf, with her ears hidden under a knit hat, smiling at me.

“Thank you for buying me such wonderful clothes. That one piece with the laces should be wearable when the season changes too. And it was so inexpensive!”

We spent a long time in the clothing area choosing what we needed together.

The shop employees came gathering to help us, which took us by surprise. The appearance of a cute girl like Marie was like a special event for them, and they picked out all sorts of clothes that would look good on her without pushing us to buy anything. They even answered her questions about the seasons of Japan and when each piece of clothing could be worn, which I found to be helpful.

“No problem at all. I’m glad we were able to get you some spring clothes. After all, you were saying you didn’t need any other clothes at first.”

“It was only natural when I didn’t understand the situation. I wouldn’t have minded if you were rich... Well, I probably still would have minded.”

She had a point. I wouldn’t have been comfortable asking someone to buy me a bunch of things when I didn’t know their worth. In that sense, I was glad she now saw the whole picture and gained the ability to pick out what we needed.

As I thought about it, a little something peeked out from under the table. Its lips were sticking out, and its eyes were looking off to the side. Then, with a high-pitched voice, it spoke to me.

“Hello, Kazuhiho, thanks for teaching me so much today.”

“Hehe, you’re welcome. I hope that information was useful.”

“Of course! It was a ton of fun, and Marie loves her new clothes. Plus, she seems to be enjoying life here in Japan. You know, you’re kind of a ditz, but you can be real mature when it comes down to it.”

I wished she’d cut it out, because seeing Marie sticking her lips out while doing her ventriloquism almost made me spit my coffee out in laughter. She was almost too cute to handle already.

As I chuckled to myself, the doll began patting my head. I raised both my hands in surrender, and her lips turned into the shape of a smile. Seeing a smile like hers made me feel like my heart was being cleansed. Happy emotions seemed to gush out of her and flow into me through her eyes. I couldn’t help but stare, despite my age.

To be honest, she had me good. She didn’t realize how powerful her punch was, and I pretended not to be affected, but I was only keeping it together thanks to being twenty-five years old.

I cleared my throat, then poked the fluffy doll with my finger.

“You actually like him a lot, don’t you?”

“Yes, I love him. He’s such a little brat, I can’t take my eyes off him.”

It was such an honest response, we both suddenly burst out in laughter. It had been a while since I felt such genuine joy. All this from simply going out to get clothes with her... The time I spent with her on my days off truly were special.

It was already dark by the time we went outside, and we decided to take the long way home.

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima Suzuki. This is my first published work.

First, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me with this publication.

To Hobby Japan, thank you for choosing this book out of the many other submissions and giving me this precious opportunity.

To my editor, thank you for kindly advising me when I didn't know what I was doing. I'm quite tough, so if I say something too amateurish, please don't hesitate to shout, "Shut up, Makishima!"

To Yappen, the illustrator, thank you for drawing your stunningly beautiful art. I have a rather serious personality, so it was just by chance that I only requested sexy illustrations, haha.

I'm very thankful for my wife, who has generously accepted my self-centered efforts to get this book published. I'm talking about you, my love.

I also believe this book has become a reality thanks to the kind support of my readers.

We've done it, everyone. We've finally welcomed Ms. Elf to Japan.

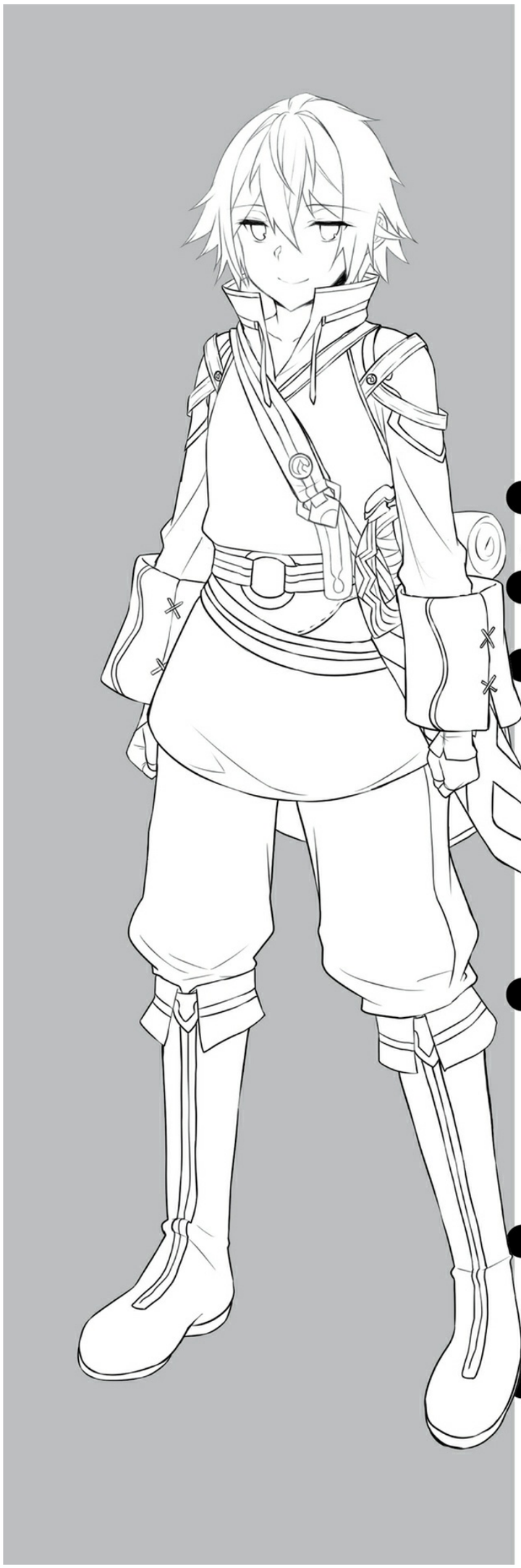
Now, this is a slightly strange story about going between Japan and a dream world. A main character with a bit of an obsession for fantasy, and an elf who learns of Japanese culture. Please watch over them as they enjoy their time together.

Dreams are a strange phenomenon, but I believe I dream more often than others. But I can't really compare the frequency with anyone, so this is just a guess. They could be in color or black and white, or show you a place you've never seen before or seen only in your dreams...

Don't you feel a little lucky when you have a dream like that? Though there are scary dreams too, of course. I hope you will be able to experience that positive feeling by reading this book at least.

Oh, and there's a rare, chance meeting with a Magi Drake during this story. I believe she, too, will turn dreams into a fun experience, so I hope you enjoy.

Well then, I hope to see you again in the next volume.





Kazuhiho
(Kazuhiro Kitase)

Attribute

The Moon
(Captivation, Breaking Away from the Past, Escape from Reality, Trauma)

Class/Level

Illusory Swordsman / Level 72

Primary Skills (Named)

Reprise
Precisely repeat a set motion pattern.

Over the Road
A basic mobility skill that was upgraded to a Named Skill due to the customizations done by the protagonist. Activates instantly, but has a weight limit and travel range restriction, and both feet must be touching the ground to use it.

Phantom Image
Creates an illusion.

Secondary Skills

Intuition LV 62 -> 63
One-Handed Swords LV 49 -> 51
Insight LV 39
Language Proficiency LV 62 (A ~ C)
Humanoid Beastmen **Giant Language**
Humanoid Reptiles **Ancient Language (Lesser / Greater)**
Elvish (Lesser / Greater)
Fishing LV 59
Long Distance Movement
(Restricted to areas with the Travel God's monument)
LV 42 -> 43

Skill Candidates

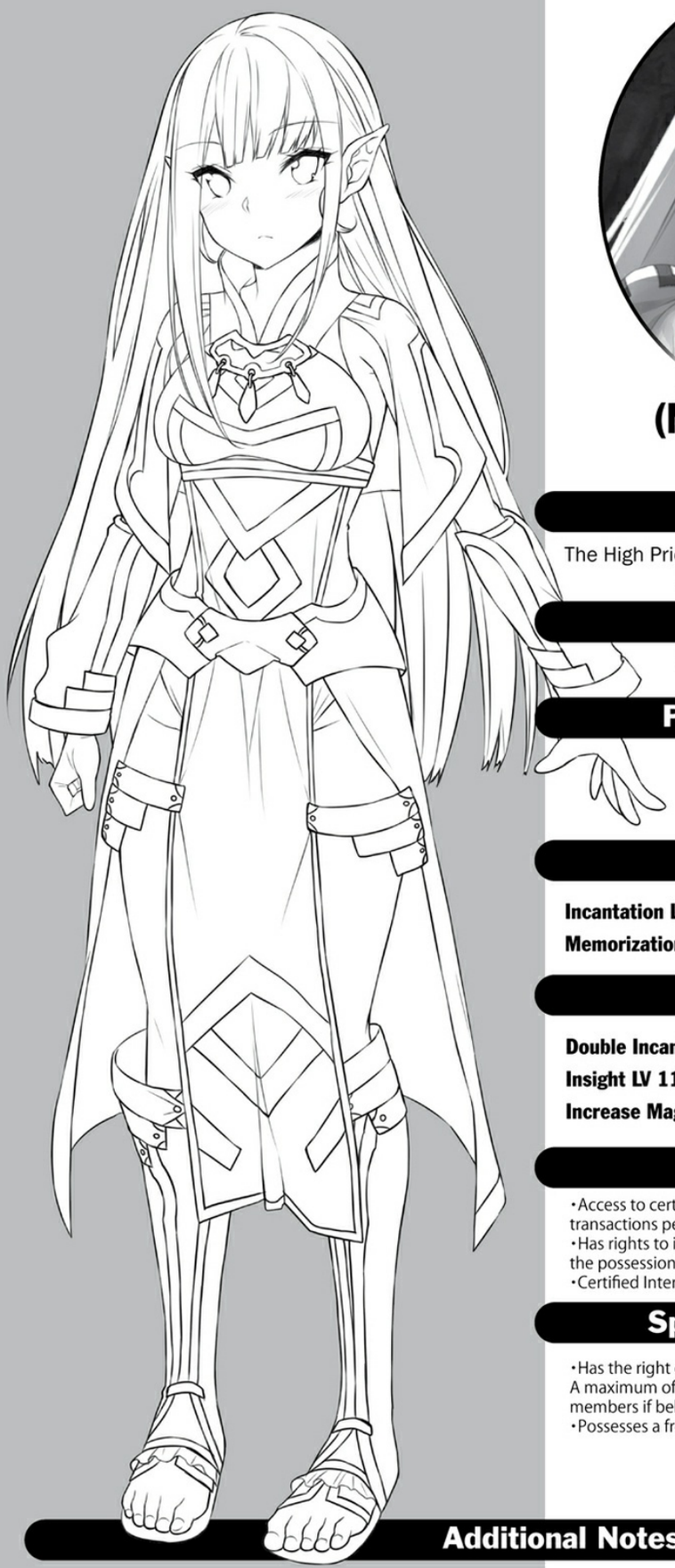
Holy Prayer LV 13
Two-Handed Swords LV 21
Stamina LV 69
Concealment LV 48
Cooking LV 32
Shields LV 29

Other Special Notes

- Able to freely travel between regions due to having no affiliation.
- Prohibited from entering specific ruins owned by ruling governances.
- Special Abilities: Greater Pain Nullification, Hypnosis / Sleep Resistance



Mariabelle
(Nickname: Marie)



Attribute

The High Priestess
(Intellect, Sagacity, Suspicion, Pessimism)

Class/Level

Spirit Sorceress / LV 27 -> 32

Primary Skills (Named)

Divine Blessing
A user of Spirit Sorcery.

Secondary Skills

Incantation LV 27 -> 29
Precision LV 26 -> 28
Memorization LV 26 -> 27
Grand Experience LV 12 -> 14

Skill Candidates

Double Incantation LV 12
Fortify Mind LV 13 -> 15
Insight LV 11 -> 12
Cooking LV 21
Increase Magic / Spirit LV 22 -> 23

Other Special Notes

・Access to certain documents and catalyst transactions permitted due to being in the Sorcerer's Guild.
・Has rights to investigate specific ruins under the possession of the ruling governances.
・Certified Intermediate Sorceress

Special Notes about Party

・Has the right of priority to exploring the Ujah Peaks Underground Labyrinth. A maximum of four members is permitted to explore at once. Allowed to swap members if belonging to Arilai (selected from those certified by Arilai)
・Possesses a fresh scale of a magi drake and dragon's blood.

Additional Notes on Stats

・Attributes: Each person is born with one of the Arcanas. 1~2 Arcanas in the regular or reversed position are chosen. One cannot see their own or others' Arcana.
・Primary Skills: The number of obtainable Skills varies based on level. Combining obtained skills will upgrade them into "Named" Skills.
・Sub Skills: Abilities possessed by each person. Secondary Skill Levels cannot surpass the user's Class Level.
・Skill Candidates: Candidates for upgrading into Secondary Skills.



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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 1

by Makishima Suzuki

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Edited by Kris Swanson

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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
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Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen