
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
2
Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen



After a little while, the elf girl emerged from the back wearing ornate sandals. The shop worker and I stared. The white, breezy-looking clothing was cinched up at her waist and ankles. There were slits in her top from her shoulder to her sleeve, from which her beautiful skin peeked out. She looked like a dancer from a foreign country, and her outfit emphasized her natural allure even further.


They felt their bodies shudder as the slightly viscous water enveloped and gently warmed them.
"AAAHHH, SO MUCH HOT WATER... THIS IS SO LUXURIOUS!"
The slightly cloudy color and scent made them feel as if they were surrounded by forestry, and the slippery texture of the water made both the girls' eyes widen as they immersed themselves in the water feet-first.
"NNG! THERE IS A THICKNESS TO THIS WATER. BUT I CAN FEEL IT SEEPING INTO MY TIRED BODY. HOW WONDERFUL."


"HEY, KID. ENJOY YOUR FLIGHT."
His creepy smile came rushing at me, then his full-powered swing connected with my body. I tried protecting myself with my sword at the last second, but it did little to absorb the impact. I spun diagonally, and the moment I thought I saw the river in my vision, I bounced off the surface of the water like a skipping stone. You've gotta be kidding!

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Chapter of Magi Drake

Prologue

Episode 1: Conquering the Ancient Labyrinth

Episode 2: It’s French Cuisine, Ms. Elf

Episode 3: License to Explore

Episode 4: The Magi Drake’s Pulse

Episode 5: Time to Rest, Lady Magi Drake

Episode 6: Illusion

Episode 7: Welcome to Japan, Ms. Magi Drake

Episode 8: Duel

Episode 9: Sorcerer’s Guild Leader

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Chapter of Magi Drake: Prologue

Thunk, thunk, thu-thunk.

We walked through a town in the Desert Country of Arilai with the light sound of drums echoing around us. Something that sounded like an ocarina joined in the melody, making the mood more relaxing and cheerful.

This country had been developed by carving spots into rocky mountains along their slope. In such desert lands as these, water was crucial for survival, and so was resisting the infernal heat of the sun's rays. This was why people pumped water out of the sand-colored river flowing from the back of this place.

I explained this to the elven girl as we weaved around people wearing turbans on their heads, and she simply replied with a mildly disinterested, "Huh." Her pale, purple eyes showed a glimpse of intellectual curiosity, but they were clouded by the sun directly above us.

"So how do they deal with this heat? That's more important than their history or culture right now."

Her eyes glanced over to me as she slightly lifted the hood of her robe covering her head. The sunlight accentuated the contrast between her skin color and shadow, making her white skin seem almost too bright.

My attempts to pique her curiosity with conversation were thwarted by her absolute hate of the overwhelming heat. I wished it wasn't so hot, but I was the one who invited her out to the desert region, so there wasn't much I could say about that.

The girl's name was Marie. She was of half-fairy, half-elven descent. Her full name was Mariabelle, and she was quite a rare species around these parts. However, no one dared bother her with the way she was holding her sorcerer's staff with both hands, wearing an obviously irritated expression on her face.

Those who sought to unravel the mysteries of the ancient ways, known as sorcerers, were valuable and powerful not only in this country, but throughout the entire world. Marie was of an even rarer class known as a spirit sorceress,

and she'd shown me just how priceless her abilities were just a few days ago.

She was staring at the city with a neutral expression when she then directed her purple eyes toward me.

"This place sure is strange. I've never seen so many people taking naps on the street like this."

"It's because the sun is directly overhead. One of the interesting things about these desert countries is how they have different hours of operation, I think."

"You don't seem all that interested with that sleepy-looking face of yours. Besides, I can hardly believe it's cooler just in that building."

I chuckled and shrugged, saying, "Who knows?" then reached my hand out for hers.

Even in these harsh environments, people live on. For all the time they'd pressed on, surely they'd developed some culture for entertainment and joy down the line as well. Wouldn't it be interesting to see what sort of culture they've produced?

"What's that knowing look for? If you're trying to trick me again, it's not going to work, you know."

"Don't worry, I'm not trying to trick you. I heard you can enjoy some delicious tea in that building. Come on, let's go check out some Arilai culture. My treat."

Marie was in a bad mood due to the heat, as I'd expected, and turned her head away with her nose in the air. Though it seemed she preferred to have some tea in the shade rather than stand out in the sun because she placed her fingertips on my outstretched hand.

We were greeted with a "Welcome!" as we stepped into the rest area. The stone-paved floor was polished smoothly and lined with multiple human-sized carpets. There were people sitting on these carpets, enjoying some tea and food.

The air smelled of incense... No, it must have been some sort of spice. It made the back of my nose tingle, but it was a refreshing and interesting sensation that reminded me of smelling herbs.

There was an exotic atmosphere to the place, but the girl was surprised by something else entirely: a light breeze had blown in, cooling the heat on our skin.

“Oh, it’s a bit cooler in here! How is it that the temperature is different in here than outside?”

Now, now, you’ll find out soon enough...

I ordered two cups of tea along with some fruit and steamed chicken, then led her toward some empty seats.

The walls, which were a burnt sand color, seemed to be made of sculpted stone. There was a window somewhat higher than normal, where the warm air seemed to be exiting.

Marie was still looking around curiously, so I pulled up a rug and invited her to sit with me.

“Here, take a seat. Then we might be able to get a glimpse of their culture.”

“I don’t see what we can learn by just sitting down...” she muttered to herself as she removed her boots and sat on the carpet. It seemed her feet were hot and tired from all the walking, because she let out a big sigh. “Nnh, it feels so nice! Wait a minute...what’s going on here? I never imagined the floor would be so cool to the touch.”

As I also removed my shoes and went barefoot, I could hardly believe how the heat disappeared almost instantly. The sweat seemed to withdraw from my body, and it was nice and cool just as Marie had mentioned.

In reality, it wasn’t as if the AC was on, but the gentle sound of flowing water was coming from around and below the building, which helped alleviate some of the heat. I succeeded in making the girl’s eyes widen as I told her so, which made inviting her here worth it after all.

“I’m surprised this place has such an abundance of water despite being in the desert.”

“There are streams full of water in the upper layers. The people use the water that flows down here.”

Marie seemed impressed as she lowered the hood of the robe that was covering her face. Her lustrous, white hair and long ears appeared, her radiance catching the attention of those around us. Even the beads of sweat on her skin were like accessories that emphasized her natural beauty.

I heard sighs from all around us as people admired her from afar.

I wanted her to relax and enjoy herself, so I placed a cushion behind her back and had her lay down. The looks she received were easier to ignore this way, and allowed her to stretch out her limbs in comfort.

“Ahh, I feel so rejuvenated... So, this is the secret to spending time in the desert. I learned something useful today.”

“It’s kind of like how being in the shade of a tree feels cooler. Trees prefer cooler temperatures, too, so they absorb water from the ground, which is dissipated through their leaves. We just happen to benefit from this natural process as well.”

“Hmm... I didn’t know that. Dissipation... You mentioned something about that before. If it’s this effective at cooling things, I’d like to find a way to put it into use with spirits.”

That wasn’t a bad idea. I told her she should give it a try, since she had the ability to use Spirit Sorcery.

As we talked, our tea and food were brought over to where we were sitting.

“So, this country’s culture is to lie down and forget about the heat by enjoying some food. That’s the correct way to pass the time if you ask me... Oh, you probably shouldn’t use that red sauce.”

Marie sniffed it a couple times, made a face that told me she would heed my warning, then pushed the sauce bowl aside. She then picked up a white-ish piece of chicken meat and tossed it into her little mouth.

“I would be happy if you could at least introduce salt to them. Oh, but the herbs they use do give the dishes a refreshing aftertaste.”

Salt was quite valuable. Come to think of it, how would they even make salt in desert regions? I should look into that some time...

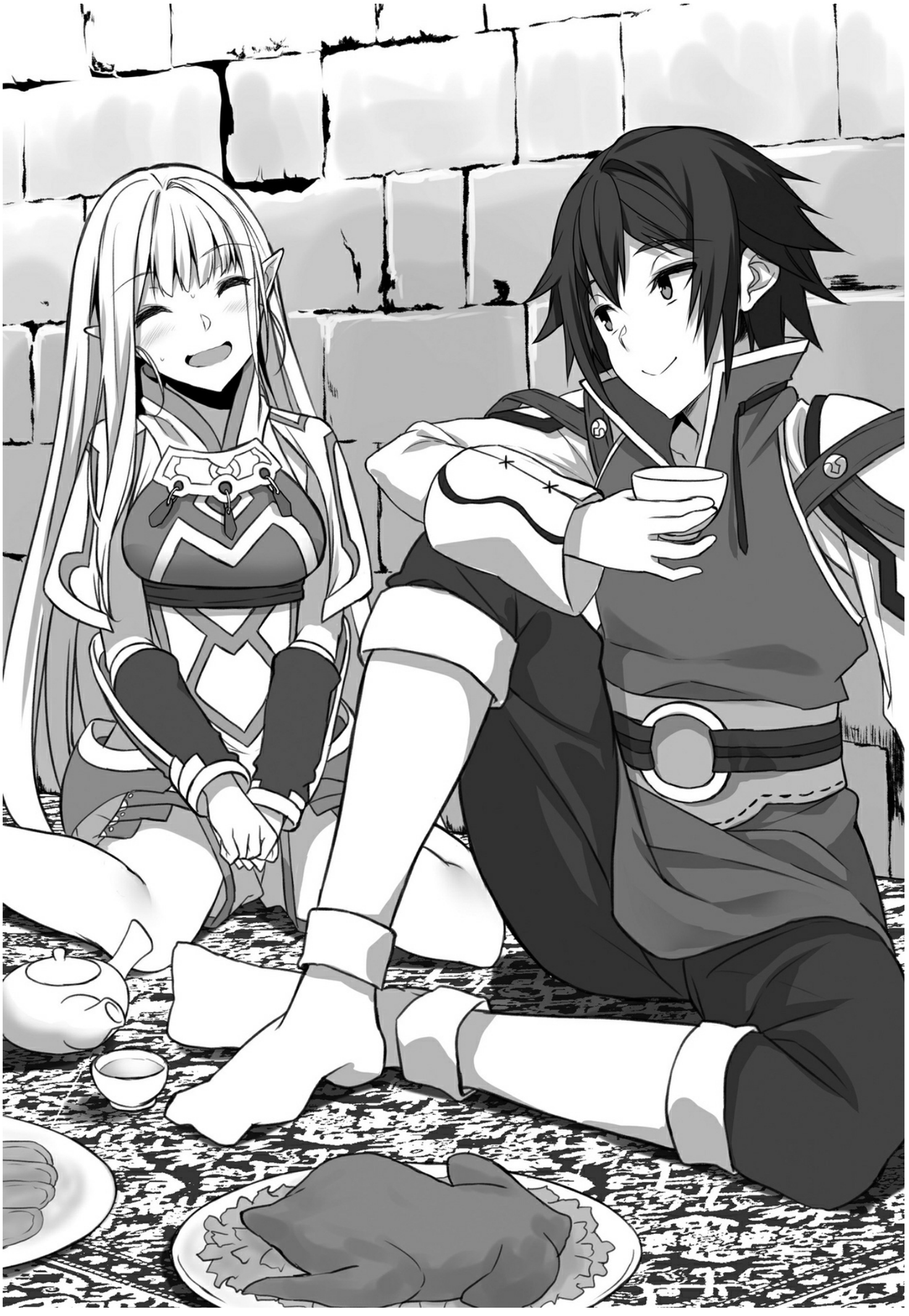
It seemed Marie had gotten used to the practice of eating food with her bare hands. She complained about getting grease all over her fingers at first, but now she was eating chicken without utensils or hesitation.

The herbs served to remove any odors, so it seemed the food was tasty even to an elf's sensitive palate. The chicken was just what we needed for our tired bodies.

The tea lingering in the cups was amber in color, and a fragrant aroma wafted up into my nose. Appreciating the smell, I was glad I'd chosen the one that was a little pricier.

Before me was an elf, relaxing and enjoying herself, and fragrant tea leaves that could only be found in desert countries like this one. It was quite the luxurious day.

I enjoyed the otherworldly atmosphere as I looked around the rest area.



As expected, the labyrinth seemed to be a hot topic among the people. I couldn't blame them, considering an ancient labyrinth had suddenly appeared within a long-forgotten excavation site.

What *did* surprise me was that there was no hint of fear on their faces as they discussed it. I figured most people would be scared if a dungeon appeared so closely to their homes.

I continued listening, and the reason soon became clear: That site had apparently been used for the magic stone excavations in the past, and it had been about 200 years since that great source of income had been cut off. There was a sense of fervor in the citizens as they spoke of tales from those times of great wealth.

Marie was also listening with her long ears. She leaned in to whisper to me.

"So it *is* a big deal that the labyrinth was discovered. We're outsiders here, but we're supposed to get a special permit to explore it, right?"

"Ordinarily, yeah. If they turn us away because this land is theirs, they'd have less adventurers coming in to their region."

Although, with adventurers who were associated with any guilds, there'd been cases where they were turned away with some payment for their troubles. As for us, Ms. Elf was in the Sorcerer's Guild, so I doubted that would happen.

I mulled over the thought as I sipped some of the tea.

Yeah, that's good...

There was a floral aroma that came with the flavor.

"Once we get that permit, let's report back to the guild at once. I sent a messenger bird, but I've been out for a while, so they may be worried."

"Yeah, we should let them know you're all right. We can head to the ancient labyrinth after that. I'm looking forward to it."

After I told her as much, Marie turned her calm gaze toward me.

"About that... We still don't know if I can participate in the exploration. I hear

the labyrinth has a high difficulty level, so it's likely that my rank isn't high enough to get approval."

That... was a factor I hadn't considered.

I crossed my legs and listened to her explain. According to Marie, the Sorcerer's Guild checks a new labyrinth for its difficulty level, then assigns people who are adequately qualified. Even if we were the ones who discovered it, we may be barred from participation if they didn't think we could handle it.

"Of course, they wouldn't simply pass up an opportunity to unveil the secrets of ancient wisdom. In that case, they typically choose a substitute to investigate it instead. That way, they wouldn't be wasting any time or resources."

"Wait, you mean they might choose someone besides you? I don't want to go exploring with some stranger. If that happens, I'm going to pass too."

"Not much can be done about that. The discovery of a labyrinth that has existed since ancient times is almost unheard of. We still don't know what they're going to decide."

So just be prepared, she added.

In other words, there was a chance we'd have to give up on exploring the labyrinth completely.

Well, I guess we'd just have to roll with the punches there. If I protested too hard, it may negatively impact Marie's future at the guild.

The citizens continued gossiping about how the royal family had sent a scouting party, and how the refinement method of magic stones had been discovered. It was mostly just conjecture, but as people who knew the facts of what was happening, all we could say was, "Rumors are pretty crazy."

"The refinement method of magical stones... Do you think they're talking about Mewi?" Marie whispered in my ear.

I nodded. "Probably."

I didn't expect the common folk to know about that, but I listened in on their conversation anyway.

Mewi was a boy from the Neko tribe we'd rescued from a group of bandits

just a few days ago. For some reason, he was able to control the objects known as the magic stones.

I think rumors are interesting because the more you talk about them, the more convincing they seem. Out of the various ideas the people come up with, the most likely one to be true is first chosen. That becomes the starting point, which then becomes a line, and they're compared to other points in the story to check if everything makes sense. Then, eventually, these vague ideas began to take form.

We continued eavesdropping with interest, but we didn't realize there was another ear listening.

Forgotten in my shoulder bag was the present given to us by the Magi Drake. Legendary beings whose levels surpassed 1,000 were capable of using magic we couldn't even comprehend. The dragon scale inconspicuously glowing with a bluish-white hue was connected to the depths of the Nazul-Nazul Ruins. Only lizardmen lived in the now-empty underground city, and only we knew of the magi drake who resided further in, beyond a secret passageway.

The dragon took a deep breath, then uttered to herself as she examined her surroundings.

"So, they've opened the door to the labyrinth. How carefree they are, ignorant of the accursed land that lies within." She let out a sigh.

Then, another image entered her vision. It was the group that was conducting a preliminary search of the labyrinth. Among them was a radiantly glowing stone.

"Hah, hah, I suppose I will let them have their bait and return to their country for now. It seems they have become quite skillful in battle by now."

No one yet knew who she meant by "they." But her joyous grin seemed to be in anticipation for whatever change was about to come.

The look in the Magi Drake's eyes then seemed to take on a smile of a different nature. She turned and directed her gaze at her feet, then stretched out her wings and covered her surroundings.

This way, no one could interfere. She wanted to keep the beautiful sight that

was about to occur all to herself.

Cracks had begun audibly forming in the eggs she'd been warming for so long. The hatching that occurs once every millennium was a fantastical sight to behold.

The obsidian eggs resembled diamonds with geometric lines cut into them as they emitted a grandiose radiance. The shells had become transparent enough to reveal the whelps inside. They each laid in different postures, with some opening their mouths toward the sky, and others curled up as if they wanted more sleep.

There was clear maternal love in the Magi Drake's eyes as she smiled, watching over her adorable children.

"Hah, hah, a sight which only comes once every 1,000 years... Perhaps I should have shown them as well."

Surely, the looks on their faces would have been quite entertaining. They would have raised their voices in wonder, and maybe thought of their own futures as they looked at each other, turning red in the face.

As both a magi drake and a mother, it would have been an unforgivable mistake to show her own children's birth to others. But at the same time, she had the feeling it would have been an unforgettably enjoyable experience.

"No matter. If they wish it, we will certainly meet again some day. Now, my children, it is time for you to awaken."

The magi drake let out a breath from her nose, then moved her face closer to the eggs. As she did so, she knew she was also changing herself.

The resounding *crack* was the noise of a new life entering the world. At the same time, it was the sound of the dark future awaiting them that even she hadn't anticipated...

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 1: Conquering the Ancient Labyrinth

A bird cried out with a high-pitched chirp. It flew up into the sunny skies, to an altitude a normal bird couldn't possibly reach. There were forests and rivers in the view below, and more farmlands appeared as it came closer to the center of the nation.

Fertile lands have been protected since ancient times, and even now, there were farmers working hard at planting seeds. Little did they know, right beneath their feet was an underground city where the magi drake rested.

Beyond them and past the smooth hills, the main road could be seen. The bird continued straight ahead, descending toward its destination with an accuracy unlike a bird at all. Even the soaring castle walls were no use in barring the bird from entry. It easily flew over the wall and approached a large, black building—the pride of the Alexei region, the Sorcerer's Guild.

Waiting on the roof of the building was a middle-aged man. The bird flapped and folded its wings as it landed upon his outstretched arm. The man, who quickly fed the bird a piece of raw meat, had been a servant of the guild for many years.

"You came all the way from Arilai? That's pretty impressive, considering you had to fly over two countries!"

He beamed, then removed the letter attached to the bird's leg. It was a piece of paper made from grass, with small letters written all over its surface.

"Ah, it's from Mariabelle. Elven magic's precise and powerful as usual. Haven't really seen her in a good minute... Ah!"

As he walked through a doorway, a hand reached out from the shadows and snagged the letter out of his grasp like a hawk. The middle-aged man was just about to yell angrily, but fell silent when he caught sight of the tall, muscular man with silvery-white swords at his waist, wearing sunglasses with a sword crest on it.

“L-Lord Sven, the Anti-Mage... I have a duty to deliver that to the leader first. I’m sure you know this, but even you must follow procedures.”

“Hmm... I see. Good work. I’ll be handing this to him personally then.”

The servant’s eyes widened as Sven began unraveling the letter. This was information from a faraway land that had been sent with powerful magic; it was highly likely to contain important information.

The middle-aged man reached out in an attempt to retrieve the letter, but a silvery-white sword floated in the air as if to get in the way. The sword was without a handle, and Sven himself hadn’t uttered a single incantation to activate it.

Before he knew it, the servant had another sharp blade pointed directly at his back as well. He swallowed nervously, but refused to back down.

“W-Wait. Please, wait! This is the Sorcerer’s Guild! Do you realize that?!”

“Yup, I do. If it wasn’t, I’d have already... Oh? You don’t look so good. Did you eat something bad or something?”

The man named Sven was smiling, but the predator-like eyes behind his sunglasses made the servant feel incredibly uneasy.

Unlike most Sorcerers, Sven was a combat specialist who excelled at conquering labyrinths. A mere servant hardly stood a chance against his gaze that could pierce even through monsters.

As the servant sank to the ground, his colleagues noticed what was happening and rushed over. Sven continued reading the writing on the letter, unconcerned.

“So the sender is that elf girl. I had a feeling it was her. She hasn’t returned for a few days now... What? An ancient labyrinth was discovered?!”

A vein bulged in his head, and in that moment, a large hole formed in the wall. It took the servant a full three seconds before he realized Sven had punched through it.

“I was wondering what the geezers had been clamoring about since a few days ago. Hah, did they think they could hide this from me? Those morons!” He

spit on the floor, then walked away looking ready to kill whoever dared stand in his path.

The two floating swords rotated in the air and followed after him into the darkness. The metallic sound of swords being sheathed could be heard from the distance, and the servant let out a sigh of relief. He realized he was trembling in fear while embracing a colleague, and they quickly separated.

“H-How?! How did he know it was Mariabelle’s familiar? I only received it a minute ago!” he shouted and spit on the floor, to which his colleague responded while wiping the copious sweat from his forehead.

“That must be his rumored Oracle. I’d never want to mess with him, he has the power to read the future. Especially if that future is related to labyrinths.”

Sven, the Twin Blade Magic Swordsman. There wasn’t a Sorcerer in Alexei who hadn’t heard the name. He was a master of conquering labyrinths, capable of slaying monsters with ease even when working solo.

However, due to his problematic personality, careful consideration was needed when sending him to foreign countries. He couldn’t be exiled due to his exceptional talent, and his tendency to take and retain treasures for himself had been a source of many headaches for the Sorcerer’s Guild.

Perhaps the biggest headache of all would come from the fact that he’d found out about Mariabelle’s message...

+ + + + + + + + + + +

Suddenly, my eyes opened. I was wrapped in soft, warm blankets, and the light of the spring morning was shining through the curtains and illuminating my room.

There I was, in the familiar sight of my condo. The air in my room was still chilly, and I blankly stared at the window while missing the world in my dreams.

“Oh...it’s morning already. I wish I could keep playing around instead of going to work.”

Oops, that probably wasn’t something a grown man should be saying out loud...

Winter had already passed, but the blankets were still dangerously cozy. I thought it was even warmer than usual, when I noticed the girl clinging to my chest.

“Oof, I need to hurry and get used to this already. If I crush her on accident, I won’t get away with just a scolding...”

I’m just your average employee at a company, but apparently, I’m also a bit peculiar. I realized this when a girl and I were defeated by a magi drake’s breath attack.

My story began as I awakened with her in my condo in the Koto Ward. Now that I knew my dreams weren’t just dreams, we’d been living together as we traveled between Japan and the fantasy world. We weren’t really doing grandiose activities though. We spent our time studying Japanese, making friends with monsters, and celebrating our discovery of an ancient labyrinth, so we’d been taking it relatively easy.

As for me, I felt pretty lucky to be able to gaze at her fantastical white hair and long eyelashes every morning. I never thought I’d be able to spend time with a half-fairy elf, and I often questioned if I wasn’t still in a dream.

I’d been staring at her with those thoughts when Marie stirred in her sleep. She breathed in, then she quietly opened her eyes. The sight of her waking from sleep always reminded me of a blooming flower. The amethyst of her eyes was so beautiful, they took my breath away.

Some say that if you ever see a half-fairy elf, you will never forget it, and I had to agree. Actually, I think there’s something about her that even surpasses the rest of the elven race...

She yawned as if to shake off her drowsiness before she spoke.

“Good morning, Kazuhiho.”

“Good morning, Marie. It’s a nice morning, isn’t it?”

Marie’s leg, which had been resting on my own under the blankets, moved away. I was slightly disappointed, because I was enjoying the warm, soft sensation.

However, I looked up at the clock to find it was already past seven in the morning. Missing the warmth of her body already, we both slowly began waking up.

I blew at the steamy cup of tea before me. Right next to it was toast with a sunny-side up egg and bacon on it, but I wanted to save it for a little bit later. Because of this, I first brought the tea cup up to my mouth.

“Hm?” I furrowed my brow.

I’d used the same amount of sugar and milk as usual, but it tasted duller this time. The tea bag I used was pretty cheap, but I didn’t expect the flavor to be so thin.

I looked across the table and found Marie was making a similar face. Then, her eyes widened as if realization had struck her.

“Oh! Maybe it’s because we just enjoyed the tea from Arilai. We must have gotten used to their fragrant tea leaves.”

“That must be it. I’m surprised our palates have changed so quickly. Maybe we can think about the tea leaves in this world together some time soon.”

She nodded happily.

Marie was wearing cute, sky blue pajamas, her skin and hair seemingly glowing in the morning light. Her colorful eyes seemed to naturally draw in my gaze. She took another sip of her tea before directing those eyes toward me.

“What sort of stores can you get tea leaves at in Japan? Only the upper class has access to them in the other world.”

“You can find them in specialty stores and department stores. They’re much easier to obtain over here. But if you’re looking for quality, they do tend to get pretty pricey.”

I didn’t mind splurging on major events like New Year’s or vacations, but I wanted to try and be frugal for daily expenses.

“I see.” Marie nodded, agreeing with this sentiment. “Well, I’m not looking for anything expensive either. I actually think being able to eat bread and meat in the morning is luxurious in itself, but I should keep that to myself.” She smiled

as she reached for a piece of toast.

Thinking about it, breakfast wasn't a common thing in the other world. The bacon was covered in oil, and it looked and smelled delicious. The elf girl sniffed the aroma coming from the lightly burned fat.

We put our hands together and said, "Itadakimasu!" which was one of the few words she could say with perfect pronunciation. It hadn't been long since she started learning Japanese, but she was quick to pick up anything related to eating.

It looked like the square toast may have been a bit difficult to eat for her tiny mouth. She moved her hair aside and took a bite. The bacon hung from her mouth because she didn't bite through it fully, and the yolk oozed out of the egg. She let out a silent scream as the yolk dripped down to her plate. I'd seen her eyes widen like that many times, but it never failed in making me feel happy.

"It's just the two of us eating here, so it's not a big deal if your table manners aren't completely perfect. Why don't you dip your bread in the yolk that dripped onto your plate?"

The girl nodded as she chewed, savoring the piece of bread soaked in yolk. There was some yellow stuck to the side of her mouth, which she licked up with her pink tongue.

"Mmm, the bread is fragrant and crispy, and it goes so well with these runny eggs."

"People don't really eat eggs in the other world, huh? I guess it's because they spoil easily, especially in the desert region where we last left off."

That was right, we had to consider such topics rather than just tea leaves and food. I thought about the sunbaked land of Arilai and spoke to Marie, who was taking another sip of her tea.

"About what we were talking about earlier...I'm sure you'll be able to participate in the labyrinth exploration. I'll be with you too. Besides, we have a big advantage."

"Advantage? You mean because we'll be okay if we die?"

“Hmm, I don’t think we should rely on that, so not quite. Just think about it: Everyone else has to worry about things like keeping watch while sleeping and food preparation while exploring labyrinths. As for us...”

Seeing what I was getting at, she let out a loud, “Ah!”

That was it. Normally, we’d need about a week’s worth of food, but we could go in there empty-handed. There was no need to keep watch, so we could participate with a much smaller party. And just as Marie had mentioned, we’d simply wake up here if we did happen to be defeated, then restart again from the same spot.

“That’s incredible! You’ve had an unfair advantage, playing by those rules all this time. It’s no wonder your level is so high.”

“Maybe so. I’ve been heading straight into dangerous situations without ever worrying for my life. But it’s easy to get separated in a labyrinth, so we’ll have to form a party. I don’t think we could cheat like before.”

By “cheat,” I was talking about the time I helped her level. That time, we’d gone out without forming a party and I weakened enemies to the brink of death, then removed myself from combat right before Marie dealt the killing blow. That allowed her to obtain all the experience from the battle for herself, raising her level by five in a short amount of time. It was a highly effective method, but she waved her hand at me dismissively.

“Not only was that mind numbingly boring, it actually hurt my conscience. I’m sure it will be much more fun to communicate with you via the Mind Link Chat. I’m starting to look forward to it, hehe.”

“Let’s do that then. You have an ability that increases your experience gain now, so it should be much easier to level up.”

She threw the last piece of toast into her mouth, wiped her fingers with a tissue, then spoke. “Now that I know we have an advantage, I need to work hard so they don’t appoint someone to explore the labyrinths in my stead.”

That was the biggest issue for us right now. According to her, you usually needed to be at the “High Sorcerer” rank to explore high level labyrinths. It seemed the guild was concerned for the safety of their members. I didn’t have

to worry about that since I didn't belong to any such association, but they couldn't afford to put their rare and valuable Spirit Sorceress in danger.

"You said 'usually,' so are there some exceptions?"

"Of course. Exploring ruins in another nation is an incredibly rare opportunity. As I said before, the higher-ups want to obtain ancient knowledge above all else, but the authority to decide as much lies with whoever discovered it. There's been one special case where the person who discovered the ruins was given the right to investigate."

One of the criteria for such an exception depended on whether or not that person in question was reliable. Otherwise, there were cases where a substitute was selected in their stead, as Marie had mentioned in the dream world.

"There's only one way for us to prevent that. We need to make them realize how capable we are," she said as she raised her pointer finger.

It wouldn't be long until the conquest team departed. They'd set forth for the labyrinth as soon as the scouting team discovered the Magic Stone. Marie didn't have the time or level necessary to qualify as an High Sorcerer, so she was right that we had to find some other way to gain approval.

"All right. I'm going to leave for work soon, but let's figure it out together later."

"Okay. I wouldn't be much of a Sorceress if I just gave up now. Let's find a way so they won't take us lightly."

She motioned her small fist toward me, and I bumped it with my own. It was exciting that I could continue thinking about our adventure, despite being back in Japan and no longer dreaming. Marie seemed to feel the same way as she smiled warmly at me.

"There's just one more important thing to take care of before I go. I'm going to teach you how to make lunch, so follow me."

She blinked. It may have been a bit sudden, but I couldn't just leave a young girl in my home without anything to eat. Though she was actually an elf who was over a hundred years old, I did still worry about her.

“I-I don’t mind, but I haven’t learned how to use this kitchen yet. I would prefer something that doesn’t require the use of fire.”

She hopped off her seat and followed me. I lived in a 1DK condo, meaning I could walk from my bedroom to the dining room, then to the kitchen in only a few steps.

I pulled the refrigerator door open. I felt her sticking to my back as she peered in with me, which made me feel a bit happy.

“Is that...chicken? It’s covered in white stuff.”

“That’s yogurt. I let it sit overnight so all the flavor is soaked in by lunch time.”

Most guys who lived by themselves didn’t really cook... Well, I’d actually heard that that had been changing as of late.

It was more economical for me to cook, and I had to think about her nutrition as well. I could just buy side dishes and bento, but I preferred to make our meals for the most part. I also had to think about saving time since I worked full time, but I had resealable plastic bags to help to that end.

Inside one such bag were some grated onions, basil, garam masala, and some other stuff I had on hand. The oven would be used later, so most fragrant vegetables should go well with it.

“I want you to use the oven to cook this around noon.”

“I’ve never used an ‘oven’ before. Are you sure it’ll be all right?”

“Should be, yeah. All you need to do is press this button and set the timer.”

I pressed the button to demonstrate, and her purple eyes went round.

“Wait, you’re saying it’s that simple?”

Of course it was. If everyone in a condo used ovens from the olden days, then everyone would be constantly starting fires.

“I thought I would have to start a fire for sure. It seems many things can be resolved with a press of a button in your world,” Marie said, looking at me with wonder.

She did have a point, considering I pressed a bunch of buttons on my

keyboard all day for a living...

She was still in her pajamas as she peered into the oven. She learned the controls in no time. Being the reliable elf and Spirit Sorceress she was, it seemed learning to operate a microwave oven was no challenge at all.

“After you put it all on a plate, you need to cook it for twenty minutes. You should eat it with some of that bread too. Be sure to use these mittens when you take it out, it’ll be very hot.”

“Okay, that shouldn’t be too hard. The food probably won’t taste very good with such a simple process though.”

Oh, I don’t know about that...

I figured it’d be better for her to taste it for herself than answer her right away. I was already looking forward to getting off work so I could hear what she thought about it.

I looked up at the clock to find I had to start getting ready for work right now. I quickly told her how to arrange the dish, then rushed to get ready. As I was changing from my pajamas into my suit, I heard Marie’s voice from behind me.

“While I start working on that plan we talked about earlier, I’m going to study some more Japanese and see if I can communicate with spirits in this world too. I’ll take care of the dishes and laundry, so have a good day at work, okay?”

It made me feel like I was married to a beautiful house wife. But we seemed like an older male and young girl from an outsider’s perspective, so she may be more like a sister than a wife.

Once I got ready, I handed my house key to her and stood at the entrance. “I’ll be going now. I’ll arrange a way for you to contact me soon in case of an emergency.”

As I said so... maybe it was because she’d gotten used to us being together all the time, but she seemed a little sad. And maybe I was too. I distinctly felt the pang of missing her already. She’d always been somewhere within my sight the past few days, the two of us enjoying conversations with each other.



“See you later. Work hard, okay?”

A guy couldn’t ask for better words of encouragement. If all I had to do to come home and talk to her again was by getting some work done, you could bet I’d work my butt off.

Marie waved her hand, smiling in the morning sun peering through the courtains.

And so, Kazuhiro reluctantly went to work...

Mariabelle had been slowly acclimating to life in Japan: she cleaned the dishes, wiped them with a dish cloth, then placed them in the dish tray; she dusted the floor with a broom and hung the blankets up on the balcony. Despite her small stature, this was effortless work for someone who’d grown up in the forest.

Compared to how she had to fill the bath with water before, this was almost too easy. While there were some tasks in the human world that could be easily completed with the use of Spirit Magic, it was forbidden to use unless necessary. The issue with human society was that even if something was inefficient, one couldn’t oppose customs that had already been set in place.

But her daily life had now become quite enjoyable. Kazuhiro sought efficiency like her, and he’d carefully consider whatever spur-of-the-moment idea she’d come up with.

Speaking of which, the efficiency of some gadgets such as the refrigerator and microwave oven were astounding...

Mariabelle wholly used her free time to study Japanese, so she happily sat down in a chair. She swung her feet back and forth as she produced a notebook and some stationery. The pen case and pens featuring different characters were so cute, just looking at them put her in a good mood.

She smiled, then raised her fist triumphantly and proclaimed, “I will learn enough so I can watch and understand anime!”

It sounded like something a foreigner obsessed with otaku culture would say, but it was the best source of motivation one could ask for. As she learned more

of the language, she could understand the messages behind the works and what made them enjoyable.

Her studies started with basic phrases used in daily conversation, then she branched out to more advanced topics. There were no shortcuts to learning a language, and it all came down to becoming as familiar with it as possible. And so, step by step, she kept at it... then realized it was about lunch time.

“That’s right, Kazuhiho taught me how to cook with the oven. It might take a while, so I should get that started now.”

She hopped off her chair and walked toward the refrigerator. After setting the oven to preheat, she took the yogurt-covered chicken out of the fridge. She cut some unpeeled potatoes and lined the bottom of a heat-resistant tray, placed the chicken on top, then sprinkled on some herbs as she’d been taught. With the press of a few buttons, the cooking had begun.

One thing she hadn’t accounted for was the way the chicken’s delicious smell would permeate the room as it cooked. It distracted her from the studies, and she had to stop several times to peek into the oven and check how it was cooking.

“What’s going on here? I thought this was just a simple dish... The fragrance of the oils cooking in the oven...and he even added garam masala in the mix. How could he? He knows that’s my favorite...”

The chicken cooked and steamed before her eyes, dripping tasty oils onto the vegetables below. The seasoning herbs had served to make the ingredients smell incredible, and made the elf’s stomach growl with anticipation.

“Oh! Only three minutes left. I need to get ready.”

The girl quickly prepared plates, some bread, and a knife and fork.

“I know...”

She then remembered the anime DVD she’d left on the table, and came up with a delightful way to spend her lunch time.

A smile widened on her face, then the electric beep alerted her of the food being done. It seemed the elf still had some preparations to do in a hurry.

The chicken had been soaking in yogurt to remove any unwanted odors, instead it smelled of aromatic herbs. As soon as the food touched her tongue, her purple eyes widened in surprise. If he'd been here, Kazuhiro would surely be asking, "How does it taste?"

"I'd hate to admit it, but in regards to your question, I have no choice but to say it tastes so good I can't control myself." She complimented the food in a roundabout way for some reason as she pictured his sleepy-looking face.

Her frustrated look naturally loosened into a smile as soon as she took another bite. And before her, a colorfully depicted anime was playing. Her mood visibly improved by the minute, and she let out a happy "Mmmf!" after taking another bite of food.

The blankets being aired out in the sun on the veranda felt somewhat peaceful and seemed to invite her to sleep, perhaps because of the laundry blowing gently in the springtime wind.

Despite being alone, Mariabelle had enjoyed her time at home. It went without saying, of course, that she'd completely forgotten about the other assignment she was supposed to work on...

Kazuhiro, on the other hand, hadn't forgotten about the assignment.

A full train on the Sobu Line is right at the top of the "trains people don't want to ride" list. The train being packed to the brim was the familiar sight of the communal rush hour, and I found myself being pressed against the door.

"Man... It feels like it gets more and more crowded every year..."

As I muttered to myself, I wanted to at least be free in my own head, so I started thinking about the other world despite getting flattened by the people pushing on my back.

...To go into an ancient labyrinth, we needed the Sorcerer's Guild to recognize our skills. My "assignment" was to figure out how to accomplish this. Incidentally, my partner was too preoccupied with Japanese food and anime to think about this, but I didn't know that at the time. Thinking about her safety was a topic even more important than my assignment that I had to consider.

I didn't know why, but I always woke up in the dream world whenever I fell

asleep. Inversely, I could go to sleep again or die in that world to come back here. But since this only applied to me, or anyone who happened to be embracing me when it triggered, her safety wasn't guaranteed. I only realized this recently when were engaged in battle with some bandits.

The bandits had plotted to take Marie as a hostage, and I fell straight into their trap. It seemed I had the mentality that it was just a dream, so I'd wake up if I died and everything would be okay. But from here on, I'd have to reconsider that line of thinking. I'd put her in danger again otherwise, and it could lead to an irreversible mistake some day. It was important for us to be recognized by the guild, but I needed to find some way to keep her safe before thinking about conquering the labyrinth.

Now that I knew the world I thought to exist only in my dreams was real, I wanted to avoid putting her in any unnecessary danger. In fact, I didn't mind giving up on the labyrinth to do just that.

This just went to show that there was a glaring flaw between us.

We both specialized in offense, and we had no tank or healer to protect us. If we had a front line in our battle with the bandits, we could've approached the battle with a completely different strategy. But I was a bit too lightweight to be a tank, and even if I wanted to teleport with Marie, my Over the Road skill's weight restriction was far too strict. So much so that I couldn't even carry a shield without going over the limit.

Besides, when it came to combat, I was more suited to fighting solo. I could choose to attack or retreat on the fly by utilizing my short-ranged teleport ability, but this only worked well because I didn't have anyone else to consider. I'd have to reconsider my thinking and strategy from here on.

But I'd been fighting alone all this time, so it was only natural for me to gravitate toward this fighting style. Maybe it'd be easier to just hire someone who could act as a tank for us...

But there was one problem with that: I didn't have very much money in the other world. I mean, I didn't really want to work for money even in my dream world...

Since I liked to travel, I spent most of my time enjoying the view in various

locations, so I didn't gain much fame as a swordsman either. This meant it was hard for me to prove myself as a capable party member.

Our assignment was to prove our abilities, but the more I thought about it, I only came up with reasons on why it wouldn't work. Despite what I said in the morning, I decided we should probably give up on the labyrinth.

As the thought crossed my mind, my phone starting vibrating. I managed to wriggle enough to get a peek at my phone in the packed train, and an unfamiliar notification was on my screen.

Oh, a text.

I'd barely ever used that feature before, so it was a bit surprising. The word "Kaoruko" was displayed, along with a simple greeting and message.

"Good morning, Kitase-san. Did you read that book with Mariabelle-chan the other day? I also enjoyed that one, so I hope to hear what she thought about it."

"Hm," I said to myself, then awkwardly began typing out a response.

"Marie did say she liked it. She wanted to know what would happen next, but was too tired and fell asleep. She seemed a little frustrated about that when she woke up."

I texted her back, then got a reply indicating she got a laugh out of my message. Soon after, I got a message that seemd to be the main reason she decided to reach out to me.

"If you wouldn't mind, how would you feel about having a little get together? My husband could join us depending on the date, so please invite Mariabelle-chan as well."

Oh, now that was quite a proactive invitation. Though it seemed she was mainly hoping to see Marie rather than me.

Kaoruko was a woman who lived in the same condo as me and worked at the local library. I remembered we'd recently exchanged our contact info so we could get to know each other better. What troubled me was the amount of work we had to do, and whether or not Marie would be on board. Though we did live in the same building, so it'd be easy to coordinate a meeting.

Personally, being sociable wasn’t my strong suit. But with Marie being an elf girl, it may be good for her to make friends in Japan. Kaoruko had a friendly disposition, and Marie seemed to somewhat favor Kaoruko in return, considering how she went in for a handshake last time.

Yeah, maybe I should learn from Marie and take a step forward...

Making up my mind, I texted back that I’d be happy to arrange a meeting.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 2: It's French Cuisine, Ms. Elf When I looked out the window from inside the café, it was already well past sundown. The streets were full of people, many of whom were on the way home from work. As for me, I'd quickly changed into my casual clothes and left without doing overtime.

On the table were steaming cups of coffee, and sitting across from me was a young girl hiding her long ears with a knit cap as usual. She was looking around curiously, her interest piqued by the aroma of coffee and cozy furniture, like the sofas.

But what drew the most attention out of everything and everyone here was none other than she herself. Her hair, which hung down to her waist, had a white luster to it, like glimmering strands of silk. Her light purple eyes were framed with long eyelashes, and drew one's attention immediately. Those clear orbs of amethyst were sure to charm anyone who gazed into them.

She had a fairy-like quality to her, a word that described her pretty accurately. She was an elf, and her name was Mariabelle.

Everyone around her sighed dreamily, admiring her natural beauty.

"It's strange that I'm here in Koto Ward right now," I muttered to myself.

She tilted her head. "And just what is so funny? You seem to be staring at me and smiling more lately."

"It usually means I'm captivated by you when I do that. I don't seem to be alone this time though."

I turned around, and the other guests averted their eyes. When I turned to face Marie again, I noticed her cheeks were a light shade of pink. She tried hiding her embarrassment by bumping my leg with her new sandals under the

table.

“Saying that when you look like you’re about to fall asleep isn’t flattering in the slightest, you know. Maybe that line would have been more impressive if you looked more distinguished.”

“Hey, I was born with this face. Even I gave up on looking more refined long ago.”

After telling her as such, Marie reached her hand out toward me. Her pale, slender finger pressed against my brow, then she surprised me as she squished it upward. It seemed that the soft, smooth finger pushing at my face was trying to forcefully change my facial expression.

“Hmm, you still look like you’re half asleep. Like you have a serious case of sleepy face.”

“Come on, it can’t be that bad. I’m probably tired from just having gotten off work.”

I tried using work as an excuse, but she seemed to realize that wasn’t the issue. The elf continued squishing my brow for a little longer before she seemed to give up and let go shortly after.

“It’s no good, there’s no changing how sleepy you look. When will you realize it’s because of you that I fall asleep before we can finish the book?”

I had to say, that was one of the more unique complaints I’ve ever received. I may not have shown it, but my heart was beating pretty hard after being touched by such a cute girl.

Marie rested her chin on her hands and stared at me. “In any case, this place feels way different from that tea place we visited in Arilai. I feel so mature here for some reason.”

It seemed I made the right choice in picking the somewhat pricey café I’d mentioned in the morning.

Many of the other customers were wearing modest clothing, which apparently contributed to her good impression. Mild music was playing in the background, and the girl looked around with excitement.

“So, when is Ms. Ichijo coming?”

“Well, looks like it’s seven now. She should be here soon. Want to practice some Japanese greetings while we wait?”

“That’s okay, I’ll ask you if I need help. I can handle greetings, and I feel like I can somewhat keep up with conversations now.”

Oh, so her studies had progressed that far already. She was quite a smart girl, and had already begun incorporating the Japanese she’d learned into our daily conversations.

I cleared my throat with an *ahem*, and her purple eyes looked right at me.

“Um... Anime, helped me, learn Japanese. It is, a very, wonderful show.”

“Oooh!” I clapped my hands as Marie showed off a proud expression. I may have just imagined it, but I thought I heard clapping from behind us too...

Considering how quickly she learned this, the rest should come easily with some more practice. So long as she continued to practice and learn various patterns of conversation, her speech would become more and more natural. Though, learning to speak naturally was the hardest part of all.

Now, it seemed Marie had finally decided to try the coffee. Unaccustomed to black drinks, she sniffed it a couple times before drinking from the cup slowly. Her face wordlessly scrunched up from the bitterness, so I added some of the milk and sugar that was at the table to it. It didn’t need too much sugar, but I decided to add extra milk to soften up the flavor. I mixed it with a spoon before handing it back to her, she thanking me quietly as I did so.

“Oh, that’s better. I love how aromatic the food in this world is, including your cooking.”

“Now that I think about it, aren’t you sensitive to smells, Marie? I think foods with strong odors aren’t as popular in Japan though.”

The girl tilted her head as if to say, “Is that so?”

Black tea, for example, had been popular for a while and could be commonly found throughout the country. Any variation with a strong scent, however, tended to be disliked. This was probably due to it not going well with food, or

simply because it wasn't a common scent.

I liked them to have some personality, so I preferred teas like darjeeling.

"Do you want to try out some of the tea here as well?"

"Ah... So this is how I become accustomed to human indulgences. I feel like I'm going to become more and more human-like, until my ears eventually fall off."

"In Japan, we call it acquiring a taste for something. Oh, look, they're here."

The people we were waiting for had arrived as we were talking. They entered the café in modest attire, then waved at us as they approached the table.

"I apologize for the wait, the train arrived late... Good evening, Kitase-san, Mariabelle-chan. Please, meet my husband."

"I'm Toru Ichijo. Thank you for obliging my wife's unreasonable request."

We stood up from our chairs and bowed. Kaoruko's husband was somewhat overweight, and had a gentle air about him, much like herself.

"Good evening, Toru, Kaoruko."

"Good, evening. I, am Mariabelle. Nice, to meet you."

Marie seemed to get through the introduction just fine. She did falter a bit, but that just made it all the cuter.

However, she looked up at me with a worried expression. This was probably due to the husband standing there, immobile, staring with a blank expression on his face.

"H-Hey. Did I say the wrong words just now?"

"No, you said the words right. It's like I told you earlier. Men are creatures that can't help but stare at you."

I'd replied in Elven, but Kaoruko dug an elbow into her husband's ribs as if she understood. "Toru..."

"Ah!" He came to in a fluster. "Sorry, sorry. I was just taken by surprise. Kaoruko told me already, but I didn't expect her to be *this* pretty. A-Anyway, let's move to the next spot. This is our first time getting to know our neighbors.

We already have reservations.”

Toru winked as he chuckled to us. I was a little bit nervous myself, but he seemed to be nice enough.

We took a taxi to the Fukagawa area, arriving in front of a French restaurant. This area was being developed more and more in recent years, with new shops being built all over the place.

We passed through the fancy, western-style doors. The restaurant was full of people who seemed to be having dinner and enjoying various conversations. There seemed to be more couples than families inside, probably due to the price, like at the café we were at earlier.

A waiter attended to us shortly after we entered, and we were lead to a table for four. They then drew a chair, and Toru gestured for Marie to sit. She seemed to think this peculiar, because she looked at me with a puzzled look in her eyes.

I whispered in her ear, “Go ahead and take a seat. You’re the special guest today, Marie.”

“O-Okay... And in such a fancy restaurant too... I’m feeling a little nervous.”

Marie hesitated a bit, so I took her hand and gently helped her into her seat. She was like a beautiful fairy, but the wait staff member maintained his professional composure.

The elven language sounded beautiful to the ear. The other guests at the restaurant seemed spellbound by her adorable appearance and sound of her speaking Elvish. With her in it, the western décor seemed to take on a fantastical air.

The spell seemed to be broken as our group settled into our seats, and everyone else began conversing again. Kaoruko, the woman with the black hair, sat next to Toru and touched his arm with lightly flushed cheeks.

“Isn’t this lovely? It’s as if we’re in the world of a picture book. It almost makes you forget we’re still in Japan, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t even be surprised if I were told I was dreaming right now.”

That’s a bit much...though, maybe not. I’d been with Marie for a long while, and I’d had that exact thought many times before. Of course, I didn’t think it was necessary to translate any of this to her.

If anything, I was worried about the price, considering we were in a French restaurant. Luckily, the prices on the menu seemed to be within my budget. It did help that we hadn’t been eating out much to cut down on expenses.

Maybe I was staring at the menu too long, because Toru seemed to read my thoughts. He looked at me from across the table and laughed jovially.

“Haha, don’t worry. It’s on me today.”

“What? Oh, no, I couldn’t...”

“No, please, I insist. My wife brought you out against your will after all. It would be my pleasure.”

It wasn’t against my will by any means, but she was a bit insistent with her invitation. Looking over at her, I noticed that, despite her rather composed attire, she was fidgety as she touched the necklace resting on her collarbone.

“Just earlier, she was telling me to come straight home without doing overtime today with such a ferocious expression...”

“Oh, stop it, Toru! I just wanted to get to know our neighbors better is all. *Ahem...* I recommend the foie gras here, you two,” Kaoru advised us with slightly red cheeks.

Marie was looking up at me with a curious expression, probably because foie gras was foreign to her world.

“It’s a very delicious bird. It’ll probably even get you to shout in surprise.”

“Just who do you think I am? I may do that at home, but there’s no way I would even dream of doing so out in public. Besides, this is just a bird we’re talking about.”

She pointed her nose into the air as she made her declaration, but I didn’t find her very convincing.

I kept my doubts to myself, and we both decided to order the recommended dish. The waiter then arranged forks and spoons on the table, and the girl

turned to me once again with a questioning look on her face.

“We’re going to eat, aren’t we? Why is he laying out so many utensils first?”

“The number of knives and forks you need changes based on the dish. You’re supposed to use them in this order, from the outside in.”

“I don’t get it. It’s not as if anyone here is royalty, are they?”

“This food actually originated from royalty, you see. Though I don’t really know much about French cuisine myself. I mean, we eat most things with chopsticks in this country.”

The restaurant we were dining in wasn’t overly formal. This wasn’t a bad thing, because it meant Marie could still wear her knit cap to hide her long ears. But it probably made her head warm, and I wanted to find hairbands or something that could hide them while indoors.

I looked around to take in the interior, which was arranged with a somewhat fantasy-like décor. The elf girl, too, was curiously observing our surroundings. The decorations were simple, but just enough to give a hint of luxury.

However, nailing the “just enough” aesthetic was probably the hardest thing of all. It seemed the Ichijos here had a knack for finding these types of restaurants.

Sure enough, all the food that had been brought to the table was colorful and appetizing. The elf girl’s eyes had essentially turned into one of the plates before as she saw the array of hot and cold hors d’oeuvres being placed before us.

“Th-They all have such beautiful colors. They’re almost like paintings... You’re certain we can eat these, right?”

“Of course. Each dish may be small, but they’ll be bringing them out in order.”

She took a bite of the food to find it was seasoned rather lightly, and her somewhat nervous expression softened. The terrine was visually interesting with an enjoyable flavor, but the beef fillet steak with foie gras that came later would be the climax of the meal.

It was the first time I’d eaten with Marie sitting side by side, but it made me

happy to see her look up at me and give me her thoughts on the food after each bite.

Now, what sort of face would she make when she had a taste of the main event? I couldn't wait to find out.

"Oh my... It smells so... H-Here I go..."

Her fork hesitantly picked up a piece of the foie gras, then she brought it over to her colorful lips. She slowly chewed once, stopped, then made a soft squealing noise. A few more chews followed, then she turned to me with a dreamy look in her eyes.

"Ehe, ehehe..."

Gosh, she looks sloppy. I wondered where the usual, intellectual Marie had gone off to...

She finally swallowed her food with an audible gulp, then tugged on my arm and whispered in my ear, "This food is ridiculously delicious. You should be careful so you don't make noises too."

I wondered why people often smiled when they ate something tasty. Though in this case it was an elf smiling, so maybe I should have been happy to discover that humans and elves weren't so different.

I couldn't blame her. The dish certainly had an incredible amount of depth and flavor.

The foie gras meat was in the form of a paste, and couldn't even be compared with something like liver meat. It melted away as soon as it was placed upon my tongue, filling my mouth with a hint of sweetness and rich flavor.

First, my body reacted in surprise. It simply didn't know anything this delicious. My mouth salivated on its own accord, urging me to continue eating.

The elf took another bite herself, then exhaled with a blissful expression. Normally, her level of surprise would've been enough for her to start stomping her feet around, but she managed to fight back the urge. Instead, she pressed her head against my shoulder and did a little drilling motion with it.



“It’s delicioooous! Mmm! My goodness... If you were the only one here, I can safely say I would’ve been laughing uncontrollably.”

“I would have liked to hear that. Mmph... Yeah, that *is* good.”

The soft foie gras dissolved in my mouth, combining with the beef to bring an even greater depth to the flavor. Juices filled my mouth as the flavor grew in complexity with each bite, making the moment I swallowed the delicious mixture nothing short of bliss. Anyone would react in delight after tasting something like that, so I certainly didn’t fault her for doing so.

“How horrifying... Japanese people really are scary. Why do they go so far in the pursuit of flavor?”

“Actually, this was originally made by people outside of Japan. Western countries had a heartier tradition of royalty than we did,” I explained to Marie. But my words didn’t reach her long ears with her head so high in the clouds.

She was breathing deeply while leaning on my shoulders, and her body felt warmer than usual. I glanced over to find her cheeks were red, and a satisfied look on her face.

But it was true that Japanese people tended to be very picky when it came to food, even if it came from overseas. There were places like this to eat at throughout the city, and most of them felt as if they were worth more than their price. They say visitors from foreign countries were particularly surprised by this.

“I don’t know if this is true, but there’s this story I heard before. Japan was considered cowardly as a country because of how much we kept to ourselves, but there was one time when we were greatly angered.”

“Oh, I do recall being told they were defeated by a bigger country in the past. I can’t imagine they would want any trouble then... But why did they get angry?”

“It was because that country exported food that was harmful to ingest into Japan.”

The girl’s eyes widened, then she laughed, saying that was a likely story. It

was more a joke than an anecdote, but it still made her laugh, so it was good enough for me.

“This pairs well with wine, but you look too young to order alcohol. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh, stop it. I’d definitely crack up if I had some wine now. So, that’s the last of this ‘French cuisine,’ isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

Marie looked at me as if she couldn’t possibly handle any more. Her eyes were watering as she leaned on me pleadingly. She seemed to be reaching her limit.

I knew I shouldn’t, but her expression got the better of me, and I couldn’t help but whisper, “Yeah, just two more dishes.”

“Oof! Uuu... How could this be? If... If this keeps up, I won’t be able to eat anything in the other world ever again!” she cried out with a pained expression, though I found it somewhat amusing. For some reason, it made me feel as if I got to witness something special.

Suddenly, I realized the husband and wife in front of us were watching us with wide eyes. Their cheeks were slightly flushed and they seemed to be in a daze, staring at the girl clinging to my arm with a happy grin on her face.

“You said you two were...relatives, correct? You seem so close...”

“You’re dating each other, aren’t you? Oh, don’t answer that, I work at a government facility.”

I almost blew water out of my mouth. I’d been so preoccupied with Marie, that I completely let my guard down. Marie was utterly oblivious to the danger of the situation, so I tried making an excuse in a fluster.

“N-No, we’re not. She’s not used to eating delicious food like this, so she’s just overreacting a little.”

They gave me dubious looks...but thinking about, I hadn’t lied other than the part about being related, and we’d only ever gone as far as holding hands. Yet my heart was pounding, and I was having a hard time calming myself down.

The dessert and tea were served as I was taking a deep breath to compose

myself. I did jokingly threaten Marie earlier about the remaining dishes, but these served to refresh one's palate rather than deliver a powerful blow like the previous ones. Thankfully, it allowed the both of us to catch our breaths and relax.

It seemed Kaoruko still wanted to know Marie better, so she moved her face closer to the demure elf's. Recovering from her outbursts earlier, Marie was now making an effort to keep calm.

I was relieved to see this new friendship begin to bloom, but a bit sad about it at the same time...

"You've been practicing your Japanese, haven't you? I was surprised by your amazing pronunciation when you greeted us earlier."

"Th-Thank, you. Um... Japanese, is very hard. But, I learn from anime."

"Anime?" Kaoruko seemed to ask with a puzzled expression.

This was too much for Marie to explain, so I decided to step in.

"Yes, she has been learning Japanese by watching things like anime while I'm away at work. Lately, she's been watching..." I told her the title of the show we watched the other day, and Kaoruko's face lit up.

"Oh, solid choice! I think that's a perfect anime to watch for first-timers."

"She's been saying she wants to see parts of Japan that are full of greenery, so I'm planning on taking her to Aomori, where my grandfather lives. I'd like to get her accustomed to traveling before then, so I've been looking for someplace we can take a day trip."

There was quite some distance to Aomori, so I wanted to take her somewhere closer before making that trek. I'd promised just a few days ago to take her, but I wasn't used to going on trips myself, so I didn't know what to expect either.

There was an overload of information when it came to planning trips, making it hard to gauge which places were actually worthwhile to visit. Others who were unaccustomed to going on trips surely went through similar dilemmas.

Kaoruko smiled, then pressed the tips of her fingers together.

"A short trip, you say? That sounds wonderful!"

“What about Chichibu? It has nice scenery it’s kept up since the old days, and there are still things like steam locomotives and hot springs around. An acquaintance of mine runs a business there so I visit occasionally. It’s a nice and relaxing place.”

Toru offered to make a reservation for us, which took me by surprise a bit. I hadn’t expected to find a candidate for the trip destination so easily.

Before I could even answer, he began operating his phone and turned it to show us the screen. It was a picture of him blending in with nature, and Marie’s purple eyes turned into saucers at the sight.

“Oh my! What is that? There’s steam coming out of it. Does that mean it’s hot?”

“It’s a Japanese-style hot spring. I know hot springs exist in the other world, too, but these are meant more to be enjoyed at your leisure. They say they’re even good for healing wounds and other ailments.”

The springs were surrounded by trees and shrubs, with rocky areas that were perfect for lying down on. There was also a Japanese-style building with various restaurants and rest areas, which was clearly meant to be a place for rest and recreation.

“Wooow...”

Judging how Marie was peering at the pictures with fascination, she seemed to take a liking to the place. I asked her in Elvish if she’d like to go there, and she nodded right away. Seeing this, I decided to make the request.

“Thank you for the offer. We would love it if we could go.”

“It’s no problem at all. My days off don’t always align with Kaoruko’s, so we go out for small day trips quite often. Oh, and we have some anime DVDs too. You’re more than welcome to come by and watch them on the weekdays.”

Right, it was illegal to lend DVDs to others. I figured he was just following the rules since he had a government job, which was something I could respect.

I translated all this for Marie, and she had a look of great interest about her.

“Marie is looking forward to it as well. Um, what days do you normally have

off as a librarian...?”

“The library is closed on Mondays, so it would be Mondays and one other weekday. Toru, working for the government, can’t go out for leisure unless he takes consecutive days off.”

Hm, that meant Marie could visit her once a week or so.

I’d been worried about leaving her alone when I had no choice but to go to work. Maybe I was worried over nothing, but I felt like I still needed some time to mentally prepare myself before letting her walk around by her lonesome.

As I thought about this, a pair of purple eyes turned toward me.

“That’s why I say you’re overprotective. What horrible thing lurks in Japan, where there are no monsters roaming around?”

“Well, humans are far scarier than monsters. But maybe you’ll be all right if you’re with Kaoruko,” I told Marie in Elvish.

But I still couldn’t help being worried. I mean, she was just so adorable. Some weirdo could set their eyes on her, and there’d been a ton of depressing news about stalkers and such as of late.

Toru seemed to sense my concerns and smiled at me.

“I understand why you’d be worried about an adorable girl like her. It’s all right, you can think about it once you get to know my wife more.”

Maybe he was happy to see his wife making a friend too. I did get a sense that that was the case from his body language as he leaned over to speak to me. On top of that, Kaoruko had a positive demeanor about herself the entire time too.

After thinking about it for a bit, I slowly nodded.

By the time we’d all gotten back to the condo, it was almost nine o’clock.

Fully content from the French cuisine, Marie staggered slightly as she walked toward the bed and flopped onto it face-down. It was somewhat considered to be bad manners, but I didn’t mind it being just the two of us.

When we said our goodbyes earlier, she had politely told the married couple, “Thank you, for the meal. It was, very delicious.” They seemed to enjoy seeing

Marie’s reaction to the food, and asked us to join them for dinner again sometime.

“I’ll get the bath ready, so don’t go to sleep yet. Oh, and thank you for doing the laundry and washing the dishes. You really helped out there.”

The dishes in the sink were stacked, and all the laundry had already been folded. The way these tasks were done so neatly really seemed to portray her tidy personality.

After I thanked her, she sat back up. “It’s fine, that was nothing. Besides, I tend to study better while taking care of other tasks... Ahh, this is no good, I’m going to fall asleep if I lie down here.”

Marie slowly got off the bed, then picked up a chair and brought it over to the kitchen. She looked like a strange little doll as she sat on it, but it seemed she wanted to watch me cook.

After dusting off her lap with her hands, she looked up at me. “Now, what are you making for us today? Though I’m quite full, so I don’t know if I can eat very much else.”

“All right, how about something light then? Some inarizushi maybe?”

Inarizushi was something I’d made for her before. She seemed to remember that juicy, flavorful dish, and excitedly nodded right away. I also had some crisp spring cabbage to go with it, which I decided to quickly heat in the microwave.

As I cooked the rice and prepared the ingredients, I talked with Marie.

“About the labyrinth... Do you happen to know anyone who might be able to tank for us?”

“Hmm... I don’t know anyone personally, but that’s definitely something we should think about.”

Ah, so she’d been concerned about the same thing.

Our party had one glaring flaw: It was only composed of attackers. A normal party tended to have a tank to protect the group, as well as a healer. Usually, some of the members would also have skills suited for exploration. That might be asking for much, but I wanted to at least have a setup that would allow me

to focus on offense.

“But if a tank doesn’t have a party already, it’s probably because they have personality issues or something. We’d have to consider factors like level discrepancies too.”

“Let’s see, you’re level 31 and I’m 71... Yeah, that might not seem very attractive from an outsider’s point of view.”

If one person’s level were too high, the rest of the members would receive significantly less experience. That was why it was more common for members of a party to be at a similar level range. Having too much disparity in level could cause members to leave for other teams.

I threw the abura-age in a pot, and as I put the lid over it, Marie peered over at me.

“Have you forgotten about your strange ability already? We couldn’t possibly keep that a secret from another party member.”

“Right...”

I *had* completely forgotten about that. I was so preoccupied with Marie this whole time and forgot there were issues of my own to worry about.

What would happen if I told someone that I had the ability to travel between Japan and another world? Since the Sorcerer’s Guild made it their mission to unravel the mysteries behind such abilities, they’d definitely investigate it. I may be thinking too much into it, but they could even carry out all sorts of experiments on me. If that happened, I wouldn’t be able to enjoy the dream world anymore.

“Good point. I definitely want to avoid telling people about that.”

To summarize, there were two issues we needed to resolve:

First, there was a need for me to prove my abilities. I was an unknown due to me spending most of my time traveling around alone.

Second, I needed to find a tank that could absolutely keep Marie safe.

I had some idea of how to accomplish the first, but the second was going to be quite difficult. We needed to find someone who wouldn’t mind the level

difference and would absolutely keep my secret, all without expecting too much of a payment in return.

“Hmm... I thought about it all day, but all I know is that we still have so much to figure out. I’m starting to think we can just leave this up to whoever the Sorcerer’s Guild appoints to replace us until we can make preparations.”

“I’d like to say we’ll be fine, but I know you’re stubborn when it comes to being overprotective of me.”

Umm, I didn’t consider myself stubborn. She may call me overprotective, but I thought I was pretty reasonable. I’d been pretty careful about not overstepping my bounds too.

“It’s a bit of a shame though. I was looking forward to making many discoveries with you in the labyrinth.”

“Same goes for me. Your Spirit Sorcery is so versatile, I’m sure it would’ve opened up all sorts of strategies for us.”

While we were forced to sorta give up on the labyrinth we were looking forward to exploring, we still smiled at each other. There were plenty of other places we could enjoy, and I was sure she’d still be with me down the line.

Once our conversation settled down, I stopped the fire on the stove and let the abura-age cool off. This allowed the flavor to soak in so it was nice and juicy in the end.

I looked to my side and noticed the girl sniffing the air, likely drawn by the sweet scent.

“You seem to enjoy the smell of cooking too.”

“Yes, I like how there’s a gentleness to the scent of inarizushi. It’s different from curry, like it’s warm and inviting.”

Huh, that’s quite an abstract and dainty way of describing it...

It was time for her to enjoy the aroma of the Japanese food to her heart’s content. I added vinegar to the rice cooker, so the scent grew even stronger. The semi-hardened cooked rice had absorbed the vinegar well, and it seemed to gleam as I moved it over to the dining table.

“Wow, it’s so white! And it smells so...sour!”

Her eyes widened at the almost overwhelming smell that hit us. The freshly cooked rice was steaming hot, and the vinegar was all the more potent as it was released in the form of vapor. I used a fan to cool it down a bit, the smell dispersing throughout the kitchen.

Ms. Elf pinched her nose desperately, and her teary-eyed look seemed to accuse me of tricking her. That wasn’t my intention, of course, and the smell had mostly calmed down once I cooled it some more.

Once I could smell the sweet scent of rice, I added sesame and seasonings to turn it into a fragrant sweet and sour aroma. This resulted in the gentle scent Marie had mentioned earlier, and her expression seemed to melt.

As I thought about how her face resembled that of a sunbathing cat, she spoke.

“Ah! I’m salivating! But I’m still so full from the French cuisine... Nnh, but it smells sooo good!”

“Isn’t it interesting how so much Japanese food is eaten after being cooled, but the smell can be very pungent while cooking?”

Marie nodded dreamily, still seemingly immersed in the aroma. The bath had been ready for some time now, but the elf seemed to be captivated by the smell, unable to move.

I then squeezed out a little bit of the juices from the abura-age and stuffed it with some vinegar rice. Thus I completed the cheap, easy, and tasty food that didn’t require many other dishes to enjoy known as inarizushi.

As I finished making one, I picked it up and brought it over to Marie’s mouth. She instinctively ate it out of my hand, ending up with one of my fingers in her mouth, and... Well, any guy’s heart would skip a beat from that. Even as a fully grown man, there was no getting used to that.

The inside of her lips were so soft, I almost yelped in surprise. But she was seemingly unconcerned with my internal turmoil as her small lips parted from my finger.

After eating the body temperature inarizushi, Marie uttered “Delicious” with a blissful look on her face. Her mouth was surely full of umami with all those juices seeping out. It would be followed by the fragrant aroma of sesame, which would make its way through her nose with every bite.

“Ehehe, it’s sooo good! Ahh!”

For some reason, she began scratching at my hip like a cat. She was already full from dinner, but the seasonings seemed to have stirred her appetite as she ate the whole thing in one bite.

“Is this, Japanese food? Or, western food?”

“Oh, your Japanese is getting better. This is Japanese food of course. It’s a type of sushi, and... Oh, I guess you haven’t tried sushi yet, huh. Handmade sushi is a dish that’s representative of Japanese cuisine as a whole. You should really try...”

“Oh, stop it! You’re going to fatten me up at this rate! I’m going to take a bath before that happens, if you don’t mind.”

She gave the inarizushi another longing look before heading toward the bathroom. Although she was trying to restrain herself, I was sure she’d be eating her fill in the dream world.

I could see it was dark outside through the window, and the indirect lighting of the downlight was illuminating my room in the condo. It was windy outside, and I could hear the rustling of the trees lining the streets.

The night felt strangely calming. I was unfamiliar with this feeling, being a peculiar guy who liked to sleep as a hobby.

In that moment, there was a familiar feeling in the air that reminded me of my childhood. Then, my hand stopped turning the pages of the picture book. Marie was breathing in a steady rhythm while using my arm as a pillow, and her innocent, sleeping face made me smile.

Two bento boxes were set beside my pillow, and I put the picture book down next to them. Something was pulling at me, and I looked down to notice Marie was clutching my shirt at the chest. This prevented me from moving, but, strangely, I didn’t mind all that much. Her little hand holding me didn’t give me

a feeling of restraint, but something else entirely. Maybe it was just me, but I felt like she was telling me she wanted me to stay with her, even in sleep.

“Yeah, let’s get cozy under the blankets and go to bed.”

I was surprised by just how gentle my tone of voice was, and felt a strange sense of embarrassment.

It was all so unfamiliar to me. What was this feeling I was experiencing? Just by talking to her, or gazing at her face...I felt a warmth in my chest. I tried thinking of what the source of it could be, but there was no resisting the drowsiness brought on by the warmth of Marie’s body. All I managed to do was let out a long yawn.

I hope she feels the same way as me. I hope she isn’t getting tired of spending so much time with me in both worlds...

As for me, this was the happiest I’d ever been in my life.

When I settled into the blankets, the girl slowly put her arm around me, seemingly still asleep. Then, she rubbed her soft cheek against me. Feeling her slender, lightweight body against me, I quietly fell asleep.

The wind began howling outside, but it wasn’t quite loud enough to blow away my sleepiness. As I felt her soft breath and body’s warmth, I stopped noticing the wind entirely.

Good night, Ms. Elf. I’ll see you in the other world...

The gentle, sleep-inducing sound of two people breathing echoed throughout the room...

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 3: License to Explore

Arilai, Royal Castle—

Arilai ruled over vast stretches of desert lands, though its development had been rather slow in pace, perhaps due to its habitat. Another factor stilting its advancement was said to be religion. Upon looking into its history, I found that numerous tribes had merged into one, its religions combining as well. As a result, a religion with complex and often contradictory teachings had been formed.

However, this kingdom was in the midst of undergoing massive changes. The royal family, nobles, and even the commoners had all felt it coming since the discovery of the ancient labyrinth...

When we arrived at the hall, there seemed to be a hundred or so people gathered there. Or, more accurately, a soldier had told us while we were wandering around the marketplace that everyone else was already here, so we rushed over.

The individuals gathered there all seemed to have a peculiar air about them, and they were each dressed in formal attire. I presumed they were in service to the kingdom. Many adventurers traveled freely in this world, but the skilled ones tended to settle into one region and serve the government there. I was sure there were some high-level adventurers around my range as well.

As for the two of us, we huddled out of sight near a window and observed our surroundings.

“Ahh, the breeze feels so nice. I suppose it’d be quite comfortable in a royal castle.”

“Arilai was always good at utilizing their underground water reservoir to mitigate some of this geothermal heat.”

The comfort in the royal castle was surely a happy discovery for her. But as soon as we stepped a foot outside the castle walls, the extreme conditions

would be very harsh for an elf with an aversion to heat.

The girl in question dusted off the dirt from her robes, then spent a little more time than usual fixing her hair. There was a tinge of nervousness to her expression, which I attributed to her being unaccustomed to situations like this. Neither was I, of course, but it was much less intimidating than being in a meeting with some higher-ups at my company. At least in this case, all I had to do was patiently wait for it to be over.

“As I thought, there are many big names here. That gentleman over there is Aja, a renowned wizard.”

“Yeah, he seems to be high-level too. But considering his age, it may be hard for him to go spelunking.”

The man with the white beard was covered in wrinkles, and would likely be joining the exploration once a base was established in the labyrinth. When a unit slowly advances through ruins, a back line to support them is usually required. To me, it seemed there were great expectations for the wizard, which was a much higher rank than sorcerer.

I looked to my side at Marie. Her ears were perked and fully visible, unlike her usual state in Japan. Her long, beautiful hair was tied back, and her exposed nape was pale and almost dazzling. She seemed to be enjoying the sense of freedom without the need to hide her ears, as I caught her fidgeting with them a couple times. As she stood with her back straight, there was a mature air about her that matched her actual age.

Though, it seemed we looked quite small from everyone else’s perspective, judging from all the unreserved and frankly unsettling looks we were getting. I wasn’t too fond of speaking with strangers after all.

“It seems you’re all here.”

A stern-looking man appeared on stage. The details regarding the labyrinth exploration were about to be revealed.

We weren’t from this region, but we were given permission to participate since we were the ones who discovered it. I suspected it was merely for formality’s sake, though, and they were unlikely to share any valuable

information.

Marie seemed to be excited by the mood in the air, but we were basically outsiders here. They wouldn't let the treasure resting in the labyrinth go to foreigners so easily.

"We have yet to receive any useful intel from the preliminary search team. According to the reports, the labyrinth is spacious, deep, and highly dangerous. Although it's still under investigation, its difficulty level is expected to be AA or higher."

Conversations broke out immediately in response to this news. Seeing the pleased expression on everyone's faces, the elf looked around with confusion.

"Why does everyone look so happy about the high difficulty? That means it's all the more dangerous, doesn't it?"

"It's because the drops in the labyrinth improve as the scale of danger increases. Everyone here seems to be high-level adventurers, so they'd be pretty disappointed if we were dealing with a small labyrinth."

Sorcerers sought to unveil ancient wisdom, which had no relevance to the difficulty of the labyrinth. Their reason for mobilizing was based on whether there were important tomes to retrieve.

But those who were gathered here probably saw labyrinths as a potential goldmine for loot. Items could be obtained from fallen enemies, and valuable treasure could be found inside. At times, they could even produce far greater rewards than winning a war. The specifics really depended on the reports from the preliminary search team, but it was likely that the kingdom was going to be developed around the labyrinth, just as the citizens had been suspecting.

"I'm getting a little nervous now. It sounds like it really is a big deal that we're able to participate. I should go report to the Sorcerer's Guild in person instead of just sending a bird messenger."

"Well, we'll need to get a license to explore first. Also, any information we can gain here could be valuable, so let's keep our ears perked."

Marie nodded. The man onstage then cleared his throat, opening his mouth to speak.

“Now, the important part. The magic stone, or something that seems to one, has been found. It’s currently still under appraisal, but the ruins will be closed off from entry for the time being. Rejoice, for the prosperity of Arilai has been secured!”

The room erupted in fervor in response to those words. But as someone with a little bit of pessimism that came from worldly experience, I had a feeling it wasn’t just easy loot that awaited us. The giant monster that had appeared at the oasis must have been over level 200 or so. Would they all still be celebrating if we had to face such a foe some day?

“They’ve already reported about the monster, so they leave the rest for the people here to deal with... Seems to me we’re being moved along with a carrot on a stick.”

“Oh, you’re such a downer. Though your face looks just as sleepy as ever.”

“Just so we’re clear on this, I’m a pessimistic person in general. There’s an equal amount of good and bad things in the world after all.”

“Maybe you’re right,” the elf said in agreement. But judging from the look on her face, she was only agreeing with what I said about my personality.

I didn’t say it out loud, but comparatively, there were far more “bad things” in the world than good. The reason the castle we were in was so nice and comfortable was because it was supported by countless people. Surely they’d agree there were more “bad things” in their life.

As I thought about it, the girl at my side tugged at my sleeve.

“Did you know? The religion of this kingdom believes in the duality of good and evil. Which do you think the labyrinth would fit under?”

“Good or evil... I think that would depend on how beneficial it is for this kingdom. I guess it’s good in that sense, but there’s a chance it could do a 180.”

“You really *are* pessimistic,” she uttered with an exasperated look on her face.

My role was to make sure Marie was safe, so I was fine with erring on the side of caution.

We didn’t get any notable information after that, and we were told to wait for

more reports from the preliminary search team. They informed us to make any necessary preparations, then the meeting adjourned. But the others still lingered in the hall, likely to exchange each other's information.

"We should also find people to talk to... Oh? What is that annoyed look for? You're the one who wanted to gather information, are you not?"

"Y-Yeah, but I meant more like, listening in on other people's conversations..."

"We are not doing that. You tend to avoid civilization because you dislike interacting with others so much. This is a good opportunity for me to train your sociability."

"I'm a full-fledged working member of society, you know..."

Unsurprisingly, she ignored my words of protest. I had no intention of interacting with others, but Marie had other plans. She took my hand and pulled me into the crowd so we could greet the renowned wizard. The hierarchy of the Sorcerer's Guild sounded like a pain to deal with, and they gave an impression of being a group of elites...but it seemed I didn't have a choice.

"Smile! And stand up straight! Come on, you're so reliable when we're in the other world..."

She was too busy fixing my collar and tidying me up to notice her words would have made any guy's heart skip a beat. She suddenly froze, her cheeks turning into a shade of red.

"N-Now, hurry and come with me." She took me by the hand again.

Some random kids like us normally wouldn't be given the time of day, but we were warmly welcomed and able to talk to the wrinkled old gentleman thanks to being the discoverers of the labyrinth. He sleepily opened his mouth to speak, but his speech was awfully hard to comprehend.

"My name is Aja. I've already retired, but a life of simply eating and sleeping is far too boring. That's why I've decided to do something with the rest of my time here."

"My name is Kazuhiho. I'm a swordsman who's spent all his time traveling around."

“Great Aja, I am Mariabelle, a spirit sorceress from the Sorcerer’s Guild.”

We each shook his outstretched hand and introduced ourselves. In this region, it was customary to introduce oneself with a handshake.

“Hm... You have quite an interesting look about you. Like that elf there, it seems half of you is not from the realm of humans... Ah, nevermind that. Nothing but an old man’s grumblings.”

He’d hit the nail on the head right away, leaving me unsure of what to say. This was why I disliked dealing with those who could peer into the world of mysticism. They were terribly astute, with sharp words to match.

I looked at Marie’s widened eyes, and we both wordlessly agreed to let it go. His narrowed eyes appeared to be smiling, but there was a deep sense of intellect behind them. Those eyes of his scanned the room suspiciously.

“But to think they haven’t reached out to the Adventurer’s Guild yet... It’s a bit surprising, I must say.”

“It seems they only gathered people who are involved with the government in some way. Maybe that’s just how attractive the Magic Stone is. I have a feeling they’re very wary of someone else taking it.”

I told him just how I felt, and his wrinkles creased deeper as his face formed a smile.

The Adventurer’s Guild was quite accommodating when it came to these things, because they only required money to get work done. They may be called upon as backup later, but would probably arrive after Arilai had set up a favorable position. I said as such to the old man, and he nodded.

“You’re quite the cynic for a mere child. It must be quite a pain living with him, isn’t it?”

Before I could answer, Mariabelle blinked her purple eyes and smiled cutely.

“Actually, not at all. He’s a very smart and considerate person, so I’ve never felt that way being with him.”

As she finished talking, she glanced at me. Though, of course, I was too embarrassed to look her back in the eyes. In fact, I was getting flustered

wondering if she'd heard me talking to myself the previous night...

"Wahaha, there's more to you than meets the eye, I see! How delightful! To think you're living with an elf; they're usually known to be rather fussy, you know."

Sheesh, I didn't appreciate being laughed at so openly. And, incidentally, Marie was actually pretty well known as an elf who hated humans at first.

The old man was in a good mood now and giving orders to bring out snacks and tea, but I was feeling quite uncomfortable. To be honest, I wanted to get out of there.

The culture of drinking tea was deeply rooted in this region, with tea breaks occurring wherever people had the time and space. I looked around to find several other groups were grouping together as well.

A few disciples were gathered around the old man, and he was conversing with them quietly. His appearance wasn't all too impressive, but it reminded me that he was a famous figure.

Marie mainly did most of the talking, but before I knew it, the topic had shifted to the ancient labyrinth.

"They don't even know what sort of powers the Magic Stone has yet. That thing has already brought about great catastrophes in the past. I have a suspicion it's not something to be sought after..."

Hearing the old man's ominous words, Marie and I looked at each other. The last time we saw the Magic Stone was when that Neko was holding it in his hand. It was taken away by the monster before we could even touch it, so we didn't know too much about it at the time. But from what we saw, it seemed like it was far more than a simple magical catalyst to us.

Marie leaned in slightly to ask him a question. "I heard the Neko tribe had been refining them before. Do you know why humans can't do the same?"

"'Tis a mystery. It was only 200 or so years ago, but there aren't any written records on it. Wouldn't you say it's as if someone deliberately erased the existence of ancient labyrinths from history?"

The old man stared at us with his bulging eyes, and we audibly gulped. He was subtly telling us that we weren't dealing with an ordinary underground labyrinth. But since the great Aja was participating in this investigation, he, too must have been seeking the truth behind the mystery.

"I'm sure we will be seeing each other in the labyrinth as well. I would say we have about a week. Be sure to prepare sufficiently until then."

"Ah, yes...but it's a bit dangerous with just us two, so we're thinking of sitting this out until we have a team ready. Not only that, but we still need to get approval from the Sorcerer's Guild."

The old man's eyes widened in surprise.

"Truly regrettable. To think the first discoverers won't even step foot in the labyrinth... When I was young... Ah well, it's true that it may be too dangerous for two children. But, if you do participate later on, come talk to me."

"Thank you, we'll be sure to do that."

We bowed our heads in gratitude. He seemed to be impressed by our respectful attitude. The old man then reached and called for someone in the distance.

"Hakam! Have you forgotten to give these two something?"

The person who slowly stood up was the one who was speaking on stage earlier. The man was dressed in noble attire, but it didn't seem to match his muscular, bronze body very well. He walked over like a bear in his too-tight clothing, then observed us with a long gaze. There was clearly a strong will behind his slightly wrinkled expression, and he had an aura about him of a man accustomed to the battlefield.

"What is it, Aja...? Ah, you mean the exploration license."

"Yes, it seems they report to the Sorcerer's Guild with it. They're a stubborn bunch that won't lift a finger until they actually see the license. It would be better for them if you give it to them already instead of making them waste time here."

Hakam sighed in exasperation, then called over his subordinate and told them

to bring something from his room. The man who clearly seemed versed in military arts turned back around and sat next to the great Aja.

“I am Hakam, the supreme commander in charge of conquering the labyrinth. I do not mind giving you a license, but departure will not be for some time yet. Do not try to explore the labyrinth prematurely.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t do that. But being able to report to the guild early will help us a great deal.”

Marie and I bowed in gratitude, and his intimidating face softened into a smile. It was only a slight change in expression, but it completely changed the atmosphere about him.

“You seem like well-mannered kids, but I can’t judge a book by its cover. I’ve heard the stories of you saving a Neko tribesman and discovering this ancient labyrinth. They say you fought off multiple bandits, despite your young age.”

“Thank you. Things ended up going well, but it was quite dangerous. I can’t say it was very commendable of us to put ourselves in such a situation.”

Marie nodded along in agreement. Ever since we played right into the hands of those bandits before, we’ve learned to be far more cautious.

“Ah, it’s good that you have a grasp of your own abilities while you’re young. Whereas Aja there is a wrinkled old geezer now and still hasn’t learned.”

As soon as he finished his sentence, he was knocked on the head with a staff. The sound of the impact was quite loud, but he seemed unfazed as he gave us a look that seemed to say “See?”

Just then, some of his subordinates approached him with a rolled up letter. The string binding it was undone before us, revealing a license with the seal from the king of Arilai on it.

“Here’s what you asked for. I intended on giving it to you later, but I’d rather not deal with the trouble of refusing Aja’s request.”

“Th-Thank you.”

He was probably going to delay giving it to us because he didn’t want us going off to the labyrinths by ourselves, as he’d mentioned earlier. Of course, we

weren't the type to lose sight of ourselves over greed, and I think he understood that after talking to us.

He handed Marie the letter and turned his head toward me. "Ah, I'd like to ask something of you before you return to your country. I'm about to meet with the Neko, and would like you to be my translator. We have our own, but I thought he'd be more at ease with someone he's familiar with."

"Oh, you mean Mewi. Yes, of course we don't mind."

I quickly glanced at Marie to find her nodding enthusiastically, so I accepted the request. He didn't explain the reason for their meeting, but I figured it had to do with the Magic Stone. It was clearly something he couldn't say here, and he did mention earlier that something like a Magic Stone was under appraisal. We'd also seen the Magic Stone in person, which may have contributed in their decision to choose us for this task. We were wondering how Mewi was being treated anyway, and whether he'd be able to live in peace.

Hakam nodded with satisfaction, then directed his warrior's gaze toward my hip. I didn't have a sword at the time since the bandits had broken it, so all I had was an empty sheath.

"Do the swords of our land not suit you?"

"No, no, it's not that... I've been looking for something that's cheap, durable, and long-lasting, but I'm having a hard time finding one."

I sounded like a frugal housewife, but I really didn't have much of a budget to work with. But he seemed more perplexed by the fact that I seemed fine without carrying a sword.

"I was wary when I heard you'd be participating from a foreign country, but it seems there was no need."

"I wouldn't be so sure. The elf girl is as clever as she looks, and the boy is deceptively so. They're even living together, despite their age."

We both made a face and tried shouting over Aja, but it seemed those around us couldn't ignore that statement.

"Elves these days are pretty open about that sort of stuff, huh?" "Who

knows? Maybe it’s the guy that’s...” they all chimed in unnecessarily.

Our faces turned red as we said the same thing at once:

““It’s not like that! We’ve only held hands so far!””

The hall erupted in laughter. Their chuckling voices didn’t stop for some time, and our faces were still red when we left the castle.

And so, I learned that it was better to just keep my mouth shut in situations like those...

It seemed that while we were away, the conversation in the hall continued. The amused laughter died down after quite some time, and eventually settled into its usual calmness. Hakam, the man in charge of the mission to conquer the labyrinths, looked around as he rubbed his beard.

“They’re quite strange, those two. Even those who were cautious of outsiders relaxed quite quickly around them. That’s not something you can do deliberately.”

It was natural to be cautious of outsiders, especially when meeting one for the first time. Considering this was a conquest for a labyrinth that could steer the future of an entire kingdom, it was only natural for everyone to be on edge. But Hakam could clearly see the peaceful mood in the air, as if the hostility had been neutralized.

“Ah, the power of youth,” Aja sighed. “We could never reach someone’s hearts as they do, with the countless secrets we harbor.”

Hakam exhaled from his nose and sat down. There was a smile on the wrinkly face of the old man sitting across from him, as well as those around him. Hakam frowned dubiously.

“And what about you? You seem to treat them like your own grandchildren, but you’d better not leak any of our information, unintentional or not.”

“Fool... Of course I know what I can and can’t tell the Alexei Sorcerer’s Guild. But it seems they will have difficulties ahead. Even if they do manage to get approval from the guild, I don’t know if we should send them into ancient labyrinths where many perish on a daily basis...”

Hakam exhaled quickly from his nose again. The old man indeed sounded like someone worried for his grandchildren.

The refreshing aroma of tea wafted up from the cup he was holding. Hakam took in the scent and opened his mouth to speak again.

“They should be fine. If they do end up participating, I’m certain they’ll manage, just as before. Though, this is nothing more than a hunch.”

Aja seemed surprised, then smiled even wider than before.

“How interesting that a veteran of many battlefields says so. I suppose I’ll leave the fact that you were captivated by a cute elf girl during your speech to myself.”

Hakam nearly spit out his tea. This was followed by his repeated attempts to explain himself, and the hall became lively again.

We were oblivious to all of this happening, as we were resting at a plaza in Arilai.

Bright sunlight...would be a mild way to put it.

Mariabelle stood in the middle of the plaza, bathing in the infernal beams from the sun.

She was gripping her holly staff with both hands as sweat ran down her face. She was muttering something that the spirits around her could hear. A sphere of water, several buckets worth, was floating before her. It was a water spirit called Undine.

In Arilai, there were no restrictions on using water or ice spirits in the middle of a city. As soon as Marie learned this, she told me she wanted to try something before going to see Mewi. I was sitting on a bench and swinging my feet back and forth, acting like a sort of escort for her.

Looking around, there were various clever methods of dealing with the desert heat in the city. For example, this tall plant that looked like a palm tree. They’d been planted all over the place, and it was clear to see they were deliberately positioned to provide shade from direct sunlight. The regions for the upper classes, such as royalty, were surely even more comfortable to live in.

But we were in the lower layer of the city, where the quality of life had a stark contrast from the upper layer. The citizens dealt with the climate by wearing breathable clothing, rehydrating with tea often, and taking naps on particularly sunny days to replenish their energy. Many around us were even taking a post-lunch break by lying down in the breeze.

The uncommon sight of an elf and Spirit Sorcery was attracting great amounts of attention, but she continued her muttering.

“Oh, something’s changing?”

I voiced my observation when I saw that something was sparkling around the water spirit. They seemed like tiny water particles, and they all moved in unison the moment Marie raised her thin finger. Mist was dispersed in the area around her, and, after a brief pause, the crowd around her cheered.

“Ahh, it feels so nice! You did it, Marie!”

“Hehe, I’ve finally learned to control vaporization. I was thinking about it at the oasis and during the tea party. It should really prove to be useful here.”

As the vaporized fluid spread to our surroundings, the heat became significantly easier to manage.

“I don’t know if you realize this, but there aren’t many elves who can pull off such a complicated and delicate order. I may have mentioned this before, but my strength lies in this extreme precision,” she explained with a proud expression while wiping beads of water from her forehead.

Dispersing mist that was a lower temperature than the surrounding atmosphere did indeed serve to make the area cooler overall. As it lowered the air temperature, the evaporating water absorbed some of the heat along with it. Children gathered around excited, drawn by the interesting sight.

Marie smiled faintly and touched the water, then gave the water spirit an additional request.

“Keep cooling them off for me.”

The transparent sphere bobbed as if nodding in response.

With the sound of children shouting happily behind us, we slowly climbed

down the stairs. Marie was still sweating as she turned toward me, but there was a satisfied look on her face.

“That should help with the heat, but they’ll need to figure out how to secure more water.”

“Water is quite precious in the desert... By the way, Marie, have you been getting better at handling spirits?”

“Yes, I’ve come to appreciate them more, since I’ve been unable to communicate with them in Japan. I feel like I’ve become much better friends with them now,” she said proudly.

According to her, going back to Japan felt like reverting to level 1, and it was very difficult for her to communicate with spirits there.

“But I feel as if I’m inching closer to them, so it may get better over time. Although, I don’t want you to expect too much.”

“I don’t expect anything, and I don’t think it’s all that necessary while you’re in Japan.”

“Maybe not, but it bothers me. It gives my back this itchy feeling knowing I can’t do something I normally can.”

Hm, I didn’t know that. Personally, I’d prefer if Marie just lived her life quietly, but I wanted to leave that decision to her. But now that she could control vaporization, it’d really help us get through the extreme heat that was approaching in about three months.

We continued down to the lower layers of the city. The buildings were closer together, with more residential areas and shopping districts in the area. It was more humid with the increased traffic, and the lack of wind made it feel even hotter than before. Marie seemed to be having a hard time dealing with this, and walked from shade spot to shade spot, hiding from the sunlight.

“Maybe you should at least change out of those thick robes. Look, everyone else is wearing light clothing.”

I voiced my idea after noticing a clothing store when we descended the stone stairway to an open area. There was colorful clothing in breathable-looking

fabrics displayed at the store. We were still far from our destination, but the girl's feet stopped at my suggestion. I seemed to have caught her attention. Seeing her light purple eyes staring at the clothes, I decided to entice her a little more.

"Don't they all seem nice and airy? Looks like they're Arabian style or something. I always think about what would look good on you, and I think those colors that match your eyes would look nice."

"Oh, stop that. As you can tell by my robes, I'm a sorceress. I'd be setting a bad example wearing thin clothing like that..."

"Hmm, I think you'd look good in a simple white color too. Look, it matches your hair perfectly."

The store employee gestured for us to try it, so I took one and held it up to her shoulders. It drew out the color of her eyes even further, making them seem more beautiful than precious jewels.

...But from behind the clothing I was holding, I could see a pair of glaring eyes and a frowning mouth.

"...The Sorcerer's Guild would be angry with me if I showed up wearing something like this."

"We're in Arilai right now. There's still a long way to go until we get to your country, and I doubt anyone from there is watching you. You liked wearing pajamas while we rested in Japan, didn't you?"

She made a troubled face. Just to be clear, there were no rules stating she had to wear robes. Anything was fine to wear so long as the fabric didn't restrict movement or get in the way of interacting with spirits. The rest really was up to the sorcerer's sense of code.

"Hmph... You always try to lure my interests like this. You started this, so take responsibility and help me choose an outfit, okay?"

"Ah, good. I'll gladly help of course."

Marie put on an exasperated act, but her footsteps seemed lighter as she followed me into the shop. I already knew how much she liked clothes, so it was

easy to convince her.

It seemed there was a wide array of dyes available in this region, seeing how the clothes came in all sorts of colors. The shop was also well-stocked with different fabrics, ranging from thin to thicker cloths.

“I think pants like these would be easy to move around in. What do you think?”

“Oh, it has drawstrings to cinch up the waist and ankles. It does look quite lovely, with a foreign style to it. As for the color, I do think white looks nice. Say, what do you think of these? Would it look strange if my stomach was showing?”

I looked at what she picked out. It was the type of top that covered up the chest down to the wrists. It seemed to be designed for hot weather and didn’t completely cover the stomach. Well, all I could say was that I was more than happy to see a cute girl’s belly button from wearing something like this.

“Then I think you should wear this veil along with it. It’s a little flashy, but it’d go really well with your pretty skin.”

I placed the thin fabric over her head. She seemed to be getting into it too.

“There’s nothing wrong with wearing this. It’s for dealing with the sun after all,” Marie said, almost as if making excuses for herself.

I heard shopping with women could be a hassle, but there was no pain in spending time with such a cute girl like her. Even the old lady working at the shop seemed enchanted and helped us pick out clothes that would suit her, rather than just directing us to the most expensive ones.

We didn’t have the convenience of a changing room, of course, but she kindly let us use the room in the back. After a little while, the elf girl emerged from the back wearing ornate sandals. The shop worker and I stared.

The white, breezy-looking clothing was cinched up at her waist and ankles. There were slits in her top from her shoulder to her sleeve, from which her beautiful skin peeked out. She looked like a dancer from a foreign country, and her outfit emphasized her natural allure even further. All I could manage was a wordless sigh...and the shop worker seemed to be in a similar emotional state, seeing how we both sighed at the exact same time.

Marie was a slender girl, but there was a definite sexiness to the curvature of her hips, and her cute little belly button was openly visible. She wasn't showing skin excessively at all, but the little bit of wrist, ankles, and waist she was showing hinted at her beauty as a whole.

"H-How do I look? It's a little embarrassing wearing something so light..."

The veil covering her white hair and elf ears swayed a bit as she shyly asked for my opinion. I mean, she looked so good, there was nothing for me to critique. The shop worker and I clapped without thinking, clearly impressed by the end result.

"Please come back again!" The smiling older lady waved her hand enthusiastically as she walked us out of the shop.

Marie seemed much more comfortable in her new outfit as we walked out under the sun, though the expression on her face seemed somewhat apologetic.

"She gave us such a big discount. I'd feel guilty if we didn't come back to shop here again... I also feel bad about you holding my bag for me..."

"We can come back once we save up more money. As for the bag, it doesn't suit your new clothing, so I don't mind holding it for you."

She was so adorable as she thanked me, it seemed to lighten the mood of everyone around us. They couldn't help but stare at her gorgeous smile, and I certainly couldn't blame them.

That reminded me, I'd need to buy new clothes for her to wear in Japan too. It was getting warmer over there as well, so I debated whether to get her spring or summer clothes.

As I stood there thinking about it, the girl peered at me with her purple eyes.

"So, where does Mewi live? I hope we didn't make Sir Hakam wait too long with our detour."

"Hmm, I think he'll forgive us when he sees your outfit. It should be right over there, just around the corner."

I repositioned the bag, which was now bulging with Marie's robe in it, and we

walked around the corner.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 4: The Magi Drake's Pulse

After being rescued from bandits, Mewi of the Neko tribe was left in a complicated situation. The Magic Stones were still a mystery, and he was the only one who could refine magical catalysts at the moment. And while half-beasts had once freely intermingled with humans, they were still classified as monsters, and couldn't be explained to the citizens until the details were known. Therefore, he was transferred to a workshop by the river away from the residential area after his recovery was complete.

Due to being near the river, there were all sorts of vegetation unfamiliar to our region, like trees that had incredibly skinny trunks and leaves, and those that looked like palm trees. We stepped through the course sand as we scanned our surroundings.

"Oh, the wind is a little cooler here," Marie spoke. "Maybe it's more comfortable in this area?"

"Must be because there's less direct sunlight since we're at the rear of the slope, and there's a river nearby. It's definitely still hot though."

I pulled at my collar with a finger and fanned at my sweaty neck, but couldn't stop the pouring sweat. I felt as if I'd be producing pure salt soon.

As for Marie, she seemed to be feeling quite fine in her new outfit, and coolly suggested I wrap a turban around my head.

"Yeah, black hair tends to absorb sunlight, so that might be a good idea. I wish there was something a little more stylish in design though."

"Oh, that's a shame. I probably would've laughed out loud if I got to see you wearing such an outfit." The girl giggled, and I silently decided against wearing a turban afterall.

The workshop made of cut stones was cozy but well built. I was surprised to find it had its own private waterway, with a small water mill alongside it. Looking up, I found a big chimney on the roof, which would likely be pumping

out smoke if magical refinement was to take place there someday. But I didn't really know how refining worked, so that was just a guess on my end.

There were two stern-looking guards at the entrance. When I cautiously spoke to them, they'd apparently been alerted of our arrival already and let us in right away.

"You're here. Ah, that's quite lovely. I did not expect an elf to arrive wearing the attire of our kingdom."

When the door creaked open, Hakam was waiting for us at the table. He noticed Marie's change in outfit right away, and slowly stood up like a bear.

"Thank you for your kind words. The fabrics in this kingdom are very light and stretchy, so it's breezy and easy to move around in."

"I'm glad you seem to like it. The citizens will certainly be happy to see you wearing it, so I would love it if you roamed around in that outfit during your stay."

He ushered us inside with a surprisingly kind smile. There were countless battle wounds on his sun-tanned skin, and while he stood with a military posture, he had a manner of speech that told me he was good-natured.

Someone else was in the room—a Neko that was small enough to be completely invisible behind Hakam's frame. Mewi had once had the tendons of his foot cut by bandits, but he stood up from his chair and walked up with steady steps. I crouched down to greet him, and he reached out with fingers that looked like dumplings to grip my clothes.

"Hey there, Mewi. Looks like your wounds are all healed up."

"Sir Kazuhiho. Thank you very much for saving me from danger."

He bowed his head, and I noted what a polite half-beast he was. I'd heard they'd once spent time mingling with humans, so maybe their manners had been passed down from those bygone days.

I looked over to the table they were resting at earlier, noticing a fist-sized object resting there, wrapped in a piece of cloth. They should have gotten right into inspecting the Magic Stone sample they retrieved from the ancient ruins.

The reason we were able to attend such a meeting that could affect the future of an entire kingdom...wasn't because we were the first to discover the ruins.

"Thank you for coming here before returning home. There aren't many who can speak the language of half-beasts...with a Neko dialect, no less. I'll have to rely on you until he can learn the universal language."

"Oh, it's no problem at all. We wanted to come see Mewi as well."

We ended up being invited here because we'd been taking care of Mewi until a few days ago. In other words, we weren't sought out for our ability to explore labyrinths, but simply to act as translators. Of course, they were probably taking us lightly because we looked like we were fifteen, but I doubted they'd let any important information leak.

"I did ask for his protection, but I never expected such a nice workshop... Wait, huh? Mewi looks a bit tired..."

I took a better look at him, and noticed his fur seemed a bit dull compared to before. He had had round eyes like a kitten's, but now...they were like those of an old cat with the wisdom of a lifetime. Glancing at the table, I noticed there were various books on the universal language, and it was clear to see he'd been through so much since recovering from his injuries.

"Oh my, Mewi looks a bit down. This won't do. Here, come to me."

Marie couldn't speak his tongue, but as an avid cat lover, she lifted him up from both armpits without caring about the language barrier. Mewi hung there in the air and let out a "grrow." He pretty much seemed like an ordinary cat.

"I hope you don't mind if I take a seat next to you, Commander Hakam. So, how go the studies on the universal language?"

Hakam and Mewi shook their heads in response to the girl's question. They both looked out the window and let out a sigh at the same time. It seemed like they were getting along well.

The man slumped his shoulders, then gestured for me to take a seat as well.

"In any case, I'd like to proceed with the appraisal of the Magic Stone. That reminds me, you mentioned that you've all seen the Magic Stone in person. I'd

like to ask, does it look like this?”

Hakam reached for the object on the table and removed the cloth covering it, revealing a turquoise stone reminiscent of the sea. It was much like an unpolished gemstone and was small enough to be fully concealed if I wrapped my hand around it.

Marie, Mewi, and I moved our faces closer and stared at the stone. I was no magic user, but I felt like it was something more than just an ordinary stone. It was as if there were some sort of energy seeping through, like a quickening pulse.

“Hmm...” I pondered at the sight. “It’s similar, but I think it shone when Mewi touched it that one time.”

“Mewi, would you mind touching it again?” Marie asked gently.

Mewi touched the stone despite being unable to understand a word she was saying. Maybe he somewhat instinctively knew what she wanted, like normal cats.

His furry hand grabbed the stone, and he began rubbing it. Then, it seemed as if the stone began to glow, as I’d thought.

“Oh, I’ll go close the window.”

After standing up and covering the windows with wooden boards, we were finally able to see the changes in full. A bluish white phosphorescence filled the room, dimly illuminating the faces around the table.

“Is this...the real thing? Marie, how does it look from a sorceress’s perspective?”

“I can feel magic within it. But it’s faint... Ah! Is the stone...changing?”

Just then, the stone emitted a slight glint in front of us. The magic seemed to stabilize, and the previously wavering light turned into a steady gleam. Marie touched it with her finger, then strained her ears to listen to the stone’s voice.

“It’s been refined... It’s drawing out magic by changing its essence into something else. It’s called a magical catalyst, a tool that allows even an amateur to use magic.”

Hmm, so magical catalysts were something like batteries then.

“Does it feel like the stone from before, Mewi? Maybe I’m just imagining it, but it seems much weaker.”

“Yes, I think it is very faint. But it feels very familiar. The smell too.” He sniffed the stone as he answered my question.

So that made it very likely that it was a Magic Stone. But there was no need for us to confirm as much. So long as we figured out its value, it would answer the question of whether it was worth conquering the labyrinths or not.

I told Hakam as such, and he nodded deeply.

“I see. Then I’ll leave the rest to Aja. I’ll be excusing myself now, but I’d like it if you helped him with his studies, if you don’t mind. In that case, you will be free to visit this place any time you please.”

I was actually thinking about asking that, so I was surprised to receive permission first. It was clear to see the high expectations he had for Mewi by looking at the workshop that had been provided.

The reason he still permitted us entry was probably because he saw the girl gently petting the purring Neko. Maybe he was kinder than he seemed.

He stood from his seat, then picked up the stone and left the workshop.

As the man of authority left, it felt like we were finally able to relax. The three of us all let out a collective sigh, and finally had the chance to take a careful look around the place.

The sunlight pouring in between the tree branches outside lit up the interior of the room. Someone must have once used the various alchemical tools that were stored there, but the walls and ceiling were well kept.

“They gave you a cozy and well-lit workshop, didn’t they?” Marie said. “It’s the perfect place to have lunch, and seems like a comfortable place to live.”

“I was very surprised to be given such a nice house. I cannot thank Sir Kazuhiho enou... *purrr*...”

He looked into my eyes and tried to thank me, but melted as soon as the elf began rubbing the back of his neck. His innocent eyes were now closed, his pink

little nose twitching periodically.



“No, I’m glad everything worked out. You even have guards here, so you should be safe from any danger. Oh, speaking of lunch, have you eaten yet?”

Mewi glanced at the basket next to the window in response to my question. Black bread peeked out from under the cloth, and when I lifted it, there was a red soup full of spices underneath.

“I am not good with spicy foods...so I have only been eating bread.”

Beast tribes hardly ever cooked, so their tongues may have been sensitive. We’d brought ourselves some bento, so I decided to share with him.

I opened the lid of the boxed lunch, revealing the inarizushi with a subdued color palette. It probably looked bizarre to a half-beast, but Mewi’s nose was twitching in reaction to the faintly sweet aroma.

That made me think, were cats able to eat rice? I’d heard they shouldn’t eat too much grains, but he did say he’d been eating bread... The bigger issue here was the flavor.

Marie picked up one of the inarizushi and brought it over to Mewi’s mouth. “Here, open wide!”

“I may not look it, but I do know how to use a fork. I may fumble with it a bit, but...mmgg...mmf, oof!”

Mewi’s eyes snapped open, and he let out a strange cry. Sour-sweet juices seeped out with every bite, and the fragrance of sesame passed through his nose as he swallowed. The incredible, gentle flavor fortunately seemed to mesh with the Neko’s palate, and when Mewi looked up to me... Well, it was hard to explain the look on his face. It was like he was asking, “Are you sure I can have this?”

We wanted him to enjoy the food with us, of course, and I was still a little full from the French cuisine from the previous night to be honest. As such I nodded in response, and Mewi’s eyes glimmered like the Magic Stone. He then gripped Marie’s finger with both his paws and began eating with gusto.

The Neko seemed like he couldn’t get enough of it, and the elf was enjoying herself as he licked the remnants of the food off her fingers. Marie turned to

me, and her glittering eyes seemed to be screaming “Sooo cute!” I smiled and nodded. They both seemed cute to me.

A few minutes later, after Mewi finished eating about half the meal, he sat there on Ms. Elf’s knees with a full stomach and dreamy expression on his face. And of course, Marie had the same expression on hers.

Immediately after, realization seemed to hit her.

“Oh no! I can’t move at all!”

“Okay, should I feed *you* this time then?”

Her eyes darted back and forth between the Neko and inarizushi, then said, “If you don’t mind...” with a completely serious face.

Wait...really? I was happy to, of course, but I hoped she wouldn’t protest later.

And so our late lunch began, with the sound of purring in the background.

We were relaxing with some tea some time later, and Marie and I began debating about the universal language. Actually, it was probably more like an argument than a debate.

Mewi suddenly woke from his nap and looked at us with confusion.

“Like I said, I think he should end his sentences with ‘mew.’ It would sound much more natural for him. Don’t you think it’d be adorable?”

“Y-Yeah, but whether or not he should talk like that should be up to him. Mewi, would you want to end your sentences with ‘mew’ when you talk?”

He thought about it for a moment, then shook his head as if to say, “I do not think I would.”

Marie lips turned into a frown, then she stared at the Neko with a strangely dignified look.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no room for compromise here. You must uphold your pride as a Neko and end your sentences with ‘mew.’ That’s what I think at least.”

“Huh...? I don’t think that’s what a Neko’s pride is about...”

Mewi shook his head as if to say, “No, it is not.” That much was obvious.

Wait, maybe this was because of those picture books I’d been reading to her every night. Or it could’ve just been her personal preference, but I really wasn’t sure here.

Whatever it was, men were creatures bound to have their lives swayed by women. All we could do was awkwardly nod along.

W-Well, I won’t stop him if he agrees...

I couldn’t say she was completely wrong either, and had considered that making his speech patterns more flamboyant would change the impression he gave people.

As I put away the bento box after finishing our meal, I thought about how I could explain that the rest of Mewi’s life had been determined in that conversation.

Suddenly, I heard a *clunk* as the bento box hit something rigid. It was an item from the magi drake, which had been left in my bag and forgotten about for a few days now.

“While we’re at it, can you take a look at this? Someone gave these to us. They’re a dragon scale and dragon blood.”

“I do not know much about it, but I do not mind taking a look of course.”

It was something different from Magic Stones, but maybe he could do that refinement thing.

Marie began explaining while Mewi touched and rubbed the objects.

“As I explained earlier, magical catalysts allow even amateurs to use magic. A skilled sorcerer would be able to reach even further beyond. But more importantly, Mewi, you should be ending your sentences with ‘mew.’”

Maybe he’d learn about those verbal tics in the half-beast language... Oh nooo...

I mulled over those unconcerned thoughts as I spoke to Marie.

“Huh? I thought refinement was the end of it.”

“Simply put, magically enhanced equipment can be created too. It’s highly dependant on the quality of the original items and caster’s skill, so there aren’t many of them circulating in the markets.”

Right, magic equipment. I’d seen things like that in games, but I didn’t expect them to exist in this world too. It’d be nice to see at least once, but I thought that might be too much for Mewi to handle.

I translated for him, and as I thought, he shook his head sideways. “I-I have not learned that much...mew! Besides, I do not understand refinement very much either, mew.”

Wow, he’s so diligent...he’s actually ending his sentences with “mew.”

His eyes were a bit teary, but Marie had a warm smile on her face and rubbed his head as a reward. She seemed to genuinely find it cute when Mewi spoke like that.

His eyes narrowed with satisfaction, then looked up at me. “Master Kazuhiho, this is amazing. It is brimming with power, and I cannot seem to refine it.”

Hm, the drake did mention she was giving me a fresh scale instead of one of the scales on the floor that had run out of magic. And Marie had explained before that Magi Drakes could generate magic simply by breathing. So maybe that meant it’d continue generating magic for some time. That may explain why Mewi isn’t able to handle it.

I peered in to get a closer look with the others, and Mewi furrowed his brows.

“Wait, there is something else... Permission? Contract? There are strange words showing... It still seems to be connected.”

I had no idea what he was going on about. I translated his exact words to Marie, and she seemed to share my confusion.

“Huh? What do you mean by ‘connected’?”

“There is still magic pouring into it... Is this really just an item? It feels like the source is too close...”

With that, he indicated the stone that had been soaked with dragon blood. Its faint glimmer seemed like a pulse, or a fire that was nearly about to go out.

“Maybe I’m just imagining it, but does it seem weaker?” Marie pondered aloud. “If it’s really connected to her, maybe something happened?”

“No, there isn’t anyone who would stand a chance against a magi drake. She’s probably sleeping or something.”

Then, as if reacting to our conversation, the glimmering changed its pace to resemble something like a heartbeat. Marie and I looked at each other. If she could hear us... Well, it was probably quicker to just ask her.

“Lady Magi Drake, is something going on?”

The glowing flickered quickly and brightly, and our eyes widened. This must have been what Mewi meant about us being connected. It was like she could hear us on the other side of a phone. Which also meant she probably knew about everything we’d been through up till now...

“In any case, I wonder what sort of danger she’s in if she’s asking for our help,” I questioned.

“I wonder too. It could be that the danger isn’t toward the magi drake, but her eggs. I was planning to return to the Sorcerer’s Guild today, but let’s check with her first.”

I nodded in agreement, though I still couldn’t imagine how anyone could threaten a magi drake whose level was over 1,000.

As soon as Mewi saw us off, I decided to activate my long distance travel skill. And so, we headed off to the Nazul-Nazul Ruins, the magi drake’s haven.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

In the hall, spell casters from high-ranking sorcerers to wizards had already gathered. It was customary for those who achieved a high rank to wear navy robes, but they could wear any color they wanted once they became a wizard.

In Alexei, the silver bird was a symbol of wisdom, and it was common to see it embroidered on robes. But the man who stood at the center, Sven, the Twin Blade Magic Swordsman, wore no such embroidery. His muscular build was far from that of an ordinary sorcerer, and he opted to wear high-quality black leather that was suited for combat. There was a dangerous air about him that

made the other candidates keep at least a few steps away from him.

Bang, bang! The sound of a gavel could be heard, followed by silence. The guild leader's assistant, a man with graying hair, seemed to be the one in charge.

"Allow me to explain why I've gathered you all here today. Just earlier, we received news from Arilai that the Ujah Peak Ruins have been completely sealed off."

The hall became filled with voices. Everyone there had been surprised to find that the rumors were true. It also supported the talks of a half-fairy elf discovering the ancient labyrinth and receiving a license to explore it.

Bang! The gavel sounded again.

"Order. This will be discussed again upon Mariabelle's return, but her rank is not sufficient to enter an AA-rank labyrinth. Therefore, a substitute candidate will be chosen instead."

It would take at least a week to travel to Arilai, even with a horse and carriage. Considering the time left until Arilai would begin their search of the labyrinth, there was no time to wait for Mariabelle's return.

There were a total of eight substitute candidates gathered at the hall, each specialized in varying branches of magic. Sven stood a head taller than the rest of them, wearing a condescending sneer the entire time.

"I'll go. There aren't many who can handle an AA-rank labyrinth or higher like me."

"That doesn't mean you're the only one who can."

Sven turned to face the one who had made the comment. There stood an azure-haired woman, who seemed to be a similar rank as him if the color of her clothing was anything to go by.

"Allowing you to go could very well be the cause of conflict with Arilai. It will take at least ten years for you to learn how to get along with others peacefully and pleasantly."

"Ten years? That's not nearly enough time."

His shoes clicked and clacked as he walked up to the wizard, a dreadful grin on his face. The sheer intensity of the look in his eyes made everyone back away in a circle around him.

All except the aforementioned woman.

“Do tell. Who else is there? Who could possibly do a better job than me?”

The woman’s expression stayed calm, even in the face of his oppressive pressure. Her eyes were like clear, placid lakes, and seemed as if they had no sense of sight. Perhaps the crystal on her forehead served to grant her that ability instead. There was also a somewhat mystic air about her with her kimono-like attire and long, tied-back hair.

“Many of the candidates have already retired. Someone has rendered them incapable of speech for some unknown reason, but...nevermind that. I believe a substitute similar to you is neither needed nor wanted.”

Murmuring broke out once again. Mariabelle wouldn’t be approved due to her rank, but there could be an exception if a skilled escort accompanied her, as she had previously suggested.

The man laughed. “How surprising. I didn’t expect you to come to the rescue of your beloved disciple. But a chick that leaves its mother’s side will die quickly. Or is that perhaps what you want?”

“You’re quite wrong. The time for her potential to bloom is near.”

They stared at each other. One side smiled with an overwhelming heat, while the other accepted it with a smile like a serene lake.

Bang! The gavel was swung once more.

“As I just said, this discussion will continue upon Mariabelle’s return. Today’s meeting was merely to inform you all of the news. We are now adjourned.”

Mariabelle’s master seemed taken aback, then shot a cold look to the man in charge. The crowd muttered among themselves as they dispersed. The meeting was also meant to select a substitute candidate, but it had ended rather abruptly. Basically, it served to indirectly inform everyone that Sven was the number one candidate.

“Too baaad.”

Sven put his hand on the woman’s shoulder like a dear friend would, clearly enjoying her annoyed expression, then walked away. The only thing he needed now wasn’t Mariabelle’s return, but the license to explore the ancient labyrinth.

Sven, the Twin Blade Magic Swordsman, was walking down the road in a good mood. The rumors among the sorcerers had been true: the ancient labyrinth, which represented wisdom itself, was seconds away from being conquered. Now, the question everyone was focusing on was “Who would become the substitute?” That half-fairy elf wasn’t even considered.

“Boss, is it true? I heard you were chosen as the substitute.”

A figure wearing a black hood over their head emerged from the shadows. An iron chain was attached to the staff he was holding, indicating he was clearly not a proper sorcerer.

“Of course. Who else but me could conquer the ancient labyrinth? I made him choose me as the number one candidate. Now I just need to wait for that elf brat to come back. When she does, be ready to pick that labyrinth clean.”

The man in black snickered, his chains rattling as he followed after Sven.

A labyrinth that hadn’t been touched since ancient times would be a mountain of treasures. It was highly likely that priceless wealth and undiscovered magic could be found there. This was why conflict between the various factions was to be expected, but it still seemed quiet so far. But this silence would only last until Mariabelle obtained the license.

Suddenly, Sven began sniffing the air. The gesture was reminiscent of a hound, but the sight was far more terrifying than it was comical.

“Ah, she’s close. The elf girl is coming soon.”

“Your skills in using the Oracle ability is as impressive as ever, Master Sven. Will you be greeting her?”

“Yes, let’s go. Just as that woman said, I need to keep things peaceful at first and say hello.”

With that, Sven began walking outside, which had become stained in red.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 5: Time to Rest, Lady Magi Drake

Vooooooom...

We were zooming through a pitch black dimension at extreme speeds. The sight was similar to riding through the subway, except there was nothing enclosed around us. Despite that, we couldn't feel much wind.

This was my ability known as Trayn, the Journey's Guide, which allowed us to travel long distances. The possible destinations were limited to locations I'd visited with monuments dedicated to travel. Although it was extremely convenient, it was limited by the fact that it had a weight restriction, used up a valuable skill slot, and could only be used once a day. It was used by a small handful of traveling merchants, but it was unfit for transporting wares on a large scale.

My passenger, Marie, had been afraid at first, but she was completely accustomed to it by now as she was sitting next to me. Though, I couldn't help but wonder why she had such a bitter expression on her face...

"Haah... Back to wearing this robe again. I wish I could've spent another day wearing the other clothes."

It seemed she was feeling pretty down about going back to her regular clothes. She really did love wearing pretty clothing... I'd made myself a mental note.

"It's a shame, but the weather is nice where we're going. Besides, you were the one who was self-conscious about wearing sorceress-appropriate attire, Marie."

We didn't want those cute, Arabian-style clothes to wrinkle, so we left them at Mewi's workshop. We planned on visiting again soon, so we'd be able to take our time then.

"You really were cute in them though. I've always thought you have a classy facial structure, so clothes tend to look good on you."

“Oh, d-do you think so? Hm... You always say these things, but it’s throwing me off because it’s too dark to see your sleepy-looking face.”

She fanned herself as if her face were hot. Was my face really getting in the way that much? When I thought about it, Marie was always wearing her robe, so her time in Japan and other regions may have taught her the joy in wearing different clothing. I didn’t have much in my savings, but I didn’t mind breaking the bank to buy clothes for someone who was just so dang adorable.

I thought about that to myself, but she turned toward me with accusatory eyes.

“I know you’ve been secretly guiding my actions. Just like that time with the clothes. You lure me in with your sneaky ways, and before I know it, I’m involved in some new form of entertainment.”

“You make me sound like some sort of swindler... Well, maybe that’s not too far from the truth... I don’t know why, I just want to tell you about all sorts of fun things.”

She lightly tapped my forehead as if to say “There you go again.”

There was a faint smell of foreign incense in her silky hair. It made me feel like we’d just gotten back from an overseas trip.

“Now that we’re able to spend some time together, I want to do tons of fun things with you. I’ve never lived like this before, so I’m really looking forward to it.”

“Oh my, that does sound wonderful. Maybe you really are better when your face is hidden.”

Wait, what? Is my face unnecessary?

I resented that, but I could feel my heart skip a beat when she leaned on me, and I conceded that maybe my face was unnecessary after all.

Her soft body pressed against me, and it was hard to get my heartbeat under control when I could feel her warmth through the robes. But she was entirely calm, and I could feel her breathing much closer than usual. Even just hearing that soothing sound made me feel happy inside.

“You’re right. Looks like there are more things you can sense when you can’t see.”

“Hm? What are you talking about...? In any case, you should know I’m also looking forward to it. In Japan, and in this world too.” She tapped my forehead again, though it was much gentler this time. “Arilai was hot, but it was very fun. We were able to spread our wings a bit there. And we have the Japan trip coming up this weekend, don’t we? I can’t wait!”

The weekend was approaching in just a few days where we’d be going on our first domestic trip. Chichibu wasn’t too far from the city, and the view should be nice, according to the weather report. I told her as such, and she reiterated just how excited she was.

We both leaned against each other, exchanging our body temperatures. There wasn’t much in terms of conversation after that, but I felt like my heart was at peace. We stayed like that for some time until we eventually felt slight vibrations. Our surroundings became brighter, signaling that we were nearing our destination.

We’d only been traveling for twenty minutes or so, but I felt something warm lingering in my chest. The surroundings became much brighter, and we arrived at the monument dedicated to travelers.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

I’d heard before that the Nazul-Nazul Ruins were an underground city which had been destroyed 1,000 years ago. According to historical documents, sorcerers of great power and mighty soldiers who were far stronger those of the modern day lived there. But all their splendor was now a thing of the past, and the only sounds echoing in the vast underground ruins were our footsteps, including the lizardman’s, who was guiding us.

Two light spirits floated around us, allowing us to see without issues. The moisture on the stone pavement made the footing slippery, and I instinctively caught Marie’s arm as she nearly tripped.

“Oh, thank you. Would you mind holding onto me? I’m afraid I’ll slip again.”

“Not at all. I’m sure you’re preoccupied with directing the spirits. *And thanks*

for guiding us there, by the way.”

I switched to the reptilian language for my final statement, which was directed toward the lizardman leading the way. He directed his round eyes toward me, then seemed to blink as a translucent membrane briefly covered his eyeballs.

His crocodile-like mouth opened as he spoke. “No, no, I was told to politely escort our guests upon their arrival. If you recall, you went in through the back way last time. Now, I have permission to show you through the front entrance as guests.”

Huh, I hadn’t known there were front or back entrances. This was probably arranged by the magi drake, but I was grateful we could proceed like this without even looking at the map.

I translated for Marie, then she tilted her head curiously. “Oh, then I wonder if she isn’t in that dire of a situation. I thought something happened, judging by how weakly the dragon blood was glowing.”

“I can’t say for sure because we hardly see her in person, but... something certainly feels off,” the lizardman spoke. “We’ve even been getting spooked by the occasional growling we’ve been hearing. The eggs should have hatched by now, but...”

He began looking around cautiously. Maybe there was a change I wasn’t aware of. Though I couldn’t imagine what sort of trouble the legendary magi drake could possibly be in...

We continued through the dwellings of the lizardmen, then we headed deeper and deeper underground. They all seemed sociable as they waved hello, but they probably would’ve greeted us with bared fangs if we’d been intruders. Actually, their fangs were already showing naturally.

In any case, we passed through several hidden doors, then found ourselves in complete silence as we descended some long stairs. Everything we said echoed, which was somewhat of a bizarre feeling. The statues around us seemed to be the type that would normally begin moving and attack us for disturbing the peace.

“We don’t have time to waste on sightseeing right now.”

“I know, but it really is a shame. I wanted to see it reanimate with my own eyes...”

It was an impressive sight, but the lizardman looked at me with an expression that screamed “What’s wrong with this human?” Odd, I didn’t think I’d said anything that would make a monster get weirded out like that...

Eventually, we arrived before a giant entrance. I had to look up just to take in its sheer size. Its spookiness was fitting for the last boss’s room. It was overwhelming to think such an intricate ornament was made by a dragon.

As if I’d been struck by lightning, I was frozen in awe for quite some time. Its style was reminiscent of western architectural style, but the superb sense of balance must’ve originated from the designs of ancient times. I couldn’t even touch it without taking several deep breaths to steady myself first. It was enough to make any labyrinth enthusiast’s heart burst with excitement. I told myself to calm down and wipe the sweat from my hands first.

“There’s a sense of femininity that’s been added to it... I don’t think this was outsourced to a craftsman. To me, it almost seems like an expression of the stories within her mind...”

I’d finally calmed myself down enough to carefully reach out toward the ornament. In that moment, I felt like I ununderstood how train otakus felt. If I had a camera in my hands, I surely would’ve been taking all the pictures I possibly could. On my days off, I’d probably open the resulting album and look through it with fascination, sighing contentedly. And to think I was going to touch it with my very own hands...

“Stop being ridiculous. Let’s go.”

Marie pulled me by the sleeve and my outstretched hand swiped at the air. I cried.

“Well, I’ll be heading back now. Not allowed to go in there without permission.” The lizardman blinked as he spoke. It seemed he was looking for the right time to depart.

There seemed to be a sense of disappointment in his eyes as he looked at me,

and for some reason, Marie nodded in agreement despite being unable to understand him. But she, of course, understood the universal gesture of waving goodbye, and we both waved back at him in gratitude for guiding us there.

The waving lizardman looked pretty cute, like it was someone in a full-body costume...

Then, something happened after we said our farewells. As if our presence had been noted, the large metal gates had begun opening. Had we been just normal explorers, we probably would've been in pretty big trouble. Surely, some glorious battle music would've begun playing as we gazed upon the enormous black dragon laying within the open space surrounded by rocks. The sight alone would've meant certain death for us.

"Umm, excuse us..."

But we were guests in this case, and the magi drake waved her tail to welcome us in while still laying down. She then wiggled the tip of her tail, and the surrounding rocks began glowing here and there. It was as if she'd flicked on a light switch, and I was a bit surprised that she had a sense of hospitality, despite her terrifying appearance.

"Ah! Look, look! Dragon whelps!" Marie squealed.

"Oh, you're right! They're so small and cute."

When I looked up, there were about three little drakes climbing atop their mother's back. Their scales were white, most likely because they'd been born recently.

What was more concerning was just how listless the magi drake seemed. She was so full of majesty the last time we were here, but she simply laid there, completely drained of energy and her mouth slightly ajar.

Um...did she always look like this? I thought she had more of a "boss" feel to her that would strike despair in one's heart with her mere appearance. Marie and I looked at each other, wordlessly sharing this sentiment.

Just then, her words in the language of dragons rang out in the room, and she began glowing around her chest. A shining, humanoid silhouette landed upon the ground, her long, black hair wavering as she straightened her posture.

“Ah, hey!”

Marie covered my eyes, preventing me from seeing the woman in her birthday suit. She was quite voluptuous despite her long, slender legs and tight body, and had a mature attractiveness that contrasted with Marie’s.

With my vision blocked off, all I could hear were some crackling sounds. It was likely the sound of her creating that dress made of rigid material like last time.

Once Marie released her hands from my eyes, the magi drake in draconian form was slowly walking toward us. Her black armor had an intricate design, yet had a wide range of motion and seemed too strong to be broken by human hands. The sight of her making minor adjustments to her armor would’ve looked pretty cool. Her long, slender legs were still uncovered by armor and visible.

The drake, who was a head taller than us, parted her lips. “Welcome, children of men. It has been some time, but as you can see, I have had my hands incredibly full.”

“I see they’re finally born. Congratulations!”

She nodded with a proud expression on her face. Her obsidian-like eyes narrowed, and her smiling face was beautiful like no other. If there were anything detracting from her beauty, it’d have been the fact that she looked a bit tired and pale, and her hair was quite frayed.

“Ha, ha, if you are here, you must have brought it. I know you did. Let us give them an opportunity to dine with you children of men.”

She straightened her posture as she quipped, then...

Clunk!

The dragon dropped her chopsticks on the bento box that only contained a few grains of rice, on the verge of tears. We’d already eaten it at Mewi’s workshop, but she didn’t believe it. Maybe she didn’t want to. I could hardly bear to watch as tears welled up in her eyes and she began sniffling. For someone who was usually so majestic, her emotions were way too obvious. It was probably because she was unaccustomed to a human body, but the grief on her face was quite painful to see.

“U-Um, we were worried something had happened to you, and we came without preparing anything...”

“...ty...”

“Huh? What was that?”

“It is emptyyy! I have been working so hard raising children, and you are telling me to only enjoy the smell? Waaah!”



I was taken aback when I saw her fall to her knees. It seemed she wasn't just disappointed by the lack of food. She began explaining how hard it'd been raising her young.

"Children are so unruly. They were adorable at first, but they are like little demons that crawl around endlessly. And I have been continuously feeding them my magic all this time. All this time, without sleeping or eating...for so long..."

Marie's eyebrows contorted in concern as the elf rubbed the magi drake's back sympathetically. There must have been so much the dragon had been holding back, and tears began running down her face.

"Ah, I envy you. You have your male by your side. Ha, ha, that one is always off flying around somewhere, doing as he pleases. I wish to do something enjoyable as well. I want to go play... If only I could at least attack some human settlement."

Wait, did she just say something scary just now...?

Marie shot me a troubled look. Maybe this was what they called "maternal neurosis." I never knew dragons also had trouble raising children, but it must've been tough if she didn't even have time to sleep. The growling the lizardman had mentioned and the faint glow we saw from the dragon blood was probably due to this.

"U-Um, it would be dangerous attacking people, so please don't."

"I know. I am a prudent dragon. Survivors with a grudge will only bring more trouble, so I will be sure to choose a small settlement."

She smiled faintly, but that wasn't reassuring at all, Ms. Magi Drake. I wouldn't have minded when I thought this world only existed in my dreams, but this was just concerning.

Hmm, but this wasn't something that could be resolved with some bento. In Japan, husbands tended to devote their recreation time to their wives, but I wondered how it was in this world. Thinking about it, I remembered the trip to Chichibu we'd been planning for the weekend.

“Oh, how would you like to join us for a trip in Japan? Ah, you probably wouldn’t be interested in that, would you.” I laughed, but my laughter soon turned dry.

The dragon’s tears stopped immediately. Then, the sparkles in her eyes said to me, “Why, that is a wonderful idea.”

“Yes, yes, that is right. This body is but one of many dragon cores. I shall visit the world of reality with the children of men as I care for my young. How exciting!”

Uh-oh. I may have suggested something that could end up being big trouble. And there was no way I could really take it back now...

We’d already revealed my secret about being able to travel between our worlds, but I couldn’t imagine what would happen if a legendary dragon followed us to Japan. Even Mariabelle was glaring at me, and I felt something cold go up my spine.

By the time we emerged from the underground labyrinth, the view outside had changed completely. In the far distance was a royal castle enshrouded in twilight, with an azure sky on the other side. The air was chillier than earlier, and I was glad I had Marie change from her Arabian-style outfit.

But when I turned around, her purple eyes were cold and she clearly wasn’t having it.

“...I can’t believe you promised such a thing. Just what are you planning on doing?”

“Sorry, it just sort of slipped out. I didn’t think I’d end up inviting a Magi Drake to Japan...”

Her pale fingers reached out and pinched my cheek, and while I stood there in surprise, she pinched my other cheek as well. She moved her scowling face closer to mine, and although she was upset with me, it made my heart skip a beat.

“I think you’re far too careless when you’re in this world. It seems you need me to discipline you.”

With that, she moved her body even closer as if to prevent me from escaping. She seemed to have gotten used to this by now. Being a guy, it was quite troubling when she pressed her small breasts against me as she did when we slept in the bed together. She then pulled my cheeks up and down, giving me a strange sensation that was somewhere between pain and ticklishness. It was troubling, because...it made me so happy, I didn't know what to do.

"And what exactly is so funny? It seems you don't know what happens when you make me angry. I may not look it, but I've disciplined many newcomers at the Sorcerer's Guild. I'm feared by so many that I'm known as the Fairy of Ice."

Fairy of...Ice? That's weird, I only see her as a Food Fairy.

...Things wouldn't have ended well for me if I said it out loud, so I stayed quiet.

"I'm sorry, Marie. From now on, I'll be sure to discuss these things with you first."

"That's a given. We're going to be spending so much time together, so I won't allow any secrets or selfish actions. Understood?"

I could only muster a "yesh, ma'am" with my cheeks still being pinched, but it seemed the Fairy of Ice had forgiven me. She let out a cute "Hmph!" then slowly released me.

But my heart was beating as loud as ever. It was probably because she'd mentioned how we'd be "spending so much time together."

As for Marie, she tilted her head and asked what was wrong, so she clearly had no idea how big of an impact her words had. It would've been uncouth to prod her about it, so I decided to focus on our original goal. I cleared my throat, then turned toward her.

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, we should get to the Sorcerer's Guild before the sun sets. Though I don't know how long they'll stay open."

She blinked her round eyes. It seemed she'd forgotten all about that from the whole ordeal of inviting the magi drake to Japan, so I produced a rolled up letter from my shoulder bag. It was the license from the Kingdom of Arilai permitting entry into the ancient labyrinth.

“Ah! We need to report to the Sorcerer’s Guild! Oh no, the sun is going to set soon!”

It didn’t seem like a big deal if we reported the next day to me, but Marie stamped her little feet around with an anxious expression. She was straightlaced by nature, so she probably wanted to deliver it as soon as possible.

But just then, we were taken completely off guard by someone speaking to us.

“Then I’ll deliver that license for you.”

The man’s outerwear swished as he stood up, and my mind froze. There was an air about him reminiscent of a drawn blade; an aura that could only be achieved through combat. He stood there with an unnatural smile and fit body, wearing sunglasses which were an uncommon sight in this world, and had two swords hanging from his waist.

Since when had he been sitting here? How did he know we’d be here? We’d just traveled from two areas away and emerged from an underground labyrinth.

My heart finally began beating again, and my body naturally prepared for battle for some reason. How did he know about the license anyway? This man was no ordinary burglar.

“Who’s this? Do you know him, Marie?”

“Umm, I think he’s Sir Sven, a Sorcerer who specializes in anti-magic.”

Ohh, okay. I totally thought he was an enemy, judging from the unnatural air about him. I didn’t know there were such buff sorcerers these days.

“Good evening. I’m Kazuhiho, Mariabelle’s convoy.”

“Good evening, Sir Sven. What a coincidence, seeing you out here.”

We smiled and bowed politely, but the man sighed for some reason, rubbing his forehead. I may have been imagining it, but it was almost as if he was distressed by the peaceful mood we were emitting. Then, as if to pull himself together, he extended his big hand toward us.

“Hand over the license.”

“Oh, yes, it’s right here. Please give me the substitution permit in exchange.”

It was like an exchange at a government office. I didn’t know too much about the Sorcerer’s Guild, but this was all too real and took the fantasy out of it. They seemed pretty big on their societal hierarchy, too, so I was glad I’d avoided it until now.

“What’s that look for? We need to do things properly and set an example for those looking up to us. This is an elementary procedure even a child could do. You’ll only get laughed at behind your back if you can’t even remember to do something like this. Is that what you want?”

Sven opened his mouth to scream at her, but closed it soon after, as if he’d reconsidered after seeing her intense demeanor. Seeing his expression, Marie became flustered.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. If you forgot, you can get the form at the second window. If you can just fill out the necessary sections...”

“Fine. Forget it, just hurry up and deliver it yourself!”

The man cut her off by basically yelling his response. It seemed this guy wasn’t very fond of these types of procedures. There were some people who really hated paperwork at my company too.

While I thought about it, a figure adorned in black popped out of the darkness.

“Um, Boss? What are we gonna do?”

“Shut up! We’re going back to the guild!”

Marie and I blinked at each other, wondering why the two of them had come out to greet us in the first place.

We passed through the entrance gates and entered the town as night was falling, which was filled with people shopping for dinner. The sheep crossing the road to return to their homes, street vendors pouring warm stew into bowls, the rutted roads, and lopsided roofs felt a bit nostalgic. Steam was rising from here and there, and there was a sense of vitality to the bustling town. Such a

sight couldn’t be found in the modern world, so it was interesting to see.

I stretched, taking in the spirited townscape.

“Ahh, so nice and cool. This weather is definitely more manageable here.”

“Agreed. We learned some methods for cooling off in Arilai, but I much prefer taking a walk around here.”

Desert nights were also quite cold, of course, but we’d gone to sleep right away and hadn’t really experienced them much. Though I’d heard the temperature difference was quite extreme, so I didn’t particularly want to.

Sven, who was listening to our conversation, stepped in closer to us. “I heard you found a labyrinth over there. But a couple brats like you are just going to end up getting yourselves killed. I’ll conquer it for you instead, so you should be grateful.”

“Oh, I see. I’m looking forward to it.”

Marie was busy staring at a street stall that was roasting mutton, so I smiled and answered for her. After some time passed, Sven slumped his shoulders. He’d seemed as dangerous as a naked blade earlier, but his mood had completely changed now. Even the person in black standing behind him seemed at a loss.

“I dunno... This isn’t really what I was expecting. Hey, Elf! If you’re hungry, hurry up and buy something! What...? You don’t have money?! You should’ve gotten a reward for finding the labyrinth... Oh, you haven’t gotten it yet? I see...”

The man became more and more dispirited as Marie replied with a flustered explanation.

That was right, Marie had used up all her pocket money because we weren’t expecting a long stay. Luckily I didn’t have such issues because I didn’t make a habit of depositing money.

In any case, Sven had been writhing where he stood for some time now, and it was actually making me feel a bit sorry for him. I hadn’t fought many people in the past so I couldn’t be sure, but judging by the way he carried himself, he

must've been quite high in levels. He could've been a higher level than me, but I had a feeling we were at about the same range. It would explain why he wanted to be the representative to enter the ancient labyrinth so badly.

While I was lost in thought, a skewer of mutton suddenly appeared before me. Oil dripped from the roasted meat, and the faint smell of spices stimulated my appetite. Behind it was Sven's remarkably sullen face, who said, "That elf wouldn't shut up, so you hurry up and eat too." His face may have been scary, but he seemed pretty nice.

"Th-Thank you. I'm sorry you ended up paying for us."

"Whatever, I'll be raking it in soon enough. Anyway, I thought you were a bodyguard. Where's your sword?"

"Oh, it was destroyed a little while ago. I'll have to find a new one soon."

I disregarded the exasperated look on his face and bit into the mutton. My mouth was filled with oil and a strong odor...

Wow, this tastes astonishingly bad.

It seemed nobody really put effort into the cooking in this world. Worried, I looked over to my side. Sure enough, Ms. Elf had a sad look on her face.

"How unfair. It looked so tasty... This is how the food in this world tricks us. It makes me feel like crying."

"Poor thing. When we get back to the other side, I'll feed you to your heart's... Oh, speaking of, it's about time we go to sleep."

We pushed the mutton to the person in black, thanked them for the meal, then ran off. Sven stood there with a blank expression, but the guild reception was already closed and we were going to go tomorrow anyway, so it should've been fine.

You should understand that as members of society, we had a duty to never be late. This was particularly true about going to bed on time. But there was no point in explaining this to him.

In the end, we went to a cheap inn nearby and rolled into bed right away.

The man stood in the streets, looking up at the cheap inn with a vein bulging

on his forehead. The person in black followed from behind, munching on a mutton skewer as he spoke in a worried tone.

“Wh-What should we do? We finally found the inn, but they shouldn’t be able to get away, right?”

“Do you think I’ll make a mistake like that? I memorized the feel of those brats’ presence. So long as they’re in this country, they can’t escape from my Oracle. Not ever.”

He glared at the sorcerer in black, who nearly dropped the skewer out of fear. Then, a few minutes later...

Enraged, Sven swung at a wooden window. Splinters of wood erupted from the frame. With the full moon behind him, the man searched every room with bloodshot eyes. He’d been keeping track of them until just a moment ago, but they’d suddenly vanished. Their bag, clothes, sorcerer’s staff; it had all disappeared with them like they were playing some sort of prank.

“Th-They escaped... Those damn braaats!!!”

His murderous roar echoed throughout the inn, causing great nuisance to the other guests there. It went without saying that he caused even more trouble for them by searching for the two until morning...

“Find them! They must still be nearby!!!”

“Heheh, I think you’re forgetting my specialty magic, Boss.”

Oh, it seemed they didn’t think they were quite done yet. It was hard to tell because of the all-black attire, but the subordinate seemed to be grinning. Seeing this, Sven’s dangerous smirk returned to his face.

There was a chain connected to the staff in the sorcerer’s hand, which floated up in the air on its own accord. A light appeared there, forming a blurry image of eyes, a nose, and a mouth. Whatever it was, it was clearly not from this world.

“That’s right, your necromancy. With this...”

“Yes... No matter where they hide, they can never escape my wraiths. Those children will spend their nights cowering in fear! And you will be the one to

chase them down, Boss.”

The sorcerer let out an ominous laugh...but unfortunately for them, the two were long gone from not only this town, but this world entirely, and the efforts of using necromancy had ended in vain. They became desperate after getting their hopes up pointlessly and continued searching to exhaustion. “They’re gone...” they muttered with the morning sun upon them, collapsing into sleep.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 6: Illusion I sat up from bed suddenly and looked at the clock on the wall. It was still just a bit past seven, and I let out a sigh of relief.

Whew, I was actually scared there.

We usually slept out in the open or camped out, so we didn't have much trouble finding a sleeping spot. I felt bad for the people who came to pick us up, but we could hardly explain that we had to wake up from our dreams.

"I'll have to apologize the next time we meet. He was kind enough to guide us through town and even bought us skewers. I feel bad."

I watched Marie's arm slide down to her side as I muttered. She'd been embracing me earlier, but was now comfortably sleeping face up in her sky blue pajamas.

I wanted to keep sleeping too. But I just had to work one more day until the weekend came along, then I could enjoy my little trip with her.

Yeah, I'm really starting to feel motivated now.

I gently placed her hand on her chest, then quietly left the bed so I wouldn't wake her.

What I hadn't expected was that a legendary dragon would be joining us on the said trip... I couldn't imagine what was going to happen, and I had a feeling it wouldn't end up being just a "little trip." It'd be bad if she started wreaking havoc, but there was no point in worrying about that now. Even if something did happen, it wasn't like I could do anything about it.

I walked around barefoot on the floor, lost in thought. It was probably best to decide on some things not related to the trip, too, like what to eat once we returned. She could eat a ton from what I've seen, and I didn't think she was too picky about her food. The food didn't need to be too extravagant, but I needed to make sure we had enough.

“I need cheap and tasty food, and a bunch of it. I’ll have to put some more thought into this...”

Curry would be the easiest, but we just had some the other day. I wanted something that had originated in this country because we just got back.

“Something that’s really popular... Oh!”

An idea came to me, so at least I didn’t have to worry about that anymore. *It* should fulfill the criteria I was thinking about.

There was one more important thing on my mind. The magi drake may have been beautiful, but she couldn’t just walk around outside with her horn and tail. She said it wouldn’t be an issue when I brought it up to her yesterday, but I wondered what she meant by that.

I was putting some some freshly toasted bread on a plate when I heard a yawn from behind me. Mariabelle was stretching her limbs, then looked around blankly and climbed down from the bed.

“Good morning. Did I sleep in late? Let me help prepare breakfast.”

“Good morning, Marie. Would you mind getting the plates ready then?”

She gestured, “Leave it to me!” as she yawned, then put on her slippers and walked over.

The kitchen in my 1DK condo wasn’t very big. I only had to turn around to see the front door, and there was just a pot of foliage marking the boundary of the kitchen. Because of this limited space, our butts bumped into each other as we went through our morning preparations.

As I was opening the fridge, Marie’s fairy-like eyes looked up at me.

“So, about the magi drake... You said she had maternal neurosis, right? What do people usually do about that in Japan?”

“Hmm, I think so long as she can have fun and get her mind off childcare, anything would work really. Like shopping or a mini vacation. Though I’m not sure if she’d be able to enjoy shopping right after coming to Japan.”

I think it’s fair to say anyone who comes to Japan from the other world for the first time would be rather confused. Shopping would be more enjoyable after

getting used to the world to some degree.

Although, my main reason was that I didn't want to spend money, but I didn't need to tell her that...

"I see. Then maybe your suggestion of a mini vacation was the way to go. But that requires money, too, doesn't it? From what you've told me, it doesn't seem like you have too much wiggle room to spend with your income."

"I do have some saved up. It's a good thing we planned our trip for somewhere close by though. There are hot springs there, so I'm sure she's going to enjoy those."

The girl's face loosened into a smile. Then she clapped her hands together and looked at me cheerfully.

"I can't wait! Japanese hot springs surrounded in greenery... I just love baths. Relaxing in some hot springs sounds so luxurious."

Yeah, I knew that. Marie took her time bathing, and I always heard her humming in there. Not to mention the hot springs we were going to were said to heal wounds and illnesses.

It seemed the girl completely forgot about preparing breakfast from all the excitement. When I talked to her, realization seemed to hit her and she hurriedly prepared the table.

I was pretty happy about it myself. As soon as I got through work for the day, I'd be free to enjoy the next two days. Despite my age, I couldn't contain my excitement.

With those thoughts in mind, I quickly prepared our meal. I placed the onions and ground meat I was cooking on the frying pan onto a separate plate, then melted some butter dumped in some flour. Then I added a bit of milk, mixed it in, added some more... After repeating the process a few times, it began turning into a smooth white sauce. It took a bit of work, but I didn't think it was worth going out and buying premade sauce.

I added the ingredients from earlier into the boiling sauce, then mixed in macaroni. I just needed to transfer it all to a heat resistant plate and add some cheese, then I'd be done.

“Marie, heat this in the oven for lunch again, okay? It’s just normal gratin, but I think it’ll taste good freshly cooked.”

“Oh, oven food. The last one was so good... Hehe, this is a bit embarrassing, but I said, ‘Delicious!’ to myself.”

Oh, that was pretty cool to hear. Cooking is much more rewarding when there’s someone else to enjoy it. Especially with Marie, since her reactions are easy to understand and I feel like my food becomes a hundred times more enjoyable to eat.

“Well, I have to get to work, so let’s eat.”

We sat down at the table and said “Itadakimasu” together, then began eating our breakfast.

Oh yeah, after I’d left for work, Marie was apparently pacing back and forth in front of the oven at lunchtime, unable to walk away from the fragrant smell of the cooking cheese. It was an aroma both children and adults could enjoy, and I was sure she could hardly wait to dig in.

She blew on the piping hot gratin, then put it into her mouth. The melty, creamy sauce mixed with toasted cheese was appetizing in its appearance and had a rich and delicious flavor. The gentle taste of milk was dramatically enhanced by the savory Parmesan cheese. After enduring the heat that nearly burned her tongue, the flavor burst forward all at once. She gripped her fork without thinking, and let out an unintelligible noise, then leaned back in her chair as if all the energy had been drained out of her. Afterward, the sound of her uttering “delicious...” could be heard.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

The Koto Ward had quickly become enshrouded in night. I was riding the gently rocking bus home after a long day’s work, feeling somewhat exhausted. Of course, I wasn’t late and got off work at the standard time, but I couldn’t help but worry about Marie being home alone. She called me overprotective, but I was sure most people would feel the same way if there was an elf in their room.

I watched the city lights go by as I thought about it. After passing several

stops, my phone vibrated in my chest pocket. I looked at the screen and realized my earlier concerns had been completely unnecessary.

“Kitase-san, where are you now? Marie-chan and I are about to watch a movie. If you’re almost home, would you like to join us in watching it?”

A cute image had been sent to me along with the message. That must have meant Kaoruko was helping her learn Japanese today. They must’ve been getting along better if they were still hanging out this late.

I smiled with relief, then tapped at the phone screen’s unfamiliar controls. “I’m about to get home now,” I replied.

The bus slowed to a stop. When I descended the steps and walked out, stepping onto the ground, I was already in front of my condo. The air-pressure-powered door closed with a *“psssh...”* and departed for its next stop.

In that short amount of time, a young girl appeared at a balcony above and waved her hand. It seemed her long ears were hidden under a hair band. She was clearly standing on her tiptoes to wave at me, and I couldn’t help but smile at the sight.

After living alone for so long, it was surprising just how drastically my life had changed.

“Boy, tonight sounds like fun. I wonder what sort of animation we’re watching,” I thought aloud as the signal at the crosswalk turned green and I began walking. Although I knew she was looking for a translator, it went without saying that my steps were lighter than usual.

I slid the door open, and a girl trotted over excitedly. She clutched my pajama as I got out of the bath. She, too, had recently bathed and her skin was positively glowing.

Looking around, the sensation that something was different was probably due to the layout. There was a sofa for relaxing in the spacious living room, and there was a large LCD TV that my own couldn’t hold a candle to. It was so spacious, yet she had two more rooms. It made me realize how powerful the term “2LDK” was. It was about twice as big as my own place.

Hmm, that’s pretty crazy when I put it like that...

“The TV is so big! Come on, come on! Let’s hurry and watch!”

Marie hopped up and down, tugging at my pajama to hurry me along. She was clearly excited, but I wanted to thank Kaoruko first, who was sitting over there with a big smile.

“Thank you for letting us use your bath.”

“Oh, not at all. It seemed Marie-chan just couldn’t wait to get started. She’d been studying so hard until you arrived. It surprises me just how much of a quick-learner she is.”

She glanced over at the table in the living room, and some writing implements had been neatly set aside there. I picked up the notebook to find all the things Marie had learned that day written inside, then nodded.

I turned to the girl who was itching to start the show, speaking to her in Japanese instead of Elvish.

“Good evening. What anime are you watching tonight?”

“G-Good, evening. Um, I will watch, a very fun Japanese anime.”

Her pronunciation and word choice was slightly awkward, but she got her point across just fine.

Impressed, I smiled at her. “Then let’s watch it together.” I held her hand as she gave a happy little reaction.

She studied in earnest, so I had to reward her so. I guided her to the best seat on the sofa, then poured some of the juice I brought over with Kaoruko’s permission. With the preparations complete, I sat next to Marie on the sofa as she’d urged.

Still not used to this sort of entertainment, she looked up to me with childlike excitement. “I can’t wait to watch another title by the same director. I’m like a child in high spirits, despite being an adult.”

Wait, was she an adult? She was kicking her feet back and forth like a child, acted like a child on the inside *and* outside, and her actions were pretty childlike...but I decided not to say anything.

Seeing this, Kaoru giggled from the single-seat sofa nearby.

“But it’s very strange. I feel excited, too, like I’ve been taken back to my own childhood. I think it’s thanks to Marie-chan that I’m able to feel this way.”

I nodded in agreement. Whether it be cooking or movies, having someone who was genuinely enjoying themselves around me gave me joy as well. Even more so considering she was appreciating something that was produced by my home country.

I looked at her as I thought about it, and she gave my knee a couple taps. That was the signal telling me to start because she really couldn’t wait anymore.

“Shall we dim the lights for the show?”

“Yes, please.”

Kaoru pressed a button on the remote, and the hue of the room faded with an electronic beep. It was as if only the TV and us three existed in the room, and the girl clapped as the anime movie began playing.

A vivid blue filled the screen. It was brighter than the blue sky, and seemed to be this director’s favorite color. It dyed the dim room in a similar blue, and we stared at the screen like we were being sucked into it.

It reminded me of when a film began rolling in a theater, and I simply loved that moment. The moment you open the cover to a brand new story, and an unknown world unfolds before your eyes.

This time, the opening was a bit more tense than the others we’d seen. The heroine who appeared on-screen had a gloomy expression, and her surroundings were as dark as our room. A deep, rumbling echo indicated that this wasn’t somewhere above ground. It seemed like a good old-fashioned type of anime that appealed directly to one’s emotions with little narration.

The elf was able to somewhat understand the situation without my interpretation just by the expressions on the protagonist’s face and the movement of her surroundings.

Just outside the window was a world of night, and from there, a black-clad figured emerged. Scenes of a character running away from bad guys are often used in movies, but the one fleeing here was a young, powerless girl.

Marie stiffened from the tense atmosphere and clutched my sleeve without thinking. The shadows chasing the heroine closed in on her, then it happened.

“Ah!”

Marie was so surprised that she sat up straight on the sofa, her eyes glued to the screen. The long, shrill scream sounding from the ship advancing through the clouds was like a scene from a nightmare.

But the incident didn’t end there. Sparkling illuminations were shown on screen as if to announce the start of the movie, then music began playing and the title was displayed. Marie’s eyes glittered with fascination.

“Wooow! I’m getting goosebumps... It really is like a world inside a picture book. Just like with the last anime we watched, the music is so beautiful it’s making my heart swell.”

I felt the same way. I’d seen this many times before, but the feeling in my chest wasn’t because of how often I’d watched it. Though it was hard to put my emotions into words.

“It’s like...there’s a story inside the music. A story without words or letters, which makes it all the more memorable.”

She rested her head on my chest, and her expression was that of a child’s who was completely immersed in a story. Her face seemed to be appreciating all of the messages in the songs that were making our hearts throb.

Now the elf was probably taken a bit aback. The opening had been so tense, but the atmosphere changed completely with the appearance of the other protagonist. He was a young, energetic boy, and a smile began widening on her face as he took her hand and led the way. It was like she was learning how to smile for the first time, and her lovable expression made Marie smile too.

Eventually, like the last title, the story became filled with attractive characters, and the marvelous vehicles that appeared stimulated the viewer’s imagination.

The last anime we watched was geared toward children, but this was more like a roller coaster ride that *seemed* like it was for kids at first glance.

The young boy had an energy that was unexpected from someone of his small frame, and dove head first into danger without hesitation. Marie winced every time from the simple yet dramatic scenes where he'd fall and nearly die.

"Ah, hya! Waaah?!"

Not accustomed to this sort of action, she clung to me tightly the entire time. She was positioned as if she were tree climbing, and I could feel her heart beating against me.

"Ahh, I wish this boy would calm down a little... Ah, ah! Stay put!"

Just then, the boy's foothold gave way under him...

Marie reacted in exactly the same way as the heroine. Her lips tightened, and she squeezed me so hard I could barely breathe. Her sigh of relief was perfectly in sync with the girl on the screen, which was so cute I just had to smile.

The roller coaster analogy applied not only to the action, but the story itself. There had been sudden changes in high and low moments up until then, but the climax was downright intimidating and full of scenes that demanded the viewer's undivided attention. I could feel the tension from the elf who was basically holding me like a body pillow.

It was a bit agonizing as a man to have her soft body pressed against mine, but I managed to keep explaining the key points as if I were the narrator. I tried to make it more enjoyable for her in case she learned this Japanese.

She continued watching fixedly until the story finally came to an end. The bad guy was successfully thwarted, and a warm, mystical conclusion awaited us. It was the quintessential ideal ending to a fantastic story.

"Haaah..."

Marie let out a sigh of relief and slid down the sofa. Gentle music began playing as if it were being considerate of her. People who watched it in theaters probably wouldn't have been able to get up until the credits finished rolling either.

After such an overwhelmingly heated experience, it made us want to immerse ourselves in the gentle music.

The girl's head slid down my body until it rested on my thigh. With the absentmindedness in her eyes and slight curl of her lips, it was hard to describe the look on her face in that moment.

"What did you think, Marie?"

I stroked her hair as I asked, and she let out a deep sigh.

"It makes me want to say Japan is the greatest country ever. I feel like I gained something from watching it, like some sort of precious treasure."

Yeah, I knew just how she felt. That was how wonderful the story and ending were. So much so I could watch it over and over again.

Marie rolled over and looked directly up at me. It seemed she was still too captured in the world of the story to turn the lights back on. I wanted to wait a little longer until she was ready to come back.

"Yeah... It was more showy than the last one, and it's hard to describe, but...it was wonderful. The people, the vehicles...and that diligent boy was so much like you. So cute."

"Huh, you think so? I don't think that word describes me very well, to be honest."

She giggled at my reply. Then she reached out with her pointer finger and booped the tip of my nose.

"Is that so? You may have a tired-looking face, but that's how you seem from my perspective. But... Hm, would you mind if I say something selfish?"

Her tone was playful, but there was sincerity in her eyes. It made me realize she was an adult after all, considering it wasn't often she'd tell me what was on her mind in such a way in all the time we'd spent together. Maybe it was time for me to take her outstretched hand like the boy in the movie.

"Go right ahead."

My reply came out gentler than I had expected, and both our eyes widened at once. I fumbled for an excuse, but she stopped me with a finger. Her pointer finger touched my lips, then in the same gentle tone as mine, she whispered in Elvish.

“I want to go on adventures and travel to unknown lands with you. That ancient labyrinth too. I can’t contain my curiosity anymore after watching that movie.”

“All right, Marie. I’ll take you, no matter what. You’re going to have to acknowledge the greatness of my fishing skills if we’re to travel to uncharted worlds together, but I’m sure you don’t mind that.”

She smiled, and denied me with a cheerful, “Absolutely not!” Ms. Elf kicked her feet back and forth, still laying on my lap.

Just then, we heard someone clear their throat and we nearly jumped. Our eyes slowly turned toward the source of the noise. Kaoruko sat there with her back straight and had slightly blushing cheeks. We immediately separated from each other.

“Oh, please don’t mind me! I know how close you two are, and I won’t be telling my husband who works at the public office!” She spoke quicker than usual and gestured with both hands. Even someone who was still learning Japanese like Marie could understand the gist of the message.

Marie’s face grew bright red as she looked down without a word, and I covered my face with both hands.

We’ve done it now...

We were so engrossed in the movie, we’d completely forgotten we had company. I still had much to learn...

I made up some excuse about us just being relatives who got along well, and left after thanking Kaoruko for her hospitality.

Ms. Elf and I exchanged glances, warning each other to be more careful...

That day, we had concluded another story. The blanket was filled with the warmth of our bodies, and the girl’s heavy eyelids told me she was halfway in her dreams already.

The black cat in the picture book had finally reached his destination after going through many bizarre events. We’d been interrupted by sleep many times, so she was trying her hardest to stay awake this time. The black cat was

rejoicing with both hands in the air, and Marie's smile was just as big as his.

"The end," I whispered, and her eyes turned toward me. She had a sleepy, happy smile on her face, and her pretty eyes closed slowly. Moments later, she was making soft, sleeping noises.

I watched her depart in her dream world, and I closed the book. That book from overseas had painted such a vivid picture for us in the past few days. I was sure the children who would read it after us would be just as excited as she was.

My role was likely similar. I taught her how to read and write, showed her the joys of these stories, and she'd continue to grow as a result. I was fortunate to be able to witness it from so close by.

"Then I already know what I need to do. I'll take you wherever you want. I'll keep you safe and make sure you have the time of your life."

I'd given up on it once, but we only had to get over two hurdles to head into the ancient labyrinth: be acknowledged as her convoy, and find a powerful ally.

"Then we just have to keep pressing forward." I didn't know what to do about the latter, but I'd do what I could. We'd be in a dream world anyway, and I wasn't just some salaryman over there.

I put the book down softly so as to not make a sound, then tucked her in up to her shoulders. Her warmth was making me sleepy as well, and before I could even yawn, her soft hands and feet wrapped around me.

She always says I make her sleepy, but look who's talking now, I thought to myself.

I smiled again as she pressed her cheek against me in her sleep.

Goodnight, Ms. Elf.

I decided I'd give it my all tomorrow.

+ + + + + + + + + +

I sighed as I looked above me. There were two large buildings within the premises, and the one directly before me was comparatively new and fancy. It was still before lunchtime, but there was a constant flow of what seemed to be

students. They seemed just like university students as they walked around in matching robes. The building in the back was more imposing in build, and had a very sorcerer-esque feel to it. With the crow perched upon its roof, there was a somewhat creepy feel to it that kept me from wanting to get too close.

“So, which one do you go to, Marie?”

“The one in the back of course. There are multiple royal sorcery facilities, built for the purpose of utilizing knowledge. It’s a perfect place of study for those blessed with a good bloodline, and it doesn’t differ much from the general public until you take the novice class. That’s why they don’t have staffs.”

Marie gestured at her holly staff. I thought I recalled her explaining it was made from a unicorn’s mane or something.

Thinking about it, it wasn’t surprising that it was a royal facility. Their mission was to unveil the mysteries of ancient knowledge, which was why it was run by the kingdom. It was likely made into a center of knowledge for nobles and the like for financial reasons. At the same time, it served to bestow knowledge of the ancient labyrinths to promising young individuals, who may distinguish themselves in war later on.

The road we walked on was well kept, and it felt like there was money bursting out of every corner.

The elf, whose height wasn’t much different from mine, raised her head proudly and turned her eyes toward me.

“Well, I skipped a class, so I don’t attend the side for the general public unless I’m instructing.”

“What?! Are you someone with authority, Marie?”

“I already told you. Only a select few can become spirit sorceresses. You tend to listen to what I say, but I guess you really have no interest in these things.”

She had the wrong idea. We were always walking around together, so I thought sorcerers had a ton of free time...but I probably shouldn’t say that.

I seemed to have carelessly let my thoughts show on my face, and she shot me a suspicious look.

“Oh, is that so? I’ll have you know, I wasn’t just wasting my time playing around. As proof, I’ve been receiving a salary.”

Wh-Whaaat?! The shock on my face was palpable. So that’s how it was...

I was a vagrant who wandered around this world aimlessly with no prospects for the future. Come to think of it, my serious aversion for working even in my dreams made me seem like a pretty hopeless person.

“Pff... Aaahahaha!”

My face must have looked pretty funny, because Marie laughed out loud while clutching her stomach.

“Huh...? What’s so funny? My whole life suddenly became pretty bleak just now...”

“Ahahaha! I’ve never seen your face look anything but sleepy before! Stop, stop! Don’t come closer with that face! M-My sides!”

She dropped her precious staff on the ground, and my face looked like I was about to cry. Unfortunately for me, this went on for a full minute or so...

Marie waved goodbye as she disappeared toward the Sorcerer’s Guild. After her report, we’d meet up again and go see the magi drake, who’d be waiting for us at the ruins. Then I’d escort the two ladies on the hot springs trip.

But first, I set my resolve and knocked on the door of the Adventurer’s Guild. Just as it was made apparent earlier, my current existence was an incredibly shallow one. I was a boy who could be blown away with a small gust of wind, but it was the life I’d chosen.

The receptionist was a lady, and she looked at me with an uninterested expression. Yeah, that seemed about appropriate for me.

“Welcome, little boy. What are you doing here?”

“I want to go to a labyrinth with a cute girl. I need to get ranked to do that, so I was hoping to get it done here.”

“Is that right?” she said with the same disinterested tone.

Yes, I needed to get ranked there. That would help me show my skills to the

Sorcerer’s Guild, and they’d understand I was capable of acting as a convoy... But it was my first time visiting such a facility, and I had no idea what the results would be. That was why I hadn’t said anything about it to Marie. We promised each other we wouldn’t keep secrets, but I liked to think of it as more of a surprise.

I was a little anxious as I filled out the contract, which stated scary things like I wouldn’t hold grievances if I died or got injured, then proceeded to a test of close quarters combat skills about an hour later. I should probably fix my personality that made me take on any request given by a cute girl...

With those thoughts in mind, I faced the man who seemed to be some sort of instructor. We were at an inner courtyard that was surprisingly spacious. It couldn’t compare to the Sorcerer’s Guild from earlier, but the building was new and there seemed to be quite a few people here.

I looked up from the two-story courtyard, and the sun seemed to be on its descent. Seeing this, I realized I didn’t have too much time. I turned toward the man before me.

“Um, how far will you be raising my rank? I’d like to increase it as high as possible.”

“Haha, you’re an eager one. Even if I’m not strong enough, there are pros on the upper floor. You can challenge me without worry, and make sure to apologize for getting ahead of yourself on your way home.”

The man flashed an affable smile. He seemed to be in his forties and had dark skin with black hair and a black beard. Yet he gave off an impression of cleanliness, and seemed to have a good sense of virtue. He did accept a payment that most kids wouldn’t be able to pay, so it seemed he was going to judge me for my money’s worth.

So, I decided I’d go all out in front of others for once. I’d made a mistake in my last man-to-man combat encounter, but I’d like to make good use of my Phantom Image this time.

I asked if they have any sword replicas available before the match began, and he looked at me as if I were some sort of weirdo.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

The man had been an adventurer for over twenty years, and had completed over a hundred missions during his career. He had accomplished so much, but that was due to his ability to lead his companions rather than a pure skill in swordsmanship, as he'd freely admit himself. He was the reliable leader who could turn the tide of battle even in the most desperate of situations by bolstering everyone around him. Due to having lived this way, he was approached by the Adventurer's Guild right when he was about to retire.

Despite having such a history, the man woke up to find himself in great confusion. A wet towel was blocking his vision, and the spectators raised their voices with heated excitement.

...Had he gotten stunned in the middle of battle? His experience had led him to the wrong conclusion, and he quickly sat up.

"Pops, stay down!"

"What?! What are you... Wait, what the hell?!"

In his field of view was a young adventurer, like the ones he'd always taken care of. Then he realized he was in casual clothes instead of armor, and finally remembered the situation he was in.

Those around the inner court were peeking out their windows, and the excited voices could be heard all around them. It was like a coliseum, though it should have just been an exam to judge one's rank.

Clutching his throbbing head, he managed to raise his upper body. Then, he saw a man standing in the middle of the open space with a sword at the ready. They sheathed their curved sword, then stood in a wide stance...

"I thought I was dreaming! Why is Brandish fighting?!"

"He's the third one! Just who is that kid, Pops?!" a voice asked, but the man still didn't understand the full situation. After all, according to his memory, he couldn't follow the boy's movements and had been pummeled without being able to do anything. He was asked to yield several times, but his pride as an adult wouldn't let him, resulting in him getting knocked out.

The scene before his eyes made him wonder if he was still dreaming. The fight was happening right before him, but he still couldn’t see the boy’s movements. It seemed as if the boy strolled right into the master’s reach and received a slash from a blade, but went on walking as if nothing happened.

No, that wasn’t right...

He vanished like smoke in the wind, and by the time his opponent’s sword was sheathed again, the boy stood there with an unconcerned expression. He hadn’t moved a step from his original position.



“H-Hey, is he using a real sword?! And... he’s using Kill Zone?!”

“The master warned him he could end up dying! But that brat stood there laughing and said he’s used to it!”

He couldn’t understand.

The man who was called “master” was the third most skilled person in the Adventurer’s Guild. He had a fastidious personality, which showed in his ability to slice through enemies who entered his domain in a flash. Due to the absolute killing power of his skill, it wasn’t often he’d show it in public. This explained the Coliseum-like fervor that had filled the otherwise ordinary courtyard.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me!” the man groaned, unable to understand what he was seeing.

The boy hadn’t taken a step from where he stood, but, nevertheless, suddenly appeared at Brandish’s flank. Brandish screeched like some sort of bird and slashed at him in a cross pattern.

The man watched, sweat running down his face, as the boy vanished like smoke, then reappeared from behind, then the opposite flank, and so on.

Watching an illusion user at work was quite a peculiar sight. The occasional clang of metal indicated that the real one was somewhere in the illusions.

The sound of footsteps resounded, and the boy who had been standing in one spot approached slowly. Was it a dream, or a nightmare...?

Brandish’s expression seemed to be asking that very question, and could only continue slashing at whatever entered his attack range and desperately fend off the attacks thrown at him. His reaction speed seemed to indicate that he’d already given up on discerning whether he was attacking an illusion or his opponent.

However, this of course meant he’d quickly run out of breath.

Whoosh!

Brandish swung at a figure only for it to vanish, and a great sense of fatigue came over him. Instead, his real opponent appeared through it from behind, and the moment the boy entered his domain, he was overcome with a flurry of

swift blows.

The boy deftly blocked three sword strikes directed at him in mid air, and the crowd forgot to breathe as they watched in awe. Even blinking would interfere with the spectacle before them.

“There’s just no way... He managed to get through Kill Zone?”

Just as the man they called “Pops” muttered, the boy had destroyed the domain by striking his opponent in the shoulder and both sides of the abdomen in quick succession with perfect accuracy. It’d be too difficult to regain one’s advantage from that point.

After watching Brandish get slowly pushed back while taking blows all over his body, he suddenly came to. He then stood up in a fluster and shouted, “Th-That’s enough! The match is over!”

The Adventurer’s Guild rumbled with uproarious cheering. He could finally breathe again after seeing the battle between two experts.

The man expected the boy to be full of himself having such skill, but he seemed to be polite enough to go around bowing to each of his opponents. This didn’t seem like typical behavior for a young boy, but it seemed to give a favorable impression to them.

The fact was, there were very few skilled yet humble individuals out there. The excitement from the match lasted for several days, and stayed as the topic of conversation at the Adventurer’s Guild.

Unbeknownst to the boy, during these conversations, he was given another name: Phantom.

The girl trotted over with a light jog. Her beautiful, straight hair wavered as she ran with her precious staff in her arms, and her cuteness drew looks from those around her. I guess men couldn’t really help but feel lucky when they saw a cute girl. She was making me nervous about seeing her trip, so I wished she’d walk instead...

Our meeting spot was a park located close to the Sorcerer’s Guild. The sun was already setting, so it’d be night by the time we arrived at the ruins if we didn’t hurry.

“I’m sorry for the wait. My report took longer than I expected.”

“It’s okay, I just got here too. Let’s go get the magi drake now.”

Marie smiled cheerfully and said, “Okay!” Her cheeks were flushed, probably from all the running she did to get there. She fixed her messy hair and took slow, deep breaths to steady herself.

“Oh...” As we walked side by side, she seemed to notice something and touched my shoulder. “Your shirt’s frayed at the shoulder here. You must have caught it on something again.”

“Ah, you’re right. That’s not good... I wasn’t planning on buying any new clothes yet.”

“Don’t worry, I can fix it up for you later. Or do you want me to help you pick out new clothes? These are getting pretty damaged, so we could get you something a little more modern.”

Oof, I’d have to decline... I’d just spent so much money at the ranking exam earlier. I tried changing the subject, but I wasn’t very used to keeping secrets so she looked at me suspiciously.

Oh yeah, I managed to earn Rank A for melee combat, so I was pretty relieved about that. I needed to beat higher ranking opponents if I was to advance any further, but it was too much of a hassle and too late to find one at this point. This should be sufficient to prove my skills to the Sorcerer’s Guild though, and I was too busy with the upcoming trip to do all that anyway.

Even though those were the thoughts in my mind, they just sounded like excuses...

Now I only had one more task: finding a tank for our party. That was honestly the most difficult one, with no solution I could think of... But my thoughts were quickly interrupted by the girl tugging on my sleeve.

“I’m so excited for the trip in Japan! So, what sort of place are we going to? Is there delicious food? I haven’t been on very many trips before.”

“You’ll just have to wait and see. But yeah, I’m sure there will be plenty of delicious food.”

She beamed, and we walked together with her still holding onto my sleeve. We were in high spirits in anticipation for the trip, which is most likely why neither of us had taken notice of what was lurking behind us...

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

Due to his extensive time spent traveling solo, Kazuhiro was extremely proficient with Insight. This allowed him to detect those who lay in hiding, and it was a critical skill for avoiding ambushes. But if an opponent had the Hide skill with a higher proficiency level, they'd be able to avoid detection.

A tall figure appeared from behind a building, a sword at each of his sides. His name was Sven, the man who'd spent all night searching for the elf and boy just the other day. One would expect him to lash out in anger right away, but he stood there, deep in thought.

"I finally found them, but what's this about the magi drake...? Why are they talking about a legendary dragon?"

"Should we grab them before they get away again? If we injure them here, you'll surely be chosen as their replacement," the one clad in black suggested, and Sven laughed.

Judging by how that boy went out and earned a rank for melee combat, he was likely trying to get acknowledged as the elf's convoy. That meant he hadn't given up on exploring the labyrinth.

However, getting approval from the Sorcerer's Guild of this country wasn't so simple. Even though he had Oracle, his scarce ability to read the future, it couldn't see a whole day ahead, and this outcome was certain.

"The elf girl turned in the license already, and it's obvious he's going to fail getting approval. I'm already guaranteed to be the one appointed to explore the labyrinth. More importantly, I need to find out whether they're about to go see the real magi drake."

He narrowed his eyes and smiled, thinking this could turn out to be even more profitable than the ancient labyrinth.

Then, as per Sven's command, a black fluid began enveloping them. The dull light gleaming where the eyes and mouth would be indicated that this was the

work of a type of wraith. The ability to vanish without leaving a trace was useful not only in labyrinths, but outside as well.

As the black fluid encompassed him completely, he threw back his robe, revealing a rare crest given only to a handful of individuals who earned such a prestigious rank.

It seemed something strange tended to happen when getting involved with that boy. Such were the thoughts of the necromancer adorned in black while descending into the darkness.

Not only did they completely lose track of them the other night, but they had no idea the two would be heading to the Nazul-Nazul Ruins not too far from town.

The dim waterway smelled of mold and the *drip, drip* of water could be heard. They could sense the presence of monsters that favored damp areas, but they themselves went undetected due to the wraith enshrouding them.

Suddenly, Sven turned around with a dubious expression.

“...These underground ruins have already been investigated, right?”

“Y-Yes. There are still several unsolved mysteries about the Nazul-Nazul Ruins, such as why they were destroyed, but the Sorcerer’s Guild’s investigation should have already been completed.”

Though, come to think of it, the fact that there were still “several unsolved mysteries” about them was already strange in itself. They were extremely thorough in their investigation, so why would they give up halfway on investigating an area that was so close by?

But those thoughts were interrupted by Sven’s words.

“The hell...?”

Peering out from the waterway to see what he was pointing at, there was someone having a cheerful conversation with a lizardman, a monster. The screeches they made were hard to discern, but it could’ve been some sort of reptilian language.

“They’re laughing. Ah! They just high-fived!”

“Th-This is quite unbelievable. They’re known to be utterly aggressive and violent monsters. They spawn advanced subspecies left and right due to their inexhaustible reproductive capabilities, which can pose a danger even for us...”

They simply stared, mouths agape.

There were those who’d learned the language of monsters, but it was hardly practical because they’d get attacked as soon as they tried using it to communicate. Interrogation was considered to be pretty much the only use for it.

Suddenly, the group started walking deeper into the ruins. The black-clad figure nodded when Sven flashed some hand signals, then the two cautiously went after them through the waterways.

Surprisingly, it seemed the lizardman was guiding the way. Not only that, but what seemed to be an ordinary wall slid open, and the group continued on as if they were used to it.

The duo carefully followed suit, and Sven looked up to raise another question.

“...Do you remember any of this being in the investigation reports?”

“It seems to be very advanced magic, so perhaps they haven’t noticed it.”

They tilted their heads, puzzled. Even if it was hidden well, the power of magic wasn’t to be underestimated. They should’ve been able to notice the space on the other side and search every nook and cranny in the area. But the ornaments on the walls exuded artistic beauty and were far more intricate than the ones in the underground ruins they’d come from.

At the same time, they noticed the atmosphere had changed drastically. The air of something otherworldly was so thick, cold beads of sweat rolled down their cheeks.

“What...is this place? It’s still alive. It’s not just some dilapidated ruins,” Sven commented after seeing the guardian standing in the walkway as if it were protecting something.

Even from afar, it was clear to see it was highly dangerous. Any one of them could be level 70 or higher and capable of slicing through most adventurers like

vegetables on a cutting board. They even internally shouted for the boy and elf to stop as the two kept walking on nonchalantly... Then their jaws hit the floor as the group continued joking and laughing, passing through unscathed.

They rubbed their eyes in disbelief.

“What’s going on here? Judging by its build and ornaments, that guardian is a killing machine from ancient times.”

The black-clad figure nodded in agreement to Sven’s grumbling voice. However, getting closer to investigate would prove to be difficult. One of them may have been manageable, but there were at least ten within their immediate field of view.

It was hard to tell because of the all-black attire, but the necromancer turned with an anguished face. “Boss, they’ll notice us even through my magic if we get any closer!”

“I know. I’ll use my Oracle to investigate them.”

With that, his animal-like eyes glinted behind his sunglasses.

Oracle was a scarce skill indeed. It could peer into the details of the future, including things the user wouldn’t have possibly noticed otherwise. Its effects were obscure, like some sort of precognitive dream, but Sven had learned to freely control it over years of use.

But immediately after activating it, Sven’s body became drenched with sweat.

“No...way... It’s the real thing. The magi drake... L-Level 1,200... Wait, what? It gave birth to whelps?!”

He raised his voice with a cry, and in that moment, the magi drake turned toward his direction through the view of Oracle. Only the user was able to see in that world, but she definitely looked directly at him and made a growling noise.

Realizing she could send him flying with a mere breath, but not doing so in favor of dishing out a more fitting punishment, the guardians came to life with a heavy metallic sound. Thin, silver lines appeared on their blades, and they began swinging at the air as if to warm up for action. Their swordsmanship was

unexpected for such large bodies, and the two intruders felt death looming upon them.

“Boss!!!”

Only Sven’s eyeballs were trembling as the necromancer clutched at him in fear. The necromancer then chanted the incantation for an escape spell, but if even one word was pronounced incorrectly, they’d be sliced to pieces by the massive swords that were sending sparks in the air as they dragged against the stone walls.

Of course, the magic would only activate if the magi drake allowed it. The black-clad figure knew this domain belonged to her.

I’m sorry, please help us, please forgive us.

Internal screams of apology were mixed in with the chanting, and the spell was complete.

A pillar of water erupted in the dark waterway they’d come from. The water was only as high as their knees, but they thrashed around in a panic like they were drowning. They then sat up and looked at each other with bloodshot eyes, letting out long, long sighs. Sven’s face expressed not only fear from the close encounter with death, but from witnessing the monumental existence of the magi drake.

“I can’t believe we’re alive...”

Those were the words he finally mustered after steadying his breath. It was clear to see he’d been thinking of countless possible scenarios to survive that moment just from the exhausted look on his face.

The necromancer had felt the same way. If the magi drake felt like it, she could’ve prevented the spell from activating and they never would’ve gotten out of there alive.

“I suppose...she let us go.”

“A magi drake? That’s not... Well, I guess that’s the only possible explanation here. That was no ordinary monster. What was with that dragon?”

Sven covered his face with both hands and let out a long sigh again. At the

same time, that overbearing pressure from behind them disappeared. It was just like the night the boy and elf suddenly vanished.

Indeed, what could have happened to them? Did they disappear from this world after being eaten by the magi drake? Even Oracle, the gift from the heavens, couldn’t detect their presence in the slightest. But Sven could feel it in his gut that this wouldn’t be the case...

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 7: Welcome to Japan, Ms. Magi Drake I've heard there's a meaning behind the chirping noises sparrows make. Their morning chirps are a song of courtship as they seek a female mate, and when they find food, they're calling over their buddies. Apparently, they're quite smart and can distribute roles like posting a lookout.

And so, I had woken up in the morning at my usual condo. The room was dim, and my still-groggy mind was realizing we had returned early.

According to the weather report, it was going to be sunny all day. It had been several years since my last domestic trip, and I figured I'd be able to take my time and enjoy the view.

Then, someone's arm appeared from the edge of my vision. It clutched my head like an eagle's talon, drawing me closer. I couldn't resist the pull, but there was no pain, and I was suddenly enveloped in something ridiculously soft. There was a soft, squishy sensation, and the warmth of someone's skin. It was slightly sweaty, with a scent that made me want to smell it more for some reason.

What is this...?

My cloudy mind tried to figure it out, but it felt different from being hugged by the elf girl. It smelled faintly sweet and was smooth to the touch. It felt so nice, and I slowly opened my eyes to find out what it was.

Huh, what's this? Such a pretty color...

I froze, stiff like a scene straight from a manga, because I'd finally realized what the soft, warm thing was.

I tried getting away in a fluster, but another arm appeared from the other side

and locked me in place even more. It was like the skin was sucking me into it. My nose was buried in even deeper, and a bewitching leg wrapped around me under the blankets. The black-haired beauty *squeezed* my entire body.

Th-That's right... We slept together with the magi drake at the cave last night, so I should've anticipated this. I'd forgotten from all the times we'd woken up leisurely, but people who I brought over to Japan for the first time ended up naked!

"Ah, hey! What are you doing?! Hey, wha—"

I heard an "Nnh! Nnh!" as the girl behind me cried for help, but the sleeping beauty had the incredible strength of a dragon even while unconscious. My body was tightly bound, and when I tried moving to free myself, the magi drake let out a terribly feminine and sexy moan. Neither of us were accustomed to such noises, and we both turned bright red, our faces screaming silently.

"Nnh, nnh, mmg!" (Translation: "M-Marie, I don't know what to do, I may be done for!") "Nooo, don't give up! I'll move the blankets out of the way!"

"Nnnnnnh!" (Translation: "No no no, don't do that!") Fwoosh!

The blankets were thrown aside, and everything was illuminated by the sunlight.

The beauty had been snoring happily until that moment, but stopped abruptly. She was in a face-up position, and looked down at her own body with an uninterested expression, then sat up. Her healthy back muscles bulged as she stretched with a groan, her eyes glimmering as they gazed at the view outside the window.

"Ah, so this is the realm of the other! Hm, hm, it seems all things are different in form here. Even the flow of time... Aha, that explains Kazuhiho's change in appearance. It is about what I had expected, but...oho, still surprising! So this how you look in a world with no foundation of magic!"

She chuckled cheerfully as she spoke, but I was still dumbstruck. The magi drake finally seemed to notice me, and gave me an exasperated look.

"Hmm, and what are you two doing? I can see you two get along quite well... But I must say, seeing you two embracing each other like that so early in the

morning is a bit unwanted.”

Oh, she’d mentioned her husband was out enjoying himself somewhere. I didn’t know too much about the magi drake’s home life, so I decided not to comment.

As for the elf girl, her face turned bright red and she let out a puff of air from her nose. She looked cute as her eyebrows arched angrily, but I wasn’t even allowed to look. The girl was sitting up and holding my head, which was red to my ears, against her stomach.

“Wh-Who’s unwanted?! Please, put on some clothes already!”

She was clutching my head pretty tightly, but I would’ve liked to be released. If only she’d realize that having my face pressed against her soft stomach was a bit too much to handle...

The draconian tilted her head, then looked toward the clothes that had been prepared for her. She picked up a piece of clothing with an uninterested look, then uttered, “I suppose I could...” and took her time reluctantly getting dressed.

Thankfully, the girl finally released me, allowing me to get a lung-full of fresh air once again.

Boy, this morning was full of surprises... But it seemed it was too early to feel relieved.

“What about this end? It won’t fit at all.”

She turned her butt toward me, and I did a repeated set of double takes. Her pants were caught on her dragon tail, and her peach-shaped butt was half-exposed...then Marie covered my eyes.

This went without saying, but the kitchen was facing the walls, so I was released there under the condition that I wouldn’t turn around. Judging by the way Marie had pardoned me, it seemed she trusted I’d keep my promise. As for the draconian, she unfortunately didn’t seem to care in the slightest...

I began making onigiri as originally planned, but I wasn’t sure how many of these rice balls I’d need. The magi drake could eat two or three bento boxes

easily, so I decided to prepare more than usual.

I could hear her and Marie talking behind me, and it seemed she was speaking in Elvish so they could understand each other. Apparently she could speak monster and ancient languages as well, and actually understood what we were saying to each other during our first encounter.

While I was wrapping the rice balls with dried seaweed, I heard Marie's impressed voice from behind me.

"Oh, your tail and horn... You really *can* transform them."

"As I have told you. You may not be familiar with the term, but my tail and horn are made of magic particles, which is akin to pure energy. Hm, I know you went through the trouble of preparing these clothes, but I will be changing them to something more comfortable."

Hearing terms like tail, horn, and magic particles, it made me wonder if I really was in Japan. I kept my promise not to turn around, of course, but I was really distracted by the fantasy world conversation going on behind me. It made me wonder if now was the time to be making onigiri like I was.

"Umm, Marie, what happened to her tail and horn?"

"Oh, ooh, wow... They really turned into her clothes. Ah, it's okay now. You can't see anything."

R-Right. That was good. I almost forgot we were still in the Koto Ward, but I didn't have to cancel our trip if she was able to hide her tail and such. We wouldn't have been able to walk around outside if she couldn't, and Marie had been looking forward to our little trip today.

Now, as for the onigiri, I decided to prepare many different types of stuffing. I tried making sure they wouldn't get bored of the flavor by providing a wide variety, including umeboshi, kombu, furikake, tuna mayo, and okaka.

As I was finishing up, Marie spoke to me from behind. "You can turn around now, Kazuhiho."

"Oh, sure. I'm almost done making these too."

Now that I had permission, I turned around to find the dragon's clothes had

changed completely. Her long, black hair was still the same, but her horn and tail were gone as she had claimed. But the most surprising part was that she was wearing an A-line one piece with revealed shoulders and thighs.



“Hmhm. Well, what do you think? I used Marie’s clothes as reference.”

“Huh? Did you just make that right now?” My surprised voice came out louder than I expected.

The high quality made it hard to believe it was prepared while I was making onigiri. Intricate embroidery adorned her chest and hip area. I couldn’t help but let out a sigh.

But there was no time to waste staring at her.

“Oh, look at the time.”

The clock on the wall was approaching 6:30. I was expecting the travel time to be about three hours, so it was about time we departed.

“Okay, let’s go then. Do you two have everything packed already?”

“Yeeeah!”

“Yes!”

They’d been staring out the window, but came rushing over.

Then let’s head out toward Chichibu, Ms. Magi Drake and Ms. Elf.

I quickly wrapped the onigiri in aluminum foil, then grabbed a canteen and headed out the door. I opened the door to find it was very bright outside, and was greeted by the warmth of spring. We should be able to enjoy ourselves on the way there with this weather.

When we descended in the elevator and went outside, we saw a man brushing his teeth while throwing out some trash. He had a case of bed head going on, but I recognized him as someone we’d gone to dinner with before. He was the husband of the Ichijo couple who lived in the same complex.

“Good morning, Toru.”

“Ah, good morn...ing?”

Toru froze completely upon seeing Marie, who was humming like a fairy, and the magi drake, the beauty with her long, slender legs exposed.

“Ah. Good, morning. We are going, on a trip.” Marie bowed her head politely.

The black-haired beauty, who didn't understand Japanese, waved her hand.

"*Cough, cough...* Have...a nice trip..." Toru waved back and watched us go.

The parking lot was a short walk away. Marie got in the passenger seat as usual, and the back seat was reserved for our guest, the magi drake.

Thinking about it, Marie was very scared of the car that first time. On the other hand, the magi drake seemed to understand the gist of the vehicle's structure by looking around the interior. She sat down heavily, then I saw her nodding to me magnanimously in the back mirror.

I didn't usually play music, but I guess I was in a happy mood from being on my commemorative first trip. I pressed the play button for the CD I'd prepared and some nostalgic music from the Showa era began playing. It was the perfect song for a Japan trip, and was still heard on TV every now and then.

"Wow, this really sets the mood! This mellow atmosphere is so Japanese!"

"Oh, you can tell that already? Well then, let's get started on our very first Japan trip."

""Yaaay!""

Huh, it's a lot more uplifting with two women with me.

The distinct mood brought on by the female vocals filled the vehicle, and the car left the parking lot as the sand crunched under the tires. I kept my eyes on the road as I slowly pressed down on the accelerator.

Now, it was time to head out for Chichibu.

The sound of cars passing by could be heard from outside. We were out on Shin Oumekaidou already, which was quite busy switching between two and three lane roads. If we just drove straight down this road and got on route 299, it should lead us right to Chichibu. It would've been faster to take an express train, but I thought it'd be better this way since I was with the elf and magi drake. I wanted to avoid any sort of trouble at all costs.

"This is quite slow, but it is nice that I can travel without doing anything."

"That's good to hear. I was afraid you might get bored, so I'm relieved."

The woman stretching in the back seat was basically the ruler of the dream world. Her main body's estimated level was easily in the four digits, and according to written records, she'd lived for over ten centuries. I wondered whether a commoner like me should be showing her sightseeing, but I figured there was no need to worry about that, considering how relaxed she seemed back there.

Through the rear-view mirror, I saw her shaking her head side to side.

"Not at all. Watching these buildings go by is quite entertaining. There is no limit to what humans can accomplish it seems."

"This area has been developed quite nicely. I guess it's surprising even for you, Lady Magi Drake."

There were several high-rise buildings and flashy storefronts in the Shinjuku, Tokyo area, and she observed them through the window with great interest.

Of course, Marie was also seeing such a well-developed city for the first time as well. She was also glued to the window, and let out a "Wooow..."

Then the black-haired woman seemed to notice something and turned toward me. "Oh, it must be a bother addressing me like that. You may both call me Wridra."

"Lady Wridra it is then. Marie and I have been wondering about your name. This one fits your image perfectly."

When I told her as such, I saw Wridra smiling happily through the rear-view mirror. Her outfit was a simple flared, black one piece and shoes with heels. But her long, straight hair that went down to her hips and slender, model-like legs were full of mature charm that could make anyone stare admiringly. She had clean-cut features and night-colored eyes and hair, but gave off an impression that was distinctly non-Japanese.

In the passenger seat was the elf girl, and her long ears were hidden under a hat as usual. Her pale purple eyes looked to the back seat, and she spoke to Wridra with an expression full of curiosity.

"Lady Wridra, may I ask why you aren't surprised by cars and roads? I was screaming the whole time when I first saw them."

“I have come to understand the construction of these so-called cars for the most part. Hm, Marie... You need not be so careful of your choice of words. This is a trip for leisure, no? So I, too, would like to relax and enjoy the realm of the other.”

Hearing this, the girl looked at me with rounded eyes. She seemed to be wondering if we we could really be so disrespectful to a creature of legendary status. Then we heard that internal question answered with a confident, “Yes, you may.”

I cleared my throat, then slowly opened my mouth.

“Understood, Lad... Wridra. It may be a little cramped for a bit, but you can look forward to the hot springs when we get there.”

“Yes, I am excited about them. Mmm, how wonderful it is to not have any responsibilities.”

Marie and I laughed out loud at her slovenly expression. Despite her dignified appearance, her emotional state was always easy to tell, and we were able to interact with her with our minds at ease. She may have been a legendary dragon, but she was now just a friend we spent time with, so we should treat her like one when speaking to her.

Marie seemed to understand my sentiment and relaxed a bit as well.

Our car drove down the Shin Oumekaidou road while playing more nostalgic music. I didn’t want to pay the freeway tolls, but we must’ve gone at a good time because there was hardly any traffic.

“The Japanese language is so expressive, and not only in music. I noticed lately that there are so many words I can’t express in the languages in the other world. I even think in Japanese sometimes.”

“Oh, I do get that. I think about how I should communicate something much of the time.”

Marie slapped my arm while happily nodding in agreement. These things were pretty common when learning another language.

“These mellow songs are a good example. They’re so full of emotion, and I

can almost picture the scenes being described.”

“Hm. This reminds me of a bard, but with many other instruments. Though I do not understand the meaning behind the lyrics quite yet... Ah, so you have been studying Japanese, Marie?”

The girl turned around proudly as if to say, “Of course!”

“I was surprised when I first came here, but there are so many things to enjoy. There are many different books and movies, and countless types of clothing. I want to enjoy it all to the fullest, so I can’t allow myself *not* to learn Japanese.”

“Huh, I thought food is what you enjoyed most out of everything.”

As soon as I said that, the girl’s eyes lit up as if she just remembered, then put her arms around the back of her seat. Seeing her act as if she were talking to an old friend put my mind at ease. Her expression seemed to become even more gentle then.

“Oh yes, the food of this country is sooo incredible! It even made me roll around in the room by myself. I’m sure it’s going to blow you away, Wridra.”

“Ha, ha, I would be quite impressed if that were true. If that happens, I would allow the cook to claim their food blew away a magi drake as advertisement.”

Marie...rolled around the room? No wonder she was so interested in that oven cooking dish. She asked me for the recipe several times, so she may make it on her own eventually.

Oh, that conversation reminded me, I prepared some rice balls for us. The drive wasn’t that long, but we hadn’t eaten breakfast yet. I asked Marie to get them out, and she grabbed the containers and canteens for me. She opened the wrinkled aluminum foil, and the aroma contained inside it began filling the car. It seemed to stir their appetites, because I heard both their stomachs growling at once. I smiled, thinking they were almost like sisters.

“What is this... black triangular object? Hmm, it does smell good.”

“You can bite into it just like that. They’re called rice balls, and they’re a light meal that’s sort of like bread in the other world. They’re very convenient when you’re on-the-go like we are now.”

Wridra picked up a tuna mayo rice ball, and Marie went with okaka. I told them to go ahead and enjoy since I was driving, and they both bit into their food at the same time.

The rice balls were still somewhat warm, and the fragrance of dried seaweed passed through their noses. The natural sweetness of the rice filled their mouths with every chew. You couldn't underestimate the food simply guised as rice balls. After the comforting initial flavor, the ingredients in the middle of the rice ball would take you by surprise.

As the saltiness and sweetness merged together, Wridra's eyes snapped wide open. When rice was mixed with tuna and mayonnaise, its flavor became rich and creamy. The taste changed with each bite, and the sweetness and texture was all too enjoyable.

The car was quiet while the two wordlessly chewed their food.

"Oh, maybe we should open the windo..."

"Delicious! Th-This creamy flavor is tuna mayo?! No, I cannot allow a young child to eat such things, for the sake of their future! This one, this one, and this one are all mine. Whatever you do, do not touch them!"

"Mmm, the okaka rice ball is so good. This is what kitties like to eat, isn't it? Every grain of rice is full of flavor."

"What...?! C-Come now, what do you say to trading one of those for one of my tuna mayos?"

I was worried a rice ball would attain the title of dragon slayer at this rate... It seemed Wridra's bar for good food was set as low as ever.

But personally, I was glad she thought the rice tasted good. I imagined her to be a carnivore, so it'd be tough to enjoy her time in Japan if she didn't like rice.

What I didn't expect was just how surprised they were by the warm tea.

"It's warm! It's as if it's freshly brewed... Is it magic?"

"Huh? No, it's called a thermos, and..."

"'Thermos'? Is that the name of the spell? I always suspected there was a Grand Wizard somewhere in Japan ever since I saw that tower. Now I'm sure of

it.”

I wasn’t quite sure how to explain. The tower she mentioned was the Tokyo Sky Tree, which was visible from my place. Though she probably wasn’t going to be convinced until I actually took her there.

The conversation went back and forth for a little while longer, but Marie eventually forgot about it as her stomach filled more and more.

As we got on route 299, the road became far less busy. In the city, taxis that cut into your lane and brake suddenly in front of you were especially scary, so you couldn’t really take your time driving there. But now that we were in Saitama, I didn’t have to worry about that anymore.

We began seeing more farmland in the area, and mountains could be seen in the distance. This made driving enjoyable for me too.

It was a little livelier than earlier with the two girls singing along with the songs. I think it started off with them saying it was for their Japanese studies, and it ended up basically being karaoke.

What surprised me was how fast they were learning. Marie was pretty accustomed to Japanese by now, but Wridra was already getting the hang of the pronunciations, despite it being her first time using the language. She was incredibly fast at learning, and it made me wonder if she had some sort of skill that helped her with absorbing knowledge.

The elf had a lovely singing voice, and Wridra’s was surprisingly beautiful too. Even the gentle, serene songs were arranged into cheerful ones by their duet.

Once they were done singing, they both laughed with their mouths wide open, and I couldn’t help but smile. It was just so splendid and uplifting having women like them on the trip.

Wridra seemed to be in quite a good mood and put her arms around the driver’s seat. She spoke so closely, I could feel her breath tickling my ear.

“So, Kazuhiho, will there be a volcano at these hot springs?”

“No, not at Chichibu. We’re just going to take a look today, but I’d like to go to authentic, volcanic hot springs someday too.”

Oh, right. There was one big problem with that...

This went without saying, but the elf girl had long, elven ears. I'd just remembered that was the reason why I chose a room with a private bath.

"Hmm? Ears, you say?"

Wridra held one of the elf's ears between two fingers and stared at it. I nearly forgot this at times, but we were in Japan, and I honestly didn't know what would happen if someone saw us. Even though it was a country full of polite people, it could become big news if she were found out, and reporters could come rushing at us with questions. I told Wridra as such, and her obsidian eyes blinked once.

"Hm. So, her ears simply need to be hidden?"

"Huh? But she can't hide them without her hat, which means she probably couldn't go in the hot springs, right?"

"Come here, Marie."

Our eyes widened, then Marie's seat was leaned back. I could sense they were doing something, but as the driver, I couldn't look away from the road.

When the passenger's seat was eventually returned to its original position...

The signal turned red, and I slowly brought the car to a stop. I noticed the girl was staring at me, so I turned to face her. There, I saw Marie without her knit cap, and time seemed to freeze for an instant.

"Ah! Your ears are gone...? Huh? What happened?!"

The elf ears that should've been there were gone, and in their place was her white, braided hair. The light turned green and the driver behind me honked, so I began driving again in a fluster.

Apparently, my reaction was pretty funny. Wridra chuckled, then brought her face closer and revealed her trick.

"Ha, ha, I made hair ornaments for Marie using my magic particles. Look, they are completely covered and invisible to the public eye."

"What? But it was hair... Wait, you can make hair too?"

“That is not all. I have set it to follow simple commands, such as ‘bind’ and ‘unravel.’ Now she should be able to go outside as she pleases.”

I finally seemed to get it as we stopped at the next red light. I didn’t really know much about the so-called magic particles, but she used them to recreate Marie’s white hair and cover her ears, then tied them at the back. Only her earlobes showed this way, making her seem like an ordinary girl.

A beautiful girl.

I felt like a late-night infomercial repeatedly saying “Incredible!” but this really was. So much so that I stared at and touched it every time we stopped at a red light. It looked so natural and completely covered her elf ears.

The one who was happiest of all was Mariabelle herself.

“Ohhh, I won’t have to worry about my head feeling stuffy when going out from now on! This is so comfortable, Wridra!”

“I’m really amazed. Modern technology is pretty advanced, but we can’t really make anything that looks this natural. I guess that’s the power of the great magi drake.”

“You may compliment me more. Kufufu, children of men certainly are lovable.”

I thought Wridra was cute herself, seeing her smile in such a happy mood.

In any case, this was extremely helpful. I felt bad about making Marie wear a hat in the sweltering Japanese heat, and we wouldn’t have to worry about being considerate when eating at a restaurant now.

“You can enjoy the outdoor hot springs when we get there too. How about I buy us something tasty at that parking area over there as thanks?”

“H-Hm, I suppose I cannot refuse a token of gratitude. I shall accept it. I am quite a stickler for etiquette after all. If you so insist, I have no choice.”

A light meal as payment was nothing compared to what she’d given us.

With the magi drake’s approval, I drove into the parking area on our left-hand side. It appeared to be a cozy little rest spot out in the country. The stand here wasn’t that big in size, but they seemed to be selling a variety of products.

“There are local delicacies in each region of Japan, so they might have something like that here too.”

“Hey, there you go again, piquing my interest like that...”

The girl laughed with her pure white hair showing, and seemed to be even more radiant than usual. It made me realize again just how glad I was to bring her on the trip.

Our car was parked quietly under the blue sky. We realized we were surrounded in greenery, and the air felt different compared to the city.

Miso potato, a Chichibu specialty.

It was a potato coated in batter, then covered in thick miso. It was such a common snack for the residents there that they apparently thought it was eaten throughout Japan.

The wild trees were reaching out toward the road, forming a sort of natural tunnel. It was quite a nice view, but I felt a pair of eyes staring at me from the back seat. I bought the local delicacy as thanks to Wridra the magi drake, but it seemed its appearance had not met her expectations.

“This is quite bland for a token of gratitude...”

“Is this really a local delicacy? It looks like a skewered potato.”

Put that way, I couldn’t help but feel a little bad for the potato...

We returned to the car, and the girls each had a fox-colored skewer in their hand. It was being sold plainly in the household dish section at the stand, and its modest presentation must have lowered their expectations drastically.

“Hehe, just give it a try. Looks being different from taste is part of the charm of Japanese food.”

The two nodded at my suggestion, and the sound of them biting into their food rang throughout the car.

Then, their eyes widened.

The creamy, melty texture was more akin to mashed potatoes.

“Muoh!”

“Mmm...?!”

They chewed wordlessly, then their eyes turned toward me. I think they were trying to say, “What is this?!”

Potatoes usually tasted rather plain. But when mixed with spicy-sweet miso, it brought out the potato’s natural sweetness and depth of flavor. The creamy potato evolved into a complex flavor, and as it was swallowed, the aroma of yuzu passed through the nose and stirred one’s appetite even further. Their stomachs seemed to demand they eat more, and they bit into potato number two.

“Mmf, this is plain, yet so delicious! This miso is enhancing the flavor fantastically!”

“Mmm, you’re right! It tastes so much different than it looks! It’s creamy, sour, and spicy, and the aftertaste is a fragrant yuzu flavor!”

Their opinion of the dish seemed to have flipped upside down, resulting in a high score for the miso potatoes.

I guess it was a bit “too local,” and so common in the homes here that it was treated as unremarkable at the shop. It was almost too affordable at a hundred yen, too, and I felt like they could have raised a price a little.

In any case, we arrived at our destination without any issues. Not only was there was much less traffic than I’d imagined, but the conversations and listening to the magi drake and elf sing made the three hours fly by. I was a bit worried because I hardly had opportunities to drive far, but I realized there was nothing to fret over now.

We got out of the car, and the elf girl enjoyed a nice stretch with her arms out wide. It was a gesture that seemed fitting for the nice, clear weather.

Our eyes met, and she furrowed her cute brows.

“You’re staring at me again. I think you look at me and laugh far too much.”

“Haha, you just looked like you were enjoying that stretch. Is your back hurting at all?”

She dusted herself off, then turned around to point her little butt toward me.

Her light one piece was perfect for spring, with bright colors that suited her well.

“Just a little. But this is nothing compared to riding horses. That can leave a pain that lingers for half a day. And all the swaying makes it hard to enjoy the view.”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t really ridden them much before. Horses are a bit scary, you know? And they bite my head all the time, which tends to hurt...”

The girl chuckled, then flashed a brilliant smile that matched her white hair. Seeing the beautiful expression on her face, I felt a cool sensation passing through my chest for some reason.

Chiirrp chirp chirp...

Hearing the noise suddenly, we both looked up to the woods. It seemed she wasn’t familiar with nightingales, and stared at the bird wide-eyed.

As I stood next to her, we naturally held each other’s hands, gazing at the intricately repeating mountains and the view that was framed in farmland.

“Such a peaceful place. It’s so different from where we live.”

“It really is. But I like the calm atmosphere in your room too. It kind of reminds me of inarizushi.”

Yup, there she went again with the mysterious comments. She could very much be a girly-girl at times, I thought.

Highly impressionable, and just listening to her made me smile. I wordlessly asked what she meant, and she hugged my arm tightly.

“It feels like this. It always makes me feel just a little excited.”

“I’m not sure I get it, but I’m glad you seem to enjoy it.”

As dramatic as it sounded, seeing her like that made me happy to be alive.

She smiled happily, and I was sure she was even more expressive than usual. Maybe it was because she was on her first trip, or because she was freed from having to wear a hat.

As for the magi drake who helped make that happen, she was smiling at us while resting her elbows on the car. Her gentle expression as she watched over us was like that of a parent's. I'd almost forgotten we were there to help relieve her stress.

The black-haired Wridra's lips curled upward, forming a bewitching grin.

"It is strangely pleasant seeing how well you two get along. It makes me feel as if my heavy heart will be cured even before entering the hot springs."

It was a bit embarrassing getting called out like that, and the elf girl quickly let go of me. Then, Wridra put up her hand as if to stop Marie.

"Oh, no, it is fine. I want you to be your natural selves. I have lived a long time, but it is always heartwarming to see children of men coming together."

Judging by her expression, it didn't seem like she was saying it to mock us.

The girl seemed to hesitate a second. Then, face turning slightly pink, decided to keep holding my hand. I followed her gaze to find a gate just past the parking lot, and there was a building there that seemed to be welcoming travelers.

"Okay then, let's go to the inn."

The girls responded to my suggestion by exclaiming "Yaaay!" and raising their fists. Seeing how excitable they were, it was strange to think one of them was an elf who'd lived for over a hundred years and the other was a dragon who was over ten centuries old.

We arrived at an inn that had a tranquil, Japanese-style appearance. There was a small gate and a Japanese garden, and the girls looked around with great interest. It made efficient use of the small space in true Japanese fashion, and the building gave off a rural, homey sort of vibe.

I slid the door open to find the reception desk right in front of the entrance. The interior was very Japanese as well, and the other two stared with mouths agape at the ceiling with exposed beams that gave the room an open feeling.

"Hmm, I do like the atmosphere. It feels as if bizarre creatures may be living here."

"What? Really? I'd love that!"

Ahh, this must be the influence of anime. Ms. Elf seemed to have picked up an interest in Japanese-style buildings, and stared at the shoji screens and pillars while I was checking in.

According to the employee there, there were two types of clothes for walking around the premises. We were able to choose between a type of work clothing called samue and brightly colored yukatas. Both the girls pointed at the yukatas with vigor, while I opted for the samue.

“Aww, why don’t you pick the same one as us? This one is so much nicer.”

“I just like wearing clothes I’m comfortable lounging around in.”

“No, that’s not it. Ever since you were a child, you’ve liked clothes you can bum around in. It’s obvious just by looking at that face of yours.”

Her reasoning was pretty bad, but for some reason, I couldn’t deny it...

We walked out to the wooden flooring in the hallway and headed toward the room I’d reserved. The interior of the inn was cleaner than expected, and the design had a distinct Japanese charm to it.

There was a waterfront by the open hallway, and the girls curiously peered at the colorful koi swimming there.

“Oh! Look, Wridra! Those fish have such strange patterns!”

“Hmm, you are right. A fish this round is most definitely for eating.”

No, it most definitely wasn’t. I really hoped she wasn’t planning on catching it...

It was no wonder Mrs. Ichijo recommended this place to us though. There was nothing like it in our neighborhood, and I decided to get her a souvenir on the way back.

And so, we finally made it to our room and found its serene interior awaiting us. The elf girl’s eyes glimmered as she became the most excited out of all of us smelling the faint fragrance of the tatami flooring.

“Oooh! Tatami! Look, look, tatami flooring!”

“These mats are made of straw...? The Japanese certainly have skillful hands.

Though...the sharp eyes and accuracy required seem to be somewhat beyond that of a normal human's."

"R-Right. Let's just take it easy here for today. Here, Marie. Go ahead and open the shoji screen."

The girl blinked and looked at me, then seemed to realize something and jogged over to the shoji screen. Sunlight poured in as she slid it open, and within the small garden right outside...

"Ah! A bath! Huh? Why is it outside?!"

"It's an open-air bath, so you can look at the sky while you bathe. You can use this one or the big bath we saw on the way to our room."

I asked what she wanted to do, and her eyes began sparkling. I'd always known how much she loved baths, so one with such an open feel to it was sure to make her happy.

"B-Both! But I want to try the big one first!"

"All right, then let's make the best of our time here. We can enjoy the hot springs all day today."

The girl shuddered, hardly able to contain her excitement. Wridra's face also lit up.

I thought to myself how Marie was very good at expressing her joy. I could feel her heart thumping with her body against mine, and she pressed her head into me while making unintelligible sounds. Then she looked up to face me, and her colorful lips slowly parted.

"I'm so excited, I can hardly wait. I've always wondered... why is it that you always teach me about such fun things?"

"Hmm, I wonder... Probably because it's fun for me too."

She let out a puff of air from her nose, which was pressed against me again. Her pale purple eyes looked into mine, then her mouth opened once more.

"Will you teach me how to wear the yukata?"

When an adorable girl asked you this, all you could do was answer with,

“Gladly.”

Her smile was infectious, and I felt a grin widening on my own face as well.

It was quite lively as she got dressed. The two seemed very interested in the colorful yukata, and I could hear their cheerful voices behind me as I sat in the garden. Just listening to their happy squeals put me in a happy mood too.

It was strange to think that, just a month ago, I was a salaryman who only lived to spend his time alone and dreamed as a hobby.

“Hmm, I think this is about right... Would you mind checking this really quick?”

I turned around in response to the girl’s voice, then immediately snapped my face back toward the garden. A black-haired beauty stood behind Marie, and her pale butt was visible under the open yukata.

Hmm... Such a powerful image... Her lack of modesty was a bit troubling. Maybe it was because she was in vacation mode, but it felt like Marie was less cautious than usual too.

“I-I’ll check it over here. Come here, Marie.”

She quickly trotted over, and a girl with flushed cheeks appeared before me. I took her by her hands and stood her in front of me, redid the rope around her waist, then made some finer adjustments around her chest. It seemed as if she liked being taken care of like this, and she cheerfully let me fuss around with her without resistance. Her happy expression as she spread her arms out wide was more than I could ask for as the one dressing her.

“...That should do it. Let me see your back side.”

I took her by her hand and turned her around, and she giggled lightly. With some final adjustments to her sash, Ms. Elf successfully wore her yukata. Her smile as she turned around was like a blooming flower, and she gave me an adorable, “Thank you.”

“Ah, so that is how it is meant to look.”

Wridra peered out from behind the shoji screen, and I was taken aback when I saw her exposed shoulders and clavicles. Her skin was also a pale white, and

there was a potent and mature allure to her with her black hair hanging over her soft skin.

Come to think of it, she'd mentioned something about magic particles earlier. The outline of her yukata changed shape in front of our eyes, and enveloped her skin like she'd learned after looking at Marie. It was a sight straight from the realm of fantasy, and an impossibility in the Japan I knew... But she was a resident of a fantasy world to begin with, so there was no point in me worrying about that.

"Okay, let's go to the big hot spring then. Do you both have your towels?"

""Yeees!""

They smiled brightly as they each enthusiastically raised an arm into the air. I led them out of the room and they followed me, humming with a bounce to their steps.

Silence filled the room, and it became colored with sunlight. It was sure to greet them warmly by the time they returned.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

The dressing room was filled with steam and smelled faintly of the hot springs. Marie sniffed around for that mysterious scent, and her eyes met with another Japanese guest who happened to be there.

As visitors from a fantasy world, the two girls couldn't help but draw attention to themselves, which made her shy about undressing her yukata. But the magi drake with her didn't seem to mind a bit, and revealed her bare body without hesitation.

Mariabelle had been worried when Kazuhiro first invited the magi drake to this world. But now, she seemed to appreciate the fact that she had a fellow companion.

Wridra grinned at her, though it was unclear whether she was aware of this sentiment. This emboldened her to disregard the watching eyes, disrobe, and put her clothes into the locker. Finally, she put her drawstring bag on top, then stared at it with her pale, purple eyes. Kazuhiro had handed this to her earlier, and saying it contained something called an "allowance." Apparently, she could

use it to buy something after getting out of the bath.

But more important than the money was that the pouch had a picture of a goldfish drawn on it, and it made her happy to know he knew what she liked. So much so, in fact, that the smile she'd been holding back spread across her face.

"Hmhm, he is a diligent one. I see he thinks very dearly of you, Marie."

"I-I don't, think so. He's just very considerate, almost like a woman...and he's very kind." She blushed a bit, then closed the locker in a hurry.

The woman watching her had incredible proportions, and stood there with her hand to her waist, an amused grin on her face.

The girl felt her cheeks grow hot for some reason, then pushed Wridra's back toward the hot springs.

"Ahahaha! Just look how red your face is! Such a maiden you are."

"Stop laughing so much! I'd spank your butt if you weren't a magi drake."

The comment only made Wridra laugh even more. There was a whole head's worth of height difference between them, but they almost seemed like sisters.

As they went outside, they found there was no ceiling there. A blue sky awaited them. The spring sunlight was warm. There was the hot springs before them, the distinct smell of trees in the air.

The girl wasn't just imagining that smell. The hot springs contained gas emitting from the trees, and should they wander inside, it would've felt like they were surrounded by a lush forest.

The fairy elf's heart thumped with expectation as she dipped her foot in the water. The slightly cloudy color and scent that made them feel as if they were surrounded by forestry, and the slippery texture of the water made both the girls' eyes widen as they immersed themselves in the water foot-first.

As their entire bodies submerged, they both let out an, "Oof..."

"Aaahhh, so much hot water... This is so luxurious!"

"Nng! There is a thickness to this water. But I can feel it seeping into my tired body. How wonderful."

They felt their bodies shudder as the slightly viscous water enveloped and gently warmed them.

They'd just washed themselves off earlier, and now had their hair wrapped up in towels. Marie had ensured her long ears were still hidden, so now she was enjoying the water without worries. There was hardly anyone else there, so they enjoyed an extravagant, near-exclusive experience.

"Ahhh... So this is a hot spring... This is going to ruin me as an elf..."

"Something like this once in a while cannot hurt... Though I do not mind at all if this ruins me as a dragon..."

Enveloped by the warmth of the water, the two let out contented sighs.

There were Japanese cypresses around them, as well as vivid, green trees. These hot springs were likely accustomed to curing weary travelers of their fatigue.

Because of the sheer volume of water, moving around didn't make the ripples splash back at the elf. As she stretched her legs and took in a deep breath, her butt naturally floated to the top of the water.

She was in a world of bath. She'd come to realize what a deep culture the hot springs offered.

Then she stretched her legs and arms. The blue sky expanded overhead, and the two let out another deep breath.

"Mmf, this is no good... I came here oh a whim, but I just may become addicted..."

"Me too... It's scary how deep I am into Japanese customs now, despite being an elf... A part of me wouldn't even mind if my ears just fell right off..."

Marie placed her head against a cypress, and the two had sleepy looks on their faces. They looked just like their companion, Kazuhiro, but luckily, neither of them seemed to notice.

Steam wavered all around them, softening the sunlight coming down on their bodies. It felt as if even their thoughts would dissolve into pudding.

With such an expression on her face and sweat beading on her forehead,

Wridra turned toward Marie.

“So, does it seem like you will be able to enter this so-called ancient labyrinth?”

“No, we’ll be going to speak to the guild leader tonight... Wait, how do you know...? Ooh, that’s right. You’ve been secretly eavesdropping on us.”

Hearing the slight attitude in the girl’s words, the dragon chuckled with amusement. There was no ill intent in her eyes as she looked at the girl with her breasts floating atop the water.

Marie and Kazuhiro had been aware of her observing them through the dragon blood she’d given them. Or, more accurately, they’d realized it when Mewi pointed out that they were “still connected.”

“I had no choice. I do not know anyone who is capable of crossing over to the realm of the other. This is why I was concerned. I had feared someone would try to use this power for evil, but... Oho, I did not anticipate he was simply spending his days eloping with a young elf girl.”

The girl’s cheeks turned red instantly, and not from the heat. She was all too familiar with what the magi drake was talking about.

“Ah! I’m going to call you the ‘Peeping Magi Drake’ from now on... We’re never bringing you to hot springs again!”

“What? I cannot have that! I can promise you this: I have only listened to your voices, and I was considerate of your privacy! I would have no idea if you two have been kissing!”

“K-Kissing? W-We’ve done no such thing!”

Wridra tilted her head at the sight of the girl submerging in the water down to the lips and blowing bubbles up to the surface. Judging by the content of their conversation, she’d assumed they already had that sort of relationship.

Still under water, the girl was averting her eyes. Wridra may have imagined it, but it seemed like she was somewhat upset. Seeing this, a look of realization spread on the black-haired woman’s face.

“Hmm, I see. You are a child, and he is a coward.”

“...Huh?”

The magi drake’s hand moved through the slick water and took hold of the elf’s hand. The girl looked up to face her, and Wridra whispered, “There is something interesting over there. What do you say to joining me and checking it out?”

“...Sure, I don’t mind. So long as you’re going to explain what you meant just now.”

Wridra grinned, revealing her white teeth.

Hot air suddenly drifted out toward them, and they shut the door in a hurry. It was so hot, they seemed to think it wasn’t a place where a living creature should enter. The entrance read “sauna,” but neither of them knew what it meant quite yet. They looked at each other, wondering what to do, when several women exited from the room noisily. Seeing the refreshed look on their faces, the two looked at each other again and mustered the courage to enter.

The potent heat was still there. But seeing the dark space with wooden seats inside, they could tell it was some sort of place for healing.

The magi drake sat down heavily on the seat, and the girl followed suit... only to jump up from the burning heat on her butt and yell, “Hot!” The dragon laughed again.

“Ha, ha, this seems to be another type of bath. To warm the body with steam instead of water... Humans come up with some truly innovative ideas.”

“That’s fine and all... but I thought I was going to turn into a steamed dish. Even the air I breathe is hot... It’s making my nose sting!”

She was still a bit cautious, but gradually became accustomed to the heat and lowered her hips slowly. As she sat in the room filled with hot air, she eventually became used to it enough to stretch out her limbs.

The girl then asked the dragon, “Would you mind telling me what you meant earlier? It sounded awfully mean when you called me a child and him a coward.”

Marie looked at the dragon coldly, an unusual expression for her. Though, in

truth, it was simply that Kazuhiro had not seen her like this, and this was her usual expression when spending time at the Sorcerer's Guild.

Still, Wridra's warm, motherly expression didn't fade, and she moved in a little closer to the girl.

"You may already know this, but my body is closer to that of a fairy. The same goes for you. Elves are close to fairies as a species, and a different creature from humans altogether."

It was true. Although the elf sometimes forgot...no, she *tried* to forget, but she was different from humans. They could touch and communicate with each other, but there was something fundamentally different about them compared to humans. Because of this, she knew full well it was extremely rare for humans and elves to end up together.

"Come now, do not look so glum. This is why I say you are still a child. You wish to touch him deeply, which is why you have been changing your body and way of thinking, little by little. Am I wrong?"

The girl blinked. She couldn't understand what was just said to her, but couldn't pretend she didn't hear it either. The dragon had said something important.

"No need to be hasty. You and that boy will be a pair one day."

The girl felt something deep within her head go numb. She could see the truth of the dragon's words, and a glimpse of the future flashed in her vision. It had been blurry and vague until then, but the dragon's words helped it take shape. The magi drake could control all sorts of magic, but this seemed to be magic indeed.

The girl let out a melancholy sigh, hugged her knees, and made her small body seem even smaller.

"Hm? What is it?"

"He... probably doesn't find me attractive."

"Hmmm? And what makes you think that? You seem adorable even in my eyes."

It had to be obvious from any observer that she was very important to that young man. But Marie pouted, making a child-like expression.

“He barely ever initiates physical contact... We’ve never even kissed like you mentioned. I don’t think he sees me as a woman at all.”

“Hm. Then about what I said earlier...”

The elf’s eyes turned slightly toward the dragon, but they were full of doubt and accusation. Considering how she’d just trusted the dragon’s earlier statements, Wridra couldn’t help but let out an internal sigh.

“He has become a coward *because* you are so important to him.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Ha ha. Put simply, it means there is hope for you yet.”

The girl’s amethyst eyes widened, revealing their vivid brilliance. The boy, Kazuhiro, apparently thought of them like blooming flowers. Wridra felt as if she somewhat understood why he lost himself in those eyes.

“Real...ly...?”

Even as the girl asked anxiously, she moved in even closer. Her shining eyes were attractive even to the dragon, and made Wridra’s cheeks turn slightly rosy.

“Well, finding out whether that is true or not is a simple task. The truth is always right there in front of you. If you wish to know, you can simply find out. For example...”

The girl felt her head go dizzy from the woman’s confident words. Really, it was because she’d been in the sauna too long.

The girl’s body slowly sloped downward, and Wridra silently supported her. Then Wridra carried her outside and laid her down on the chair.

As she passed through the cloth divider to go out, the young man was reading a book nearby. The girl remembered how they’d picked a book at the library together, but she would’ve liked more time to mentally prepare for the reunion.

He noticed her as well and looked right at her. His usual sleepy-looking face smiled gently, and he stood up. The samue he wore was rather plain, but perfect for spending time in leisure.

“Hey there. How was the bath? There’s a footbath over there. Would you like to check it out?”

She couldn’t speak very well, and could only nod wordlessly. And so, they walked toward the footbath with him in the lead.

The girl turned around to see Wridra waving her hand, mouthing the words “Good luck,” which only made her heart beat even louder. She could hear it pounding against her chest, and her feet were uncertain, as if she were walking in a dream. His hand squeezed hers, and her small body twitched in reaction. The anticipation of something to come made her feel like she could pass out at any moment...

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

This place was a recreational facility, but it was also a nice and tranquil Japanese inn. As we walked down the hallway, there were many families who seemed to be enjoying their free time. The sunlight was nearly directly overhead, and there were several people heading toward the dining hall by this time.

We could go and eat already, but it would probably be better to relax a bit after taking a bath. It was the first hot springs visit for the elf whose hand I was holding, so I should be teaching her the proper way to enjoy it.

“After you’re done taking a bath, you get to pick any drink you want. Look, that’s what that booth is for.”

“...I-I see. Is that what the drawstring pouch you gave me is for?”

I turned around, noticing she took her time to reply. The girl’s face was so red that I wondered if she’d overheated in the hot springs. Her clavicle was peeking out beneath her yukata, and seeing her pale skin more flush than usual made her seem more alluring than her age. Seeing her full, soft-looking lips almost made my own face grow hot.

Although, of course, she was an elf who’d lived a hundred years, so she was

actually much older than me.

“Y-Yeah, so, uh, go ahead and pick anything you’d like.”

I pointed ahead, and the girl’s eyes were directed to the juice lineup. The refrigerator behind the glass contained coffee, milk, strawberry milk, and various canned drinks in a line. The sight was sure to draw the attention of any child, and the girl’s eyes glittered with excitement.

But feeling someone’s eyes on us, I looked to the side to find Wridra in the corner of the hallway, looking as if she were about to cry.

Umm, she’s standing pretty far from us... But what was she doing there? I wanted to ask, but she disappeared to the other side of the hallway with a look of pained reluctance. I would’ve bought her some juice if she wanted some...

As I was thinking about this, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“I want this one! The color is so pretty.”

“Oh, sure. Then I’ll choose the same. Excuse me...”

The two bottles of ramune clanged against each other as I put them on the counter to pay.

“Oh! What is this? There’s a transparent ball in here.”

“Yeah, it’s called a marble, and it’s used as a seal for the drink.”

It was funny seeing Marie struggle to get the marble through the neck of the bottle. She put the bottle on a towel and tried pushing it through, but seemed to have difficulties pushing hard enough. I placed my hand over hers to help, and she slightly trembled with effort. Just as she started to turn toward me, the marble shot in with a satisfying *pop!*

She made an impressed noise and peered into the bottle curiously. Her pale purple eyes observed the carbonation bubbling up the inside of the bottle. Drinks like these must’ve seemed strange to her.

She stared at the bottle the whole time as we walked toward the footbath. It seemed like she could hardly wait to drink it, but she just needed to wait a little bit longer.

After a short walk, we arrived at the nearby footbath. There were various places to enjoy the hot water at the facility, one of them being a bath that was also a walkway that didn't even go up to your knees. We sat on the seats that resembled verandas and dipped our feet into it, feeling the warmth of the water that was at just the right temperature.

"How interesting. I didn't expect to see a bath like this. This is for warming your body, I'm guessing?"

"That's right. Just dipping your feet in warms up your whole body. But going in the hot springs is more effective for keeping yourself warm on a cold day of course."

The redness on the girl's face had faded, and I was relieved to see she was her cheery self again.

She plopped down next to me. With her leg next to mine, it was clear to see the difference in our skin colors. She stretched her feet as far as they would go, then made little squeezing gestures with her toes. Her feet were pale like the rest of her body, and much smaller than my own.

I spread my toes in the same way, and she giggled happily.

"So, what did you think of the hot springs? I've heard this place is pretty good."

"Oh, it was incredible. I have nothing to compare it to since I'm from the forest and this is my first time going to hot springs, but I shuddered when I soaked my body in it. I even thought it would ruin me as an elf."

I'd heard people saying that about themselves, but didn't know elves could feel the same way. She seemed sincere when I looked at her, and it made me glad to have invited her.

"Then I guess I should say, welcome to hot springs culture. I'm really glad you seem to enjoy it."

"Oh, but I don't know if I should. What if I really do get ruined as an elf? You may not be laughing when my ears fall right off my head."

We both laughed, then clinked our bottles together. The chilled ramune felt

good going down my throat, and left a refreshing aftertaste. Marie's eyes widened a bit at the carbonation, then smiled and said it tasted good.

"I wanted to thank you. I was embarrassed at first, but seeing your sleepy-looking face helped relax me."

Hm? Embarrassed? What did she mean?

I wasn't expecting any formal thanks, but she removed her feet from the water. I watched her, wondering what was going to happen next, then she placed her small hand over my chest.

"You need to feel embarrassment like I've been feeling."

"Huh...?"

Her pretty face, so finely detailed, obstructed the sun as she moved closer, and my eyes widened. Her nose brushed against my forehead, then she gently swept my hair out of the way. Her soft-looking lips were just as—no, far softer than I'd imagined as they pressed against my forehead.

Time seemed to disappear. My thoughts were wiped clean from my mind, and I only recognized the warmth coming from her.

A gentle splash of water could be heard, but it sounded like it came from so far away. Only the girl's neck appeared in my vision, and I felt her breath tickling my hair. The elf's bright, silky hair caressed my cheeks, and I was at a complete loss for words.

All I could do was feel her warmth.

Then, heat began visibly warming my cheeks. I made a faint noise as I moved away from her, and the elf's face filled my view. The blushing girl before me seemed so womanly and pure, I couldn't help but be captivated by her even more than usual.

Seeing me like this, a satisfied smile spread across her face.



“Hehe, how’s that for a thank you?”

“A-Ahh, it was, very, surprising. Umm, thank you.”

“Hey now, I’m the one who’s thanking you... I’m getting a little chilly. Can you scoot over for me?”

I was still in the midst of my confusion, when the girl moved her butt in between my legs. She then got back into the footbath and began humming in a cheerful mood.

The feeling against my forehead was still clearly lingering, making it feel as if Marie’s lips were still there. I was dazzled by her thighs peeking out of her yukata, and I needed some time to contain the strange emotion I was feeling.

I didn’t know at the time, but apparently Wridra told her, “Hands, feet, wherever you please... Just give him a kiss somewhere. If he has feelings for you, just look at his face and you will see.” It was aggressive, yet accurate advice.

As my head slowly recovered from the confusion, I came to a realization: the girl was taking a step forward, and, despite my timid nature, so was I.

In other words, it seemed we were more than just friends from this moment on. That’s how it felt as I touched my own forehead.

It was quite shocking, and I probably wouldn’t have felt any pain if I pinched my cheek just then. I’d never experienced something like it before, so it hardly felt real. I even considered the possibility of it being a very pleasant dream. But the girl was definitely there and enjoying the footbath before me, her toes wavering back and forth.

Finally noticing the bottle in my hand, I brought the ramune to my mouth. The mixture passing down my throat was very cold and sweet. When I put my bottle back down, a pair of pale purple eyes were staring at me, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Hey, how are there hot springs when there’s no volcano here?”

I felt a little bit of relief as she asked the question. It was likely because her eyes were so full of curiosity as always. They told me that Marie was tangible,

right there in front of me, and her actions earlier were only natural.

As I drank some ramune, soaked in the bath, and enjoyed our conversations for a while, my heart finally seemed to calm down. That moment would be etched into my mind as a special memory, but I also wanted to protect the relationship we already had.

Marie seemed to be very interested in the hot springs as I'd thought, so I taught her about their history and of some other famous hot springs in different regions of Japan. But I soon realized I may have picked the wrong topic of discussion when I told her the reason there were so many hot springs was because this country was one of the most earthquake-prone in the entire world.

Her eyes snapped wide open. "That reminds me! There was an earthquake that night! So that wasn't just a rare incident?!"

"No, they happen quite frequently... Why don't we join one of my condo's evacuation drills sometime?"

Marie grew pale, then nodded fervently.

I remember she was so surprised that night that she practically flew out of the bathroom. I decided not to tell her that metropolitan cities, like the one we lived in, were particularly vulnerable to earthquakes. They often showed on TV the regions that were dangerous to be around during earthquakes. The Koto Ward was bright red on the distribution maps shown there.

"There was a very big earthquake a long time ago. It got pretty bad at my grandfather's house too."

"Really? Is it okay now?"

"Of course. We're the most well-prepared country in the world when it comes to earthquakes. People from other countries even come here to learn about our methods."

Hearing this, Marie let out a sigh of relief and rubbed my leg as if to comfort me.

Golden Week was coming up, and I planned to visit my grandfather's house

with her. This was because she'd become greatly interested in experiencing the old-fashioned Japanese lifestyle after watching anime.

Now that we were all warmed up, we decided to take our empty ramune bottles and leave the footbath. We walked through the dim and somewhat nostalgic-feeling Japanese-style hallway, when she turned to me with great excitement.

"Oh, I just can't wait! It's a place full of greenery that kept up well, isn't it? There must be gods all over there."

"Huh, I'm actually not sure. I've never really looked into the region's history. You might actually know more about it than I do at this point."

"How disappointing. You don't know about the land you grew up in? You need to study when we get back. I'll help you."

Ugh, I don't want to study after coming home from work...

I grumbled as I opened the sliding door to find Wridra listlessly lying on the tatami floor.

"Oh, I was wondering where you went. What happened?"

"Uuugh, I thought I would be able to eat something delicious... You are terrible!"

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she had a hungry expression as she sat up. We both looked at her blankly, and while we did feel bad, we couldn't help but burst out in laughter.

"Uuugh! After I was being so considerate, you two bully this poor magi drake? Children of demons, you are!"

"Hmm, this looks like the menu. Look, they have a local delicacy here too. It's called waraji katsu. Would you two like some?"

""Yes!!!""

How cute, they're perfectly in sync.

Taking a bath made me hungry for some reason. Thinking back, all I had were some of the miso potatoes along the way. Though I guess we had some rice

balls too... But we were on our wonderful day trip, so I couldn't complain too much.

I placed an order with an employee there, thinking how convenient it was that we didn't have to go to the dining hall since we booked a private room. The Ichijos must have spent their time pretty leisurely here too.

When the food arrived, I realized it was called waraji katsu because it was as big as waraji sandals. The flat katsu was served with sweet sauce on top and placed atop a bed of white rice. Wridra's eyes glittered at its grand appearance, and the woman's mouth hung open in surprise.

We couldn't enjoy the open-air bath that came with the private room, but I couldn't have witnessed Wridra thrashing around with joy on the tatami at the restaurant, so I'd say it was worth it. It wasn't necessarily a token of apology, but the post-bath sake and delicious side dishes she was surrounded by seemed to blow away all her stress from raising children. To be honest, I felt bad that even I'd forgotten this trip was for her.

The girls enjoyed the rest of their time there by taking naps and going back and forth to the hot springs.

Time flies when you're having fun.

This thought filled my mind as I looked up at the red skies.

The mountains of Chichibu felt somewhat nostalgic. The narrow and tall, repeating mountains were a picturesque image of age-old Japan. I always pictured mountains like these whenever they appeared in stories about the olden times.

I was lost in these strong emotions as I slowly drove the car through the winding mountain road.

To me, Japan seemed like a boring place. It was strange to think about how I was experiencing it to my heart's content now, wondering where we could go next. Though I figured most of that came from my desire to see one lovely girl's reactions.

I glanced to my side to see Mariabelle nodding off to sleep. Just looking at her lips as she slept made my cheeks grow hot. She told me to feel embarrassment,

and it clearly worked out well.

“Oh, Wridra. Would you mind getting that lap blanket for me?”

“Hm? Ah, you mean this.”

I thanked her as she handed me the blanket, and I placed it over the girl at a red light. Spring nights were still chilly, and the air was prone to getting dry while driving around. I didn’t know too much about half-fairy elves, but I was worried she might catch a cold.

“Hmhm, so gallant. Among the humans I have known, it was always the women who took care of the men. It seems you are a special case.”

“Is it really that strange? I think it’s pretty normal these days.”

Despite what I said, I felt like those of Japan weren’t all too accustomed to treating women too kindly yet. I figured that was more common in the chivalrous western countries.

As I thought about it, I could sense Wridra moving up right next to me. The seat shook slightly, and I could actually feel her eyes on me. She was probably giving me a dubious look from behind.

“You say that, but it seems to me that you only have eyes for Marie. Well?”

“I, I don’t...think so?”

My voice squeaked a little hearing the oddly passionate tone of hers, and because her hand had firmly gripped my shoulder. The dragon tilted her head as if she were scrutinizing my words, then spoke with a hint of anger in her tone.

The dragon tilted her head as if she was scrutinizing my words, then spoke with a hint of anger in her tone.

“Fool, do you truly think I did not notice that you were feeling lonely as I was waiting eagerly?”

“Huh? Waiting? What do you mean?”

She glared at me through the mirror, seemingly saying, “As I thought.”

Being glared at by a beautiful woman was strangely intense.

Her crimson lips turned into a frown, and she looked clearly displeased.

“Inviting me to the so-called labyrinth would have been the expected course of action. I thought that was your objective to begin with, but you have nothing but recreation on your mind.”

“...Huh? Oh, you mean the ancient labyrinth? But you wouldn’t want to be invited to that, would you?”

I didn’t forget about it, I hadn’t even thought of inviting her. I mean, who’d ever heard of inviting a boss-level dragon into your party?

Moreover, I was surprised she even knew about the ancient labyrinth. But when I thought about it, she’d been listening to our conversations through the item she’d given us, so it was no wonder she knew so much.

While these thoughts crossed my mind, I heard sniffling next to my ear.

“I see... I am an outcast... How strange...there is mucus coming out of my eyes.”

“What?! B-But... Wait, do you want to go with us?”

I was shocked to turn around and find she was *actually* crying! She looked like she could start bawling any minute, so I stopped the car at a drive-off near some vending machines.

I placed some coins into the vending machine, and the buttons all turned red simultaneously. The dragon’s pale skin stood out even more than usual with her night-colored hair and one piece dress.

I stopped my car’s engine, and the world grew quiet at once. The only illumination came from the vending machine. It was like we were in a dimension separate from the rest of the world.

The bamboo forest around us rustled with the wind, and Wridra’s finger wavered as she tried deciding on what to pick. She eventually made her choice, and an electronic *beep* could be heard as a button was pressed.

“Oho, there you are! Hoho, I will drink you down!”

Seeing her gleefully take the can out of the machine, I was relieved that her crying from earlier had turned out to not be such a big deal. I was sure she

wasn’t faking it or anything, but it seemed she was too expressive with her emotions since she’d hardly ever interacted with humans.

Her butt was emphasized as she was crouching, and I quickly looked away.

“You surprised me when you started crying so suddenly. Are you feeling better now?”

“Fool, dragons do not cry. As I said, that was merely mucus.”

I think those are called tears, Ms. Magi Drake...

Wridra’s heels clicked on the ground as she walked to the car, then she leaned on it. She was about as tall as I was, but her long, slender legs made her look like a model. Though, the pouting face she made when she tried to open the lid of the melon cream soda bottle did look a little weird.

“Nng, mm... Ahh, delicious!”

It was strange how a woman with such a beautiful face could seem so childlike when she smiled.

Feeling relieved that she seemed to have calmed down, I asked her, “So, about the underground labyrinth... Wouldn’t it get in the way of raising your children if you were to join us?”

“Ah, no need to worry about that. I am but a single part of a cluster known as the Dragon Core. I am connected to the main core, so this has been effective in relieving my stress as a whole. So long as I occasionally return to synchronize, I can move about freely even while raising my young.”

I tried making sense of what she had just told me. It was hard to understand the being known as a dragon, but it seemed there’d be no issues with her joining us.

Though I did have other concerns...

“I should mention, it’s a pretty dangerous place. If you, the whelps’ mother, gets hurt...”

“Yes, yes, fine. I want to go spend time with you two, so take me with you! I could tank with my eyes closed, and I would consider going depending on the bento, so take me with you!”

Sh-She just wanted some bento?! And she said she'd "consider going," but was clearly intending to go by the way she told me to take her with us. I wondered if she really didn't mind...

It was true I wanted a powerful ally, and there was definitely no better candidate to fill the role. Considering I needed someone who could completely protect Marie, keep my secret, and was uninterested in money, this would perfectly resolve every obstacle in the way.

"Well, I didn't expect this. It's like a puzzle was solved with just one move."

She laughed amusedly. It was likely that she'd already come to the conclusion that challenging the ancient labyrinths would be no issue with her with us.

"Um, would you like to go with us? It's going to be packed with ancient mysteries, and I'm sure you're going to have fun. I'll prepare us bento, of course, so let's enjoy them together."

"Hmph, you should have said so from the beginning. Then I could have acted hesitant, eaten plenty of delicious food, and reluctantly agreed at the very end."

She pointed her nose in the air. *So that's what she was planning...*

It seemed I was blowing her off without knowing it, and put the dragon in a bad mood. But the main issue of finding a tank was now resolved, and Marie's safety was secured. There was no one I could trust more to handle the task either.

"It's an honor to be have a dragon join us. There's still much for me to learn, but I hope to receive your guidance."

"Hm, be sure to apply yourself diligently, human. I shall join your party then."

The dragon flashed a handsome smile, and we shook hands. Her skin felt smooth, but there was a hint of her dragon's strength behind it.

The strange thing was, a living legend known as the magi drake was joining us on the way back from a day trip to some hot springs while an elf was snoring away next to us.

"...Oh no. I promised Marie I'd discuss these things beforehand. Sorry, Wridra,

I'll have to take it back if Marie doesn't agree to it."

"Gah?!"

I told her as such as I climbed into the driver's seat, and Wridra's eyes went round. Yeah, I understood how she felt, but my promise with Marie was important. I doubted Marie would disagree, but if that happened, sorry.

"Y-You fooooool!!!"

Wridra's voice echoed all around us, and the girl opened her eyes sleepily.

The car began accelerating slowly, and we eventually arrived at my home. And so, our little trip came to an end.

+ + + + + + + + + +

I felt a yawn tickling my ear. I was carrying the elf on my back, walking down the hallway of my condo. The girl was muttering into my ear as I made my way down the hall.

"Oh... Was I sleeping...?"

"Yeah, but you can keep resting. We're almost home."

I turned to find her amethyst eyes next to me, which were struggling to stay open. Her long, white lashes trembled as she slowly focused on me. She smelled faintly of the hot springs, and rubbed her cheek against me before her eyes began closing again.

"Feels good..." she muttered, followed by her light breathing as she fell asleep. She was exhausted from playing all day, and being carried back to my room was a privilege reserved for her.

Actually, maybe it was a privilege for me too. The girl was much lighter than she seemed, and her warm body felt good against my own...

We finally arrived in front of the door, and when I tried reaching into my pocket for the keys, I was interrupted by someone else's soft hand. I looked to the side and the black-haired woman held her pointer finger up against her lips, then reached into my pants to pull out my keys.

Marie made gentle sleepy noises next my ear, and I checked up on her as

Wridra unlocked the door for me. We usually slept together, so maybe it was nice that I could take my time to watch her sleeping face like this.

The door opened with a click. It was completely dark by the time we returned from the trip, and it was already past eight o'clock.

Wridra entered the room before us and flipped the light switch. I followed her inside, then quietly laid Marie down on the bed.

"All right, I'll take this time to prepare a meal. You can rest, too, Wridra."

"Before I do, I will teach you how to handle this ear cover. If you hold this ornament with your fingers like this and order it to 'untie'..."

Marie's hair emitted a white, glossy light. What appeared to be her braided hair dissolved in the air, and specks of light were absorbed into the center part of the ornament. Seeing it again made me consider just how incredible it was, and it said so much about the extent of the magi drake's powers.

I placed it next to Marie's pillow, and Wridra looked at me as if to ask, "Understand?"

"Yeah, this is amazing. How long can she keep using it?"

"I have separated its connection to me, so you can continue to use it in the realm of the other. It will degrade eventually, but I will recharge it if you call upon me every so often."

With that, Wridra gently sat next to the sleeping girl. Although she could be boisterous most of the time, seeing her being quiet and taking care not to wake Marie made her appear more charming and beautiful than usual. I mean, she was still beautiful when she was being noisy, but her extreme emotional ranges often caught me off-guard.

Then she whispered, "A trip like that must be damaging for your wallet. I would not mind coming here occasionally, when you have the funds to spare."

"To be honest, doing this every week would be tough. I think it'd need to be once every few months at best. More importantly, I'm still worried about distracting you from raising your children."

As the girls rested from their long trip, I began walking toward the kitchen. It

was about time I showed my cooking skills to the visitor from another world. I'd prepared some ingredients in the refrigerator just for this day, and even bought a hot plate beforehand.

"Hm. As I have mentioned earlier, I am but one of seven Dragon Cores. I will have no issues raising my young. Though, my level is lowered in this state."

Oh, so that's how it works.

But even then, I suspected her level was over 1,000, so she'd still be a considerable threat even if her skills were cut in seven.

I chopped up some cabbage as these thoughts simmered in my mind. I figured we could discuss the labyrinth stuff after Marie woke up. In that moment, I was more occupied with the new cooking tool I'd purchased for the first time in a while. Heheh, I'd be able to cook up a wide repertoire of dishes with this, like yakisoba, yaki udon, and chan chan yaki.

Besides, a hot plate wasn't really something I could use by myself. This was true for shopping, too, but when cooking for one person, there'd usually be leftover ingredients and it could end up being rather expensive. In that sense, it became much easier to shop for and cook food since Marie arrived.

"Hmm, what else... I could use a pressure cooker too. Ahh, I can't wait to get my bonus."

"You are in front of a dragon and all you can think about is cooking? How absurd." I could feel her giving me a cold look.

I heard a fizzing sound from behind me, and I could tell she was beginning to revert back to her original form as a draconian. This meant I couldn't turn around, out of modesty and respect, so I'd be staring at the cabbage for some time.

By the time Marie woke up, most of the cooking prep was finished, and Wridra's tail was extended and waving around. The girls each took a seat on either side of me, and the sight of a half-fairy elf and magi drake made it very hard to believe I was still in Japan.

"All right, I'm turning on the hot plate. Marie, would you mind pouring Wridra some beer?"

There was a glass for each of us, indicating that even the young-looking elf would be able to enjoy drinking while we were in my room. Wridra's eyes glimmered at the bubbling beer, and she smiled cheerfully.

"And so, it is decided. I will protect Marie from today onward. I will also be pointing out any areas in which you are lacking."

"...You two have a talent for blowing my drowsiness away. I never would have imagined we'd be joined by a draconian."

Marie's cheeks were flushed as she spoke, and I could tell she'd already accepted Wridra as our new traveling companion. It seemed she was actually excited about this, because she was speaking a bit faster than usual. That just showed how much the two had grown closer during the trip.

And so, I raised my beer. It may have been an audacious move with my being drastically younger than either of them, but I decided to make a toast.

"Well then, welcome to our party, Wridra. Though we still don't have achievements under our belt just yet."

"Ha, ha, so says the man who cares less about such things than anyone else."

That was true. Getting in the spotlight only led to more trouble. Even at work... Never mind, now wasn't the time. We'd just returned from our mini trip, so I didn't want to think about reality just yet.

"A toast to our new traveling companion! For this memorable day, let's enjoy some Japanese soul food known as okonomiyaki."

"Yes! How delightful, I only experience wonderful things when I am with you two!"

Mhm, but more importantly, I was rather absorbed in making some okonomiyaki. I dropped some batter containing cabbage and corn onto the hot place, then shaped them into circles. As I placed some pork onto them, Marie tilted her head curiously.

"Oh? Are you going to make them right now?"

"Yup, it's called teppanyaki. We'll be able to enjoy cooking using the hot plate from now on."

I said that, but I was the one having the most fun with it. Honestly, I was thrilled. There were all sorts of cheap, delicious meals that could be made with a hot plate. To enjoy it to the fullest, I wanted okonomiyaki, the king of hot plate food, to be highly rated in this household.

Once it was cooked adequately, I flipped it over and the sound of the meat sizzling could be heard. The girls were staring fixedly at the okonomiyaki at this point, and their faces moved in unison as I flipped it over. The way they were acting as close as sisters must've been a plan to make me break into a smile.

But I wasn't going to give in.

I flipped the side with the meat back up, revealing the grilled meat covered in melting fat. Two forks were already reaching for the food, but I put out a hand to stop them. I added some sauce and bonito flakes, and an enticing aroma began filling the room. There was a hint of sourness to the smell as the sauce was cooked on the hot plate, and just as the hunger set in, the green laver delivered the finishing blow.

"Aaahhh! It smells so good! Stop, stop, I have to have it!"

"Right after I add some of this mayonnaise... Okay, you two, give me your plates."

They both presented their plates at the same time. They looked like they were about to drool as I cut the food into two pieces and placed one each on their... *Oh, Wridra's actually drooling already...*

They drove their forks into the okonomiyaki and brought it to their mouths. It was still hot, so they huffed and puffed for some time, but then finally began chewing. The batter was so gooey, it was hard to believe it was mostly cabbage. The fragrant, fatty pork tasted delicious as the unbelievably appetizing smell passed through their noses. Fat seeped out as they chewed into the partially crispy meat, elevating the flavor even further.

The girls let out a synchronized breath, stamping their feet on the floor. Marie doing it was one thing, but Wridra might've been causing a nuisance for the people downstairs...

"Ahh, sheesh! I love this so much! It smells incredible!"

“Delicious! Urrrgh, the flavor is spreading throughout my mouth! I have been underestimating vegetables! I will take responsibility and eat all of them!”

Well, that was good. They seemed to be enjoying the meal.

I cut up another one and divided the pieces between my plate and Wridra’s, which was already empty. It looked like I’d have to keep cooking non-stop just to keep up.

“This is the best meal to have a beer with. Oh, but gyoza is too... Anyway, enjoy it to your heart’s content. We’re celebrating today.”

We tipped our gold-colored glasses, their contents drained as we gulped them down audibly. We all breathed out together with a satisfied, “Ahhh!”

“Mmm, yes! A perfect match! D-Do not tell me... You have been enjoying meals like this every day, Marie?!”

“Ahem, of course. It’s nothing to brag about, but this is the reason I decided to learn Japanese. Though anime is wonderful, too, of course.”

Y-Yeah, she was right about that being nothing to brag about, but I decided not to say anything...

Now, we were only just getting started with the okonomiyaki. I mixed in some cheese and mochi, and I became an okonomiyaki cooking machine, making batch after batch. You know, I expected the dragon to have an appetite, but it was somewhat entertaining to watch.

“Mmm! I love cheese! The burnt parts are so savory and... Oh, oh! Beer, beer, please! I want more!”

“The melting mochi... Oof, so delicious! I think I may be reduced to tears. Ah, yes. I have decided. I, too, will learn Japanese!”

Oh, she would? Though I did understand just how powerful food could be. Even if you went to a mediocre travel destination, it could end up being a good trip if the food was just as so. That could be enough to motivate people to learn Japanese...

Actually, most people probably wouldn’t.

“I was thinking of making more tomorrow if we had leftovers, but looks like

we might finish it all off. I can make some yakisoba for our packed meals. Oh, would you like to try some now?”

“”Yes!””

They were in high spirits. The sight of beautiful women chowing down was...interesting, but it was nice to see.

I turned on the TV to get some rest after eating, and a movie happened to be playing. The TV was usually facing the bed, but I turned it around the other way to face the living room whenever I had guests over.

This movie was about a giant creature going on a rampage, which was rather easy to understand in terms of entertainment, and seemed to be perfect for a lively dinner table like this. Low rumbles echoed as the music played, and the girls paused their meals to turn around.

Wridra was the first to move, driven to action by the rhythm that was like a quickened heartbeat. She walked toward the TV with a plate still in hand and stared at the screen with a serious expression.

“H-Hm! O-Oho!”

“Wridra, would you mind moving? I can’t see. Come on, move out of the way!”

Marie grabbed her by the tail and dragged the dragon back to her seat. Wridra continued eating slowly the whole time, her eyes never leaving the screen.

I was thinking how Wridra looked like a grade schooler when a flash of light appeared on the TV. A beam streaked across the land and an intense explosion lit up the sky, causing the tipsy Marie to stand up in her seat.

“Ooohhh!!!”

“So cool!!!”

Yup, I couldn’t see a thing with Marie and Wridra crowding the screen like this. Yet they were still eating okonomiyaki the entire time, so it seemed it was a hit to say the least.

“Magnificent. This is what is great about being born a dragon. I wonder...

Where ever shall I direct this desire boiling up inside me?”

“U-Um, Ms. Wridra? Please don’t say such ominous things in my room.”

“The music is so cool. What? No way! It’s that sorcerer’s tower!” Marie trotted over, pushed the curtains aside and stepped out to the balcony.

No, she had it all wrong. It wasn’t actually under attack, it was just a movie for entertainment purposes. And it was the Sky Tree, not a sorcerer’s tower.

“Um, I finished making some yakisoba. Do you two want some?”

““Yes!”” Their faces both turned toward me at once.

Huh, so they’re still able to react to these things...

All in all, it was quite the hectic dinner.

Under the downlight, I saw the girl’s eyes right before me. I’d gone to bed with her many times before, but I thought her heart was beating louder than usual, just as mine was. Her eyes like amethyst jewels were shimmering slightly, and I felt like I’d be absorbed into them as I stared.

I could still feel the heat the girl had left on my forehead. Neither of us were speaking much, likely because we were thinking back to that very moment.

I heard the sound of bare feet walking along the floor and tried turning around, but the girl stopped me by placing a hand on my cheek. Her eyes told me not to look.

“Nnh, that battle music was fantastic! I would like to use it myself,” Wridra said as she moved the blanket aside and slid in next to me.

Her smooth arm wrapped around the nape of my neck, and I felt something soft press against my back.

Ah, so that was why. The girl had stopped me because Wridra had stripped down to her naked body again. The clothes she’d created were absorbed into their master as the dragon got ready to sleep.

“I didn’t think a dragon would be so into a movie like that. Did you have fun?”

“Oh, I did indeed. It was gratifying to watch. I had used up a slot because of it, but I do not regret it one bit.”

Hm? What did she mean by “used up a slot”? Marie and I looked at each other with widened eyes at the odd phrasing.

“Ahh, ahh... Human and elf, I am grateful to you two for welcoming me today. I pray we fight alongside each other in the dream world as well.”

“Wha?! Sh-She just spoke Japanese!”

“I can’t believe it! I’m still in the middle of learning... N-No fair! This isn’t fair at all!”

I heard a triumphant noise from behind me. Were dragons able to control their skills freely? And just to watch a movie at that?

“You’re as unbelievable as always... Your actions themselves are impressive, but I can’t believe you do them just for the sake of entertainment.”

“Oh, no, there is far more value to it than you give credit for. This Japan place certainly is interesting. Not only is there food and entertainment, but I sense something buried deep within the earth.”

I turned around to face her without thinking, and saw her lying in the blanket, grinning at me with her obsidian eyes narrowed knowingly. “Something buried deep within the earth” had to be some sort of metaphor, but her eyes told me she was telling the truth.

“...It has been a while since I have tired myself out with amusement. Hmhm, and how amusing it was.”

With that, the black-haired dragon let out a yawn and slightly tightened her arms around me. She then buried her head into her pillow and relaxed her entire body.

“Hmph, this is unfair. I’m the only one who can’t speak it now. I’ll show everyone and even learn kanji.”

The elf let out a dissatisfied breath and moved in closer. Her forehead ended up right in front of my face, and I felt the slight temptation to make a move. This was all because Wridra had nudged things into motion. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have...

I slowly pressed my lips against her forehead, and the girl froze for a moment.

I could smell her even better from this position, and the sweet fragrance passed through my nostrils.

But I wasn't able to look at her face. She drove her face into my chest, rubbing her nose against me like a cat.

"Hehe... Goodniiight."

"Yeah, goodnight. I'll see you again in the dream world."

It was adorable to see her digging in closer, unconcerned by her hair getting messy in the process. We listened to the quiet snoring coming from behind me as we, too, fell asleep.

"Today was so much fun," I whispered, and she nodded wordlessly.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 8: Duel It was early in the morning, and many were gathered at the hall of the Sorcerer's Guild. Those who'd just entered looked around with dubious expressions as they noticed the high sorcerers and sorcerers in attendance.

One of them asked the person next to them, "Hey, what's going on? Did they mention what this is about?"

"No, I've only heard that the guild leader called for this. What, does no one know why we're here?"

Their questions slowly made waves among the group, spreading throughout the hall. The hall was built in a wellhole-style that was about three stories high, with people looking down over the handrails from above.

The woman with the eyes like lakes was among them as well. The sunlight pouring in from the frosted glass faintly illuminated the area, and she quietly stared at the scene below.

Everyone gathered seemed bewildered by the meeting that had been called without any explanation on what it was going to be about.

The guild's sub-leader appeared on stage, then glanced up toward her. His look seemed to ask, "Are you sure about this?" to which she wordlessly nodded in response. The aged man shook his head with exasperation, then took the gavel that was on the table.

Bang! The sound echoed throughout the hall. Everyone quieted down and all eyes turned on him. The man cleared his throat and opened his mouth.

"Thank you all for gathering here today. The one who will be sent to the ancient labyrinth will now be decided. Please begin."

Once his rather abrupt explanation was completed, his eyes turned toward

the woman again. The crowd followed his gaze, and the attention of everyone gathered turned toward Mariabelle's master. But she stayed perfectly calm, and a faint smile could even be seen as her lips parted.

"The reason you were gathered here today is none other than to have you all see for yourselves whether there is someone superior to Sven, the Twin Blade Magic Swordsman. With the guild leader's blessing, we shall begin the selection ceremony."

As soon as she finished speaking, a circular body of water appeared before her. Sunlight reflected off the serenely wavering surface like a mirror of water, displaying a scene of somewhere far away.

+ + + + + + + + + +

The Nazul-Nazul Ruins were an underground city that existed below the surface. To go outside from there, one had to go through a hole that had caved in over the years, or pass through a waterway used to draw in water from the river. No one knew where the entrance originally prepared for that purpose was.

As we walked through the dried-out irrigation canal, the echoes of our footsteps grew quieter. We began hearing the sound of running water, and an exit covered in foliage with sunlight peering through awaited us. Having completed their task of providing illumination, the light spirits were dismissed with a wave of Marie's wand, vanishing into the air.

"Mm, this area's so refreshing and full of greenery."

I looked around the riverbank as I stretched out my limbs. Fresh verdure that had been untouched by humans was a rare and welcome sight for me. The young leaves grew freely there, covering the riverbed, with an almost emerald-colored river flowing between them.

I breathed in the refreshing morning air deeply, then hopped down from the moss-covered rocky stretch. Since we were in the dream world, my body was that of a young and nimble boy. I landed in the sand without losing my balance, then turned to the girl behind me.

"I hear elves live among nature, but I'm guessing not all of them are equally

athletic?”

“I-It depends. Not every elf is a master of archery or something. You shouldn’t have such prejudices.”

She crouched down, her long ears drooping anxiously as she gave me a look of disapproval. I reached out to her, and she grasped my hand firmly and said, “Why, thank you,” with a cool expression. She then closed her eyes and nervously jumped down. Her foot slipped on her landing, but she managed not to fall by holding on to me. We ended up in a position that looked like we were dancing.

“Most of the elves I have known were quite athletic,” an exasperated voice called out to us.

There stood Wridra. Unlike in Japan, her horns and wavering tail were out in full view. Her dress-like armor with intricate ornaments were the same color as her hair and looked incredibly durable.

She, of course, showed no fear of heights as she leapt down, but I was shocked to see the rock she’d landed on burst into pieces with a loud *crack!* It seemed she had quite a lot of weight despite her nimble movements.

Her eyes, framed with long eyelashes, turned toward me. “So, let us head to this so-called Sorcerer’s Guild already. Once that is done, we will head to Arilai.”

“Let’s do that then. By the way, are you okay with the heat, Wridra? Marie hates hot weather. It puts her in a bad mood.”

“That’s a mean way to put it. Of course I wouldn’t talk as much if I’m dying from heat. Ugh, you always do this. I’ve never seen or heard of someone who invites people on a walk when the infernal sun is directly overhead.”

I became a bit flustered as she turned away and pointed her nose in the air. She was a lovely girl, but I always put her in a bad mood when it came to hot weather. Though it was possible that she hated the cold just as much.

Before we headed to the Sorcerer’s Guild, we had to cross to the opposite bank first. The water was only deep enough to go up to my knees, but the footing was very mossy and easy to slip on.

I watched the little fish that occasionally reflected sunlight as I advanced through the water, leading Marie by her hand. The cold water helped wake me up. I thought about how Wridra was going to cross the river with all that heavy armor holding her down.

I turned around to find her standing there firmly with her legs apart. The water passed between the space in her armor, and she remained unmoving like a rock. Just as I felt that she seemed a bit different than earlier, she looked at me with a faint smile in her eyes.

“I just remembered there was something I must take care of first,” she muttered, though it was unclear what she meant. But that seemed to be the end of her comment, so I wondered about it as we continued wading through the river.

I squeezed my clothes, wringing out the water they’d absorbed. We were enveloped by greenery and the smell of the river when someone appeared from the bushes as if they’d been waiting for us.

My eyes widened as I saw who it was. They were the two I’d just met a only few days ago.

“Sir Sven! I didn’t expect to see you here. I apologize for not thanking you properly the other day.”

Sven stood there, seemingly scrutinizing my words, and I tilted my head questioningly. The tall, well-built man no longer had the unnatural grin that had been on his face at our last meeting. There was a tenseness to him and the person clad in black that accompanied him.

Marie and I looked at each other, blinking our eyes. The two were clearly on edge about something, as if looking out for an unseen enemy.

Sven’s animalistic eyes looked at me from behind his sunglasses.

“...Who is *that*? No, first, I need to know...what was that thing in the depths of the ruins? There was a monster that could easily wipe out not just a town, but a whole continent. How did you come to meet it and come back alive?”

The question left me at a loss for words. I couldn’t tell him the woman in front of them was that very being. The magi drake was a legendary creature. Telling

him honestly probably wouldn't end up very well.

There was something else I realized: Our meeting here was no coincidence. They'd probably been following us and sensed the presence of the dragon.

I listened to the sound of the flowing river as I thought about how to proceed. Trying to convince him there was nothing to worry about wasn't going to work, but if we didn't resolve this, it could lead to a more thorough investigation. This would be an incredibly bad time for that, considering Wridra was so busy taking care of her children that she was experiencing maternal neurosis.

I casually looked to the side, and she was watching the river fish with a nonchalant expression. I furrowed my brows. Maybe it wasn't a big deal? Or maybe she figured she could handle someone like him with ease. I grew more worried, wondering if she'd forgotten he had the Sorcerer's Guild backing him.

I wanted one more piece of information before answering him, so I replied to his question with a question of my own.

"Sven, what do you intend to do with that information?"

His intent would determine my response. I knew he was suspicious of us for coming into contact with a monster, but I needed to know how he thought about us and the magi drake.

But Sven merely just rubbed his chin, looking as if he'd just remembered something. He quietly rose from behind the trees, his beast-like eyes glinting behind his sunglasses. I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me as his muscles expanded, his body seemingly growing bigger with every step. The murderous intent was palpable as he approached, so I assumed a battle stance.

"That's right. Whatever I ask, it doesn't change what I'm about to do. I'll peel off your skin to see if you're monster underneath, and have a barbecue on this riverbed as I enjoy torturing you all day. Then I'll go to the ancient labyrinth of Arilai, obtain enormous riches, and live happily ever after... Hey, restrain the ones in the back."

His last words seemed to be directed at the figure in black behind him.

I narrowed my eyes. I knew what I had to do. Even if it was out of fear for the magi drake, I couldn't let him threaten harm to Marie and get away with it.

I ignored him as he approached and spoke to the woman next to me.

“Wridra, do you have any spare weapons? It just so happens that I don’t have a sword right now...”

“I suppose I do, but I question whether you are worthy of it... Oh, very well... Give me a moment as I remove the unnecessary effects. Gracious, getting like this the moment Mariabelle is in danger... Such a tiresome male you are.”

Yeah, this really wasn’t the time to be messing around.

Wridra bent her knees, and a hilt appeared as her armor shifted with a heavy, metallic sound. It was the same color as the rest of her attire, with the partly-visible blade being as black as night.

“I will remove my name from it and make it possible for you to wield. This is a sword that is strong, durable, flexible, and unbreakable. Think of it as thanks for the okonomiyaki from last night.”

I never would’ve guessed some okonomiyaki would be returned in favor as a weapon like this...

I bowed my head, then gripped the hilt that was presented to me. Another metallic noise rang out, and the sensation of drawing the sword nearly sent a shiver down my spine.

Despite its rather slim form, there was a significant weightiness to it as I held it in my hand. What surprised me was how short of a time it took for my hand to grow accustomed to it. It was perfectly balanced, and there was no need at all for me to make any adjustments on my end.

“It appears you like it.”

“Yes, it’s wonderful. I’ll use it gratefully.”

I gave it a couple practice swings, and two slashes appeared in the water surface before me after a short delay.

Hmm, it was quite amazing. I could hardly believe this was a gift in thanks for okonomiyaki. I was really glad I didn’t end up using the last of my money to buy a cheap weapon.

Looking forward, I noticed Sven had drawn his weapon as well. Rather, there

was no hilt for him to draw from in the first place, as they floated in the air around him instead.

There was still some distance between us, but I had a feeling I'd be within his attacking range if I took a few more steps forward. Yet I ignored even that and spoke to the girl who was watching the scene worriedly.

"Marie, make sure you stay next to Wridra. This goes without saying, but I'll be fine."

"Yes, be careful. The magic swords he uses aren't the same as normal ones. Don't underestimate them," Marie replied with a calm voice.

It was smart of her not to tell me to beat him or run away. Despite being in the same guild as the opponent, she'd approved of me responding with violence. She also understood that since I'd been working solo for most of my past, I was far stronger going on the offense by myself rather than fighting while protecting someone. So she'd told me not to worry about her, and not to hold back.

"Wridra, I'm counting on you."

"Of course."

Just as the short conversation ended, two things happened. Sven's sword carved a path on the water surface as it came flying toward Marie, and Wridra slammed it down with a backfist. The other thing was that I set my resolve to fight seriously and began walking forward as the girl cried out behind me.

Sven seemed to be about two meters tall. I could feel his distinct aura as I moved in closer to him. His well-built, bulging body seemed inversely proportional to the intricate movements of the magic sword as it flipped in the air and returned to him.

My honest impression was that he seemed strong. His pressure was mounting, but my expression was unmoving.

I only spoke to him with a sleepy lilt to my voice. But inside, I was angry at him for trying to attack Marie.

"Hey there, I'm just gonna call you Sven. There isn't much need for formalities

against an enemy.”

“Shut up!”

He reared back, then swiped at me with the speed of bullets using his pointed fingertips.

A mere fifty centimeters. That was the distance I’d moved to evade the attack using Over the Road. It was a skill that allowed me to instantly transfer myself from one point to another, and could only be activated if its various prerequisites were met.

Just as I moved in to his flank, a spinning blade whizzed past my nose as if he’d read my move.

Huh, that was close. If I’d reached out for a counterattack, I would’ve been sliced to pieces. This should’ve been his first time seeing my transportation move, so how was he able to react to it so quickly?

No, there was something else far more pressing. He had two swords earlier; so where was he hiding the other one?

When considering things like this, it was a good idea to try and think in the opponent’s shoes. I thought about what would be the hardest to predict and deal with for me.

“Oh, right. My feet.”

I backed off one step. Just then, gravel was strewn into the air as a magic sword appeared out of nowhere and flew upward with a *whoosh!* If I’d still been standing there, it would’ve cut right through my thigh.

It disappeared back into the ground immediately, effectively setting up for the next attack. This meant I’d have to be wary of more attacks with no way to predict when they’d come.

I let out a heavy breath. I had to figure this out, or there’d be nothing I could do.

The grin on Sven’s face was indicative of his current advantage. If there were a set pattern, I could’ve recorded it in my muscle memory with my Precision skill, but it was hard to do so in this case due to its somewhat random nature.

The best I could do was throw that melee attack with his hands into my open slot.



My opponent’s estimated level was 70 or so. Not too far off from my own level, but he had superior offensive skills. He was probably hiding some proper magic under his sleeve, too, and I had no idea when he’d bring those out.

His combat experience also vastly outweighed mine. The attack he’d just used told me he was several leagues above the people I faced at the Adventurer’s Guild the other day.

“Maybe I’ll challenge him a bunch of times and learn the hard way.”

“Huh? The hell are you talking about?”

Luckily, this was a dream world to me. If I lost, I could just sleep again.

I decided to look at this positively. What if I ignored the attack from below and dove right at him without worrying about the risks?

I took a bold step forward and barged right into his attack range, and he gave me a mocking look.

“Hah! It’s torture time!”

His grin widened, and his hands extended like an eagle’s talons. There was incredible pressure radiating from him, but it also made me realize something. He seemed very aggressive, but he had to have some defensive measure prepared too.

And so, I decided to take it to close quarters combat and fight with instincts alone. I’d already set his barehand attack into a memory slot earlier, so my body moved while maintaining the optimal distance and evaded attacks automatically. I spun around like a top while getting closer to him.

As I stepped forward, I swiftly slashed twice at his hardened abs in the shape of a cross. Two metallic screeching sounds rang out as my attacks were deflected, and I gripped the hilt of my weapon hard with my numb fingers.

Silvery white lights glinted before him from the protection provided by his magic sword. I figured he’d have something like that... No matter how strong he was, it was odd that he was exposing unprotected, bare skin like that.

“I’ll bet you’re good at baiting attacks like this and going in for a counter attack.”

“That’s right. Now eat this!”

His knee filled my vision, and zeroed in directly toward my head. A clean hit would’ve probably sent me flying ten meters away, but there were ways around it so long as I anticipated his attack.

My upper body vanished like an illusion as he hit the copy of myself that I’d created with my Phantom Image skill.

“Argh, damn your little tricks!”

He glared at me as I reappeared from his side, but I figured it was just an intimidation tactic. These moments, when the opponent was sent off-balance, tended to be the best times to strike.

I dug my feet into the gravel and arced my blade as I swung it toward the side of his unguarded body. My attack was deflected by his magic sword as expected, and I immediately followed up with a low strike for his ankles. Then a second blade emerged from the ground, blocking the attack at the last second.

But that was just what I was hoping for.

“There, now you can’t keep your sword hidden.”

“Annoying little...”

I secretly enjoyed his frustrated expression as he gritted his teeth.

The fun in player versus player combat was in manipulating the opponent’s movements. I was actually finding it enjoyable myself, and my smile wasn’t one you’d expect to see on such a boyish face.

Meanwhile, the necromancer was making a move, slowly approaching Mariabelle and Wridra as Sven had ordered. The necromancer’s short stature was covered in black cloth from head to toe, and a mist-like substance emanating from the figure made it hard to discern the outlines. Dull lights glowed from where the eyes should be, like a full moon in a cloudy sky.

Then the chains attached to the figure’s staff clinked heavily as they floated into the air. The eyes, nose, and mouth began shifting around in unnatural positions, and began cackling out loud. It seemed long periods of withstanding such harsh conditions had affected their mental state, which in turn amplified

their necromancy abilities.

A round creature on the ground, the spirit of a Fire Lizard, screeched threateningly in response. Its short tail was pointed straight up, with its beady eyes in an angry triangle as it tried protecting its master.

Its master, Mariabelle, gripped her holly staff and let out a puff of air from her nose.

“You do realize fighting among guild members is against the rules?”

“Keehee, of course I know that, Mariabelle the honor student. That’s why I was only told to *restrain* you. I’ll wear down your mind until the brink of death, so just stay unconscious for me, all right? Don’t worry, this won’t hurt...”

Mariabelle furrowed her brows at her opponent’s mocking tone. It was a heavily disadvantageous situation. She was lacking in levels and field experience, and hadn’t been able to use her advantage of prepping with Spirit Sorcery beforehand. The best she could do was create one Fire Lizard.

But strangely, the girl felt no fear. It may have been due to the calmness she could feel emanating off Wridra, who stood behind her as if there were nothing going on at all.

The girl looked back with her pale purple eyes.

“That’s right, Wridra. Don’t you need to ready a shield?”

“Hm? And why would I need to do that? No one else here is holding one.”

Mariabelle pursed her lips, then tilted her head. She assumed a tank would typically have a shield, and her expression suggested that she was wondering if this was true.

“But...aren’t you a tank?”

“Hm... It appears you have the wrong idea. Of course, I could easily prepare such equipment. But there is no need to obscure my own hand in such a way.”

She spread her hands, showing that she wasn’t even holding a weapon, let alone a shield. Marie contemplated where her critique should even begin, then turned toward the necromancer.

“A shield’s important, right?”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure. I’m a sorcerer, so I suppose an opponent with a shield is actually easier for me to deal with. I’d actually be glad if they limited their own vision by holding one... Wait, why are you asking me?”

The necromancer blinked, then gave a troubled expression. The black-clad figure could never seem to get a proper read on these people. They couldn’t get the expected outcome whether they provoked or laid back... In fact, they couldn’t even get to the provoking part. Even the Fire Lizard turned toward the conversation with its tail facing the necromancer, even though it was trying to be intimidating just a minute ago.

The figure in black sighed.

There was another reason not to attack. The woman in black armor standing behind Marie wasn’t there last time, and no one had ever heard these two had another companion.

Something like a tail peeked out between her armor, and a horn-like hair ornament was on her forehead. There was an air about her that was distinctively inhuman, and something told the necromancer moving forward any closer wasn’t an option.

“No matter. We’ll take our time getting the answers out of you later.”

The necromancer seemed to set their resolve and tapped the ground hard using the staff with a “Hmph!”

They hadn’t just been leisurely waiting for the party to arrive. The necromancer’s master, Sven, used his Oracle to figure out that they’d appear here, and set a trap in preparation.

The ground began rumbling. Shadowy circles appeared on the ground all around Mariabelle and the woman, the rumble sending ripples through the surface of the river. The girl sensed something horrible as a shiver went down her spine, and her purple eyes opened wide.

“Ah! This is forbidden to use!”

“Keehee! Behold, the power of my necromancy!”

As the necromancer raised both hands in the air, three pillars of pure black erupted from the ground. The objects looked like giant black trees, then a fissure ran down each of them as if a knife had cut through the top. As the tip split open, countless irregularly shaped teeth appeared, followed by eyes completely devoid of emotion. The ground continued shaking, and the necromancer laughed as the creature began taking form.

“Hahaha! Behold, the soul of a wyvern! There are only a select few in the world who are capable of freely controlling the souls of monsters!”

After rolling around and laughing joyously, the necromancer pointed the staff at the elf. It was the signal to eat her soul. The black-clad figure was finally feeling the joy of cornering prey. There was nothing more adorable than someone who struggled vainly and desperately tried to fight back. Calling down with words of kindness from high above, then gently breaking their spirit... There was no greater enjoyment.

Just then, the woman in black finally turned her dark eyes toward the necromancer.

“Your screeching is getting on my nerves. If you must boast so loudly, do it elsewhere.”

She complained as if she were annoyed by a rowdy neighbor. It was clear she didn’t like that she was being put in danger in the slightest.

The loud *slam!* that followed was the sound of her tail hitting the ground. It became obvious after a few seconds why she’d done so.

Something incredibly dense began gradually rising from beneath the wyvern wraiths’ feet. Its body surface was a pure black that would absorb any light, and neither the necromancer nor the wraiths could move an inch. All they could do was stare and try to hold back the fear. The three wraiths simply stood there trembling, and each of them were engulfed from their ground.

What was the thing that was even bigger than the wyverns? What had just emerged from directly below and absorbed them?

Despite them being wraiths, the sound of bones being crushed along with screams could be heard, and the black smoke that puffed out like a burp told

them the wraiths had been expunged from existence. At this point, the necromancer finally realized they were now sitting on the ground. The next word out of the necromancer, as one could imagine, wasn't all that impressive.

"...Huh?"

It was unbelievable, despite having witnessed it with their own eyes. So much time had been spent training each of those wraiths, yet they all perished in the blink of an eye. Only the howling sound of vibrations in the air seemed to remain, and the giant thing that appeared earlier had vanished as well. The necromancer tried to remember what had just happened, but the whole scene was like a horrible dream.

The sound of shoes crunching in the gravel road made the necromancer's eyes look up slowly. There, a pair of eyes were looking down at the figure, and they were the exact same color as the thing that had just appeared earlier.

Huff, huff, huff... Shallow, repeated breaths. It was as if the necromancer's heart was in a vice grip, making it difficult to breathe. The woman was just that terrifying.

"Finally, you've calmed down. Now, will you keep sitting quietly? I will at least spare your life then. There will be no second...no, no third chances."

"Huh? Y-Yes! I'm sorry! I'll stay seated quietly!" the necromancer replied immediately, sitting upright with their legs underneath their thighs.

This clearly wasn't the work of a typical tank, but they didn't dare complain about it.

I heard some unsettling noises from behind me, but I had something more pressing to attend to.

To keep both his magic swords within view, I made Sven focus on defense by keeping up the offensive in super close quarters. My blade flashed as I swung it in quick succession, but my opponent seemed to have reinforced his arm and used it to accurately deflect each blow. Then his magic swords applied pressure from both sides as they flew in while spinning like fan blades.

Hmm, I was in quite the predicament...

“Are you trying to turn me into mince meat?”

“Huh? The hell are you smiling at, ya creepy brat?!”

He yelled, “Die!” and the spinning blades closed in on me from either side. But he seemed to forget that I had the ability to transport myself instantly.

I glanced above his shoulder area, then vanished. I left an illusion where I was instead, so he could slice that up to his heart’s content. I stepped off his shoulder lightly, then flipped in mid-air as I slashed at his back. The slender blade of Wridra’s weapon made a satisfying whipping sound as it cut through the air.

But I was taken aback when he crouched down at the last possible moment to avoid the attack with what seemed to be his bestial instincts.

How odd, I’d totally caught him off-guard and he shouldn’t have been able to react in time. His reaction to my first teleport was also too fast.

I considered this as I landed on the ground. It seemed as if his eyes were glowing more so than earlier as he turned around to face me.

The fact that he was waiting for us here was odd as well. Could he have some sort of skill that allowed him to see the future?

The thoughts nagged at me, but I’d decided to do close quarters combat, so I couldn’t take a break now. I went in again right away, stepping in close toward the big man waiting for me. We both had a sword, but from an outsider’s perspective, it was a bit different from a typical battle. Probably because I was using teleportation, and he was using magic.

There was so much to consider in player versus player combat. Using the same method twice could lead to eating a big counter attack, and it was clear that I had to figure out some way to overcome him.

I was glad I’d gotten some practice at the Adventurer’s Guild the other day in this case.

I overwrote the movement pattern I’d saved with my Precision skill as I continued laying on the barrage of swings with my black blade. The onslaught of attacks seemed to be wearing on my opponent as I kept it up without giving

him any room to breathe.

“Annoying bastard!”

His front kick filled my vision as he tried getting me off him, but I teleported two steps’ worth away to avoid the attack. I reappeared on his right-hand side and immediately executed the attack pattern I’d registered with Precision: a lightning-fast, full powered swing.

Clang! Sparks flew into the air, and I teleported to his left side this time, repeating the same attack again. Another magic sword flew in to block this attack as well, but I had no time to be disappointed. If I stopped for even a moment, his magic swords would automatically take the opportunity to cut me into fine little pieces.

I groaned internally. Just looking at him from a calm perspective, he was very strong. His physical capabilities were abnormally high for a sorcerer, and his spinning kick delivered from a proper stance was powerful enough to break a tree.

I leaned back desperately and moved out of the way, but my cheek split open a moment later. Fresh blood spewed out, and my vision blurred... A concussion.

His toe barely scratched me!

A magic sword came flying toward me from the side. I contained my loudly beating heart and tried to think calmly.

Was it possible for me to learn that? That was an ideal kick, but we were both human, so maybe it was possible for me to record it with Precision. I tried to do just that, and the Precision skill tried resisted it somewhat, so I pushed it into the slot by force. There was no way for me to be sure if it’d work until I tried it, but it seemed the midst of battle wasn’t the time to be experimenting.

Just as I ducked to evade the rotating magic swords, his knee came rushing up to my face from below. I had no time to look somewhere else to teleport to, making it impossible to dodge the incoming strike.

With a resounding *crack!* my young, lightweight body was sent flying into the air. I felt the impact of the ground as I landed on my back and rolled around on the gravel, unable to breathe.

As I finally got to my knees and regained my footing...Sven was grinning at me. The gravel crunched under his foot as he came closer.

“I see, your teleport has a ton of limitations. You’re always looking in the direction of your destination, and it only activates when you have both feet on the ground. Seems like a pain in the ass.”

Not bad, he was pretty spot on. Though there were other limitations, like weight and distance.

As if to confirm his victory, his magic swords pincered me from both sides without making a noise. One came flying over the water while the other flew over the gravel road, both heading straight toward me.

I have a bad feeling about this...

The hairs on the back of my neck were standing on end.

“You won’t be able to teleport now.”

The magic swords made a horrible whizzing noise as they closed in.

“Oh no!” I shouted as I realized what he was going for. I broke out into a sprint; immediately after, a sword sliced where my foot had been. I leapt out of the way just in time, but I couldn’t transport myself fully in that moment.

“Hey, kid. Enjoy your flight.”

His creepy smile came rushing at me, then his full-powered swing connected with my body. I tried protecting myself with my sword at the last second, but it did little to absorb the impact. The shock felt like I was being torn apart, and I was launched so quickly that I could hear the wind howling by. I spun diagonally, and the moment I thought I saw the river in my vision, I bounced off the surface of the water like a skipping stone.

You’ve gotta be kidding!

Multiple pillars of water shot up with each skip, then I sank into the water with a big splash. All I could see were countless bubbles as I spun around, my mind going completely blank.

When I could finally see again, fish covered in a silvery light were trying to flee from me. But one of them was moving strangely, making a beeline toward me

like a torpedo... *Ahh, a magic sword!*

I raised my own sword to intercept it, and, luckily, I was able to deflect its course away from me. Judging by the weight of the impact I could feel in my arms, a normal sword would've broken on the spot. The weapon Wridra had given me, however, seemed to be specially made, and it hadn't even been chipped. I felt a strange sense of pressure knowing that if I did end up losing, I couldn't put any of the blame on the weapon.

"Pwah!"

I paddled to the surface, taking in a breath of fresh air. Then the magic sword's attack I'd been anticipating...never came.

I was wide open...why wasn't he going for it?

I looked around curiously and the sight of Sven looking dumbfounded on the opposite shore and some people watching us entered my line of sight. Maybe I was imagining it, but it seemed like he was staring at Wridra instead of me.

"What are you guys doing? Taking a break sitting at the rocks?"

"What does it seem like? We are waiting for you to finish."

The black-clad person was sitting patiently next to the rocky area where Marie and Wridra were sitting. It was nothing like what you'd expect in a battle scene, and it dampened the tension I was feeling.

The water splashed around as I made my way through it, waving at the elf.

"You seem to be having trouble. Should we come help?"

"I-I think I'll be fine. But really, what happened over there? Did you become friends with that necromancer?"

Judging by the way Marie shook her head with a troubled expression, it looked like Wridra had taught their opponent a lesson. I doubted there was anyone who could take on a magi drake. In fact, I had a mind to commend and console anyone who dared.

Poor thing, the necromancer was curled up and trembling like a kitten...

"You have some nerve looking so unconcerned when you wet my sword with

water like that.”

“Oh, sorry. I’ll clean it up before giving it back to you.”

“No need to return it. It was given as thanks for the okonomiyaki. But I trust you know what you must do.”

That probably meant she wanted me to win.

She gestured with her chin, toward Sven, the Twin Blade Magic Swordsman. Apparently, the magi drake wasn’t going to accept defeat using her weapon.

I wished I could confident say I was going to beat him...

I nodded to signal that I’d do my best, then stepped forward once again.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

Sven, the Magic Swordsman, was in shock. After sending the boy flying with a kick, he looked off to the side and furrowed his brows when he found the girls and the necromancer just... sitting there. Wondering if they’d used some sort of mind control, he activated his Oracle to find out what was going on.

But just then, he felt his entire body freeze in fear. The woman talking and laughing next to the elf unconcernedly was no woman at all, but a monster. An overwhelming presence that reminded him of the night he ran for his life just a few days ago. Above her head, the words “Magi Drake” were written in blood-red text, telling him that battling such a being would mean certain death.

“M-M-Magi...”

His mind was thrown into a state of confusion, and his vision blurred so much that he almost passed out. Now that he couldn’t escape with his companion taken for hostage, he had to find out how to remove himself from this dreadful situation.

Could it have known he was going to be there? What if they let him escape the other night because it was planning to dispose of him here?

Finding himself in the same situation again filled him with complete terror. His body trembled, and a primal fear filled his mind.

Then he acted in an attempt to avoid certain death. He threw his sunglasses

to the ground, his eyes gleaming gold like those of an owl.

His skill, Oracle, allowed him to peer into the uncertain future, and he'd activated its maximum power. It would rapidly drain his magic in exchange for putting off his impending death.

"Hey there. You don't look so good."

He wasn't even paying any mind to the aloof-looking boy who'd come up to talk to him.

No, the boy may not even be human. In Sven's eyes, the boy appeared to be a minion of the magi drake and an evil demon who was there to devour his heart.

But now that he'd activated Oracle, the truth hit him.

"You're... human. And your mind's not being controlled either."

"Huh? R-Right... Whatever you seemed to figure out just now, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone. She may not look it, but Wridra's a pretty nice lady. We were on a nice trip together just yesterday."

He didn't know how to respond to this nonsensical reply. Could it be that the boy was interacting with that being knowing it was a magi drake? That would make him even more dangerous. To awaken a sleeping dragon and take it to human civilization was akin to knowingly spreading natural disasters throughout the land.

There were many issues that came with the activation of Oracle. One of them being that it even increased the efficiency of the user's thought process, stripping away their humanity as a result. This was why Sven limited the number and duration of its usage to a minimum, but...

"I'll cut you down."

"You sound even more threatening than earlier. All right. Let's finish this then."

The murderous intent erupting from Sven was enough to cause the birds in the vicinity to flee, but the boy only shrugged his shoulders. No matter how badly he damaged the boy, that sleepy-looking expression and speech pattern didn't change, which was rather annoying.

Light was cast on their feet through the leaves of the trees as the sun slowly rose. As the sunlight eventually went up to their knees, their blades suddenly clashed. Then another body appeared next to the boy, and another. Each of them raised their weapons, executing the move the boy had learned at the Adventurer's Guild.

Sven instantly saw through the trick with his Oracle activated. They were just illusions with movement patterns assigned to them with Precision. Merely a distraction.

He whirled around and extended his hands like an eagle's talons...and missed. The boy had recorded this movement with his Precision earlier, and was prepared with the optimal evasive maneuver.

The two swings the boy delivered as a counter attack cut into Sven's wrist and elbow, but keeping the boy from teleporting was more important than the wounds he had sustained.

Again and again, he used his magic swords to attack at the boy's feet. This was all he had to do to prevent the boy's transportation skill, giving him a massive advantage... or so he thought.

With his mind so focused on this task, Sven had overlooked something important: As his attacks increased in accuracy, they were becoming more simple, allowing the boy to record the movement with Precision. The magic swords danced in the air as they missed their marks, and he found himself sweating as the boy began evading the attacks by simply swaying his upper body.

Just then, the sleepy-looking boy pointed at his back. He seemed to be telling Sven to turn around, but it'd be foolish to do as he said. But when he noticed a shadow cast over the sunlight, his eyes quickly turned toward his back.

There, he found the boy swinging his sword down toward Sven's neck. Even though he knew it was an illusion, seeing a sword being buried into his unprotected neck made him sweat profusely.

It only took one moment. In that blink of an eye, when his body tensed up ever so slightly...

A black sword leapt upward from below, like a fish springing into the air. Sven raised his reinforced arm to block it, but the abnormally sharp blade cut halfway through his arm.

“Dumbass, you just lost your weapon!”

No longer feeling any pain, Sven laughed and tightened his swelling muscles around the blade. It was completely locked in place, and when he sent his magic swords at the boy from both sides, the boy let go of his weapon. Perhaps the boy had recorded this attack too.

He leaned back, dodging the blades by just a hair. What was more, he rotated his body in the same movement, perfectly utilizing the momentum and muscles of his body to deliver a powerful kick. The form was fascinatingly beautiful, and could only be achieved through years of training, but...

“Bastard, that’s my move!”

He even recorded my kick!

It was an infuriating thought, but the boy struck Sven’s elbow with his toe, sending a shock through Sven’s arm. The muscles that were holding the black sword in place loosened. The boy noticed it immediately, retrieved his weapon, then executed a horizontal swing.

The side of the blade was slammed into Sven’s temple, and a sound like cracking bamboo echoed throughout the river beach. Sven’s vision shook dramatically, and before he knew it, he found himself on his knees. Oracle became deactivated, then everything seemed to go sideways. The woman on the other side seemed to be tired of waiting as they approached, and Sven felt a cold sweat running down his head.

He knew it was coming. He was about to experience unspeakable horrors straight from his nightmares. But he was in for another surprise when the magi drake opened her mouth.

“It seems it is over. Your level is higher, but he outclassed you in skill. How shameful. Now that I have joined you as a tank, I will be whipping you into shape from the ground up.”

“Whaat, really?! But I thought I tried pretty hard...”

Sven stared, stunned, as the woman yelled at the boy. Were they really having a pleasant chat with the legendary magi drake? And what was this about her joining them as a tank? That sounded too good to be true. She was far more than overqualified as an escort for the ancient labyrinth. She was possibly...no, *absolutely* stronger than the labyrinth boss itself!

He screamed out mentally, then finally lost consciousness.

+ + + + + + + + + + +

Click, clack...

The sound of shoes hitting the floor echoed out loud. The hall of the Sorcerer's Guild, which had been so lively, was now left completely empty. The selection ceremony for deciding whether a substitute would be chosen was complete, and everyone had already fulfilled their duties. They'd been shocked by the sight of Sven, the combat expert, having been beaten so soundly, but since he was quite unpopular among the guild, they began chatting lightheartedly soon after. Although they shouldn't have, they began pouring drinks at the courtesy of the guild leader, and they happily cheered for the young ones with bright futures ahead of them.

In other words, everything had turned out great.

Mariabelle was popular among this group, and she was trusted not to hide any information or treasure that may be found. It was quite entertaining to see that even the ones who often acted high-and-mighty threw up their hands enthusiastically when they saw Sven eat the knockout blow.

The woman's long, azure hair swayed as she remembered the sight and smiled. She usually had a stern look on her face, but the womanly beauty hidden beneath the expression was clear to see.

She looked at her surroundings with her eyes like lakes, then walked toward the center of the hall. An aged man could be seen there, holding out a glass that hadn't been used yet. The corners of his mouth curled up to a grin, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

His deeply wrinkled mouth opened. "It appears everything turned out the way you wished."

“Thank you for your help. I’m certain the guild leader is pleased as well.”

The guild’s sub-leader let out an exasperated sigh as if to say “Who knows?” The guild leader was a difficult person and hardly showed up in public. Even the sub-leader could hardly recall having a conversation together in person. He complained that the woman was likely closer to the guild leader, being the one who controlled the flow of information.

The woman only gave him a cool expression in response. He shrugged dismissively, then looked around at the hall as well.

“It wasn’t just their abilities that got them here. I’m sure you realize this as well.”

Mariabelle’s master looked at the sub-leader wordlessly. Her eyes seemed to swallow everything from happiness to sorrow. It felt as if staring at her smile would make one vanish into nothingness.

Then her eyes narrowed with a happy smile, and she downed the contents of the glass at once.

“I have no idea what you mean. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

With that, the woman handed back the empty glass and left. The man with graying hair called out after the footsteps echoing away from him.

“I’m sure everyone was quite entertained by your rare clairvoyance spell. But it was unlike you to obscure the image just as the black-haired woman moved. So tell me, what happened in those moments?”

The words echoed as if no one had heard them, and the woman walked away without stopping, leaving the man alone in the hall.

Chapter of Magi Drake, Episode 9: Sorcerer's Guild Leader

The Sorcerer's Guild that the girl attended had a long history of uncovering the mysteries of the ancient arts to use them as a basis for modern military power.

The guild's purpose was to monopolize the hidden arts, knowledge, and sorcery, and although it seemed to have the full support of the country since olden times, that was a common misunderstanding.

More accurately, the guild was the one that developed the country itself, and it was also responsible for handling disasters caused by war.

In other words, the guild was the one doing the supporting.

This is why its security was extremely stringent.

There were all sorts of barriers against physical and magical breaches, as well as protection for sensitive information.

"That's why you won't even find insects there. Isn't it strange that barriers are even effective against bugs? But rats have nests all around, so we can never seem to get rid of them completely."

Marie sounded more cheerful than usual as she led the way.

She must've been proud to be showing me around the place where she studied, spent time, and grew up for so long.

Even more so considering its connection to the root of the country itself.

"The ceiling is higher than I expected. It looked pretty scary from outside."

"I hear it was cleaned up when some important people from a foreign country came visiting. That guard actually isn't human either... Ah, don't touch that!"

I nearly jumped when a guillotine-like blade was pointed toward me.

I thought the interesting-looking silver, gleaming armor was just an ornament, and made the mistake of trying to touch it.

I tried to convince it I was just a harmless Kazuhiho by showing both my hands, and it lowered its weapon.

As I let out a sigh of relief, I felt my ear getting pinched painfully.

“Keep your hands to yourself. Why can’t you be more composed when you’re in this world? Hmph. I thought it was embarrassing to do here, but I guess I have no choice. Here, hold on to my hand.”

I glanced at her exasperated face as she puffed her cheek, and began walking alongside her.

She was the one guiding me by my hand instead of the other way around as usual.

And so, I was seeing the Sorcerer’s Guild for the first time.

There were various buildings all around us, like facilities for lodging, reading, and conducting experiments. It had better accommodations than most colleges.

Of course, there were many areas that were off limits to visitors, and a vagrant like me never took the rigorous examinations required for entry.

Not only was I surprised when they easily let me in, but Marie was too.

“Maybe the requirements for entry got more lax before I knew it. Or maybe your face was so sleepy-looking that it made everyone around you lethargic and uncaring? Actually, that’s very likely.”

“I-I don’t think that’s it. Now that I think about it, Wridra seems pretty calm too. Have you been here before?”

I asked as I turned around, and the black-haired beauty’s lips curled into a smile.

I noticed she had a tendency to become quiet whenever there were more people around.

She always kept a certain distance from humans in general, but seemed to enjoy herself when interacting with us.

The draconian woman was mystical indeed.

We climbed the gently inclining steps and reached the top floor.

General entry was not allowed here, and there were human guards standing at the entrance this time.

Now, how to explain the situation...

I was there to explain that I was qualified to be an escort, but they let us in without any resistance, making me wonder if they even heard me out.

As the thought nagged at me, I noticed someone walking down the long hallway.

Marie's long ears perked up.

"Mariabelle. And you must be Kazuhiho. Thank you for taking care of my disciple. And the lady in the back. Please, come this way."

"Master! Will you be joining us for our meeting with the guild leader?"

Marie must have been pretty surprised, because she went running while still holding on to my hand.

The woman's serene eyes like lakes glanced down, then narrowed amusedly.

"Haha, perhaps no one will be calling you the Fairy of Ice any longer. Personally, I think this suits you much better. I must say, it's quite precious."

We heard chuckling from Wridra behind us too. Marie finally noticed she had been holding my hand the entire time, and became red up to her ears.

She turned to me, and her pale purple eyes seemed to be saying, "You *will* behave now, won't you?"

I nodded, and she released my hand.

It was my first time meeting Mariabelle's master, but I was surprised by how composed she seemed.

I was picturing a wrinkly old man in my mind.

The woman led us down the hallway and ended up at the guild leader's room soon after.

She knocked, and the door opened. The room had many bookshelves lining the walls up to the tall ceiling.

The room was designed to not let in much sunlight.

There was a heavy desk in the center, and the place looked more like a personal library.

The guild leader, who had a long, white beard and gentle eyes, was sitting at the desk.

He was one of those so-called Archmages, but he was a lot shorter than I imagined.

We seemed pretty young appearance-wise, but he was still shorter than us.

The hat he was wearing made him look like a gnome too.

Seeing us approach, the old man smiled and spoke with a somewhat high-pitched voice.

“Ah, Mariabelle. Let’s hear why you’ve chosen them to be your companions instead of finding substitutes.”

“Yes, Guild Leader. I chose these two because I trust them wholeheartedly, and they’re more capable than anyone I know. There are no suitable substitutes for them in my mind.”

The girl was standing one pace in front of us, her elven ears wavering as she spoke clearly and confidently.

The old man let out a “Hm,” then turned his beady eyes toward me.

“It appears she placed her trust in you two. But you still haven’t earned my trust. I can’t expose a talented child like her to danger so easily. I’d like to know just how skilled you are, young one.”

Marie’s ear twitched.

Even without her turning around, I could tell she was worrying about me.

I was glad I had kept “it” with me for times like these.

There were very few things in the world that could be proven with just words.

I touched my bracelet and unlocked just a portion of the viewing permissions for my stats to the public.

Then the results I had gotten at the Adventurer's Guild the other day was displayed in the air. It showed that I had earned a Rank A in close combat, which looked unfitting for a seemingly young boy.

Mariabelle was the most surprised out of all of them, and I winked at her widened purple eyes.

I had few chances to show off like this, so I was happy to take up the opportunity.

"Hm... So you are not quite as you seem. But you can find a mere Rank A just about anywhere. It doesn't quite prove you are up to the task, but...very well."

He nodded a couple times, and seemed to be halfway convinced.

Marie mouthed, "When did you get that?" from behind him, and I mouthed back, "Yesterday."

She seemed to be itching to know the details, but that would need to wait till later.

"Mariabelle is usually such a serious one, but it seems she found an interesting companion. The rumored Phantom must be a reliable ally indeed."

"...Phantom?"

The girl and I furrowed our brows at the unfamiliar name, and the old man waved his hand dismissively.

It seemed his personality was more difficult than one would think.

"So, who might this woman be?"

"A-Ah, yes. That would be Wridra, our Tank."

The old man's eyes moved over to Wridra, and Marie cut in to introduce her.

The draconian had an interesting appearance.

Her horn and tail were hidden for now, reshaped into the form of an outfit resembling a dress.

She would have drawn far too much attention walking around town otherwise.

One could tell just by touching the armor that it was incredibly rigid and durable.

It had a wide range of motion and could move with the user's will, making it fundamentally different from the equipment of this world.

The old man observed and touched her armor, deep in thought as he nodded.

Then he turned his wrinkled face toward Marie.

"Do you have any guarantee these two will not betray you?"

"I don't have any such thing, Guild Leader. But I'm absolutely sure that would never happen. When all is said and done, I'm sure I would still be able to say the same."

He watched silently as she straightened herself and replied as such.

I wanted to point out that we were the ones who found the labyrinth first, and they were the ones who were benefiting from it.

We all knew it, but no one was talking about that of course.

"Very well, I will allow it. My evaluation is now done... Why do you look so surprised?"

"N-No, it's just that... I thought you would need several days to decide."

The old man gave a muffled laugh.

"And here I thought you had planned this all out. Arilai will be starting their exploration of the labyrinth shortly. We have no choice but to send you the to labyrinth rather than waste time on the evaluation."

A look of realization hit her.

He was right. There was no merit in it for them to delay our participation.

We hadn't even thought about that, but the timing did seem almost too convenient.

"Hah, such cunningness would do you some good. In fact, your straight-laced nature is what I worry about most."

"Thank you, Guild Leader. We will be sure to uncover the ancients secrets."

“Very good, but don’t overwork yourself. The most important thing is that you return safely. And... ah, yes. Wridra, was it?”

Suddenly called out by name, Wridra turned her obsidian eyes toward the old man.

“I’m surprised to see you’re visiting our world again. These young ones must have piqued your interest quite a lot to bring you here.”

“Ha, ha, and you have aged much since our last meeting. I almost burst out laughing when I first saw your face here. You’ve shrunk both vertically and horizontally.”

Marie and I watched with our eyes wide as the two chuckled together.

Warm tea and snacks were brought out, and Wridra began telling us some surprising tales.

According to her, she and the guild leader had once been equals.

“Ha, ha, it was more like we had play dates.”

“Actually, I would say we just tended to get into trouble together. You know of Lake Oran to the south? That was created when I angered Wridra. It’s quite useful now with all the fish that can be caught there in the winter, but it was quite a lot of trouble to stifle what had happened. Half of the wrinkles on my face are because of Wridra.”

All I could do was sigh.

It was now obvious why I had been accepted so easily.

We already had his trust long ago, and he wanted us to go to the labyrinth already.

Looking into his beady eyes, I wondered if he ever had feelings for Wridra.

Even when talking to us, those eyes were always looking at her.

Mariabelle’s master, who had been silent all this time, suddenly cleared her throat.

Realization hit the guild leader, and he gestured to her with his finger.

As I wondered what was about to happen, the door opened, and our eyes

widened when we saw who it was.

“Nnh! Nnnh!”

“Nnngh?!”

There was Sven and the necromancer, both of whom were gagged and bound to chairs.

The bindings must have been reinforced with magic, seeing how they stayed completely still as they struggled.

“There are two reasons I had these fools brought here. They’ll get their punishments for attacking you on another day. First... Shaddap, I’m talking!”

He smacked Sven on the head with a staff, knocking him unconscious.

S-So strong...

The old man then reached into Sven’s chest pocket and pulled something out.

“Rank A’s and above must take these from opponents they’ve defeated in a duel. Which means this now belongs to you.”

He tossed the object toward me, and it was a ranking certificate.

My eyes widened as I saw the dully gleaming ornament in my hand.

That must be why he said I was “a mere Rank A” but approved me anyway.

His beady eyes became hidden under his wrinkles, but it seemed like he had just smiled at me.

“As for the second thing, it’s just as I said earlier. Do you remember when I mentioned the incident with the lake? I will do the same thing to them.”

What did he mean by that? I watched, confused, and his eyes turned toward Wridra.

Maybe I was imagining it, but he seemed to be a little upset.

“Hmph, you knew this would happen and left them alone, didn’t you? Not only do we control the flow of information, but we are adept at erasing information that has been leaked as well. You should have simply turned them into ashes on the spot. We would turn a blind eye if you decide to devour them

from the top down right now.”

“Nnnnnngh!!!”

I felt a bit of pity for the necromancer, who was violently shaking their head sideways.

But Wridra only laughed amusedly.

“Ha, ha, that may fill my stomach, but unfortunately, my palate has become rather refined after our last trip. Whether you decide to brainwash them or punish them by other means is up to you.”

“Yes, if we can resolve this without anyone getting eaten, that would be for the best. Then I will handle this on my end. And I will leave the ancient labyrinth to you three. Do your best.”

He walked over with his short legs, then offered a wrinkly hand.

We each shook his hand, took a bunch of their snacks, and he walked us outside.

Marie and I bowed, and the dragon waved her hand.

It was a quick meeting and goodbye, but the old man was smiling happily as we left.

And so, we had gotten permission to explore the labyrinth without incident.

I watched the sky absentmindedly as we walked through the grounds.

“That was pretty surprising, but I’m glad we were able to get approval. I just didn’t think it would go so smoothly.”

“I’m the one who was surprised. I had no idea you secretly took a ranking exam. You’d best be prepared for a pinching later.”

She made a pinching gesture with her fingers, and I broke into a cold sweat.

Well, it didn’t actually hurt when she pinches me, but... being in such close proximity to her made my heart race.

Now, we did what we came here to do, so it was time to return to Arilai.

I proposed the idea to the girls, and they nodded in agreement right away.

Arilai, the land of infernal heat...

All things there were duty bound to be scorched by the sun, and even simply breathing was painful during the day.

The creatures living there have fundamentally rebuilt how they operate just to survive.

Such was the life there, but our time was spent there in comfort.

Marie controlled water spirits to disperse mist all around us, which evaporated, releasing heat.

She was utilizing vaporization to cool the temperature, a technique she had learned just the other day.

We were able to use my long-distance travel skill, Trayn, the Journey's Guide, to transport ourselves to a monument of travel.

There happened to be a well near us, so we went ahead and made use of the water.

"Ah, I'm so glad I learned how to do this. Now we can walk around in comfort."

"Y-Yeah, but it doesn't really feel like a desert anymore... Ah! I mean, it's really nice! You're incredible, Marie!"

I hurriedly changed my mind mid-sentence when Marie stopped vaporizing water only around me.

My discomfort increased dramatically, and the girl turned away and put her nose in the air.

Yup, that meant my only available option was to apologize.

As I enjoyed the smell of water, a large shadow suddenly loomed around us.

I looked up to find Wridra flapping her wings once as she descended nearby.

Her wings flapped several more times to adjust her falling speed, sending debris into the air.

Instead of riding there with us using Trayn, the Journey's Guide, she had transformed her armor into the shape of wings and flown by herself. It only

took her about 30 minutes to arrive, which was honestly surprising.

“Hey there. You got here quicker than I thought. Sorry my skill has such a strict weight limit.”

Her dragon wings made heavy metallic noises as they reshaped themselves into armor.

I wasn’t really into transforming mechs, but seeing it in person made me realize how cool it looked.

“Either way, I am unable to enter the domain of a god. Since I am a being similar to them myself, they will not allow me to enter.”

Huh, I didn’t know that was a thing.

Maybe the gods just don’t get along?

If she’s unable to accompany us even without her equipment, we had no choice but to go separately when traveling large distances, despite the inconvenience.

“We’re not too far from the labyrinth, so why don’t we visit Mewi before we go?”

“Sounds good. Oh, Mewi is a Neko tribesman. He can refine magic stones, so we’ll probably be seeing him more often from now on.”

I told Wridra as such, and she seemed to give it some thought.

“...I suppose you two are blessed with such meetings. Let us go then.”

What did she mean by that?

I was about to find out the answer to that question soon enough.

Our comfortable travels continued all the way to Arilai.

Creak...

The door opened, and a brightly-lit room awaited us beyond.

There were several stones laid out on the table, which were like additional magic stones taken from the labyrinth.

The Neko held them one by one with his furry paws, then turned toward the

visitors.

His round, blue eyes blinked several times.

“Welcome back, mew!”

He spoke in his freshly-learned universal language...with the addition of the cat-like speech as per Marie’s orders.

I thought it just sounded weird, but I wasn’t about to argue with Marie’s decision.

“My, what a hard working little cat you are. Come over here.”

Despite being bipedal, Mewi was basically a cat. He rushed over to the elf and leaped into the air.

He looked like a stuffed doll as he was held in her arms with his arms still outstretched.

“So warm! You smell just like the sun. I’m going to rub the back of your head now.”

Ah, his face looks ridiculous...

Marie the cat lover rubbed the Neko’s head until he was drooling with happiness.

Purrr, purrr.

I was going to ask about any changes that may have occurred to the labyrinth, but I gave up when I heard him purring like crazy.

I knew Marie loved cats, but I wished she would ease up on him.

But this moment of happiness was cut short when the black-haired woman stepped inside.

“Sorry to disturb you. Mewi, was it? I suppose this is our first time meeting face to face.”

The Neko’s eyes went round as he saw Wridra, and he slipped out from the elf girl’s arms.

Then he quickly scampered across the stone-paved floor.

Ah... He climbed all the way up a beam. He's a Neko alright.

"Sh-Sh-She smells like a dragon!"

"Don't worry, Wridra is nice. She won't hurt you."

"Ha, ha, to think someone would consider me nice. In fact, I would like to see anyone who could still show malice after seeing you two."

I don't know, Wridra could be a bit boisterous, but I thought she was a nice lady.

Though she did burn me to death when I first met her.

It seemed Mewi noticed the dragon's presence.

We had given him the dragon blood and scale, so it wasn't surprising that he knew the smell.

As I thought about this, the black-haired woman stood next to me and called out toward the beams.

"If you do not come down from there in five seconds, you will not be getting any of Kazuhiho's lunch."

Fwoosh... Plop.

He leapt down and landed gracefully, and Marie and I clapped.

And so, we decided to have some lunch.

"I will now tell you about the Neko tribe," the dragon said, and Mewi put down his fork.

Since he had no companions of his own kind, Mewi must have wondered about his ancestors' past and why they could refine magic stones.

Marie and I were interested too, so we listened quietly while eating some yakisoba.

Now that the dragon had gotten everyone's attention, she put a hand on her chin and stared into the Neko's eyes.

"Since ancient times, the Neko were known as a tribe that banished evil. They banished evil and protected the people in the past. But now, their numbers

have diminished dramatically.”

Since Mewi couldn’t speak the universal language too well yet, the dragon was speaking in the halfbeast language while I translated for Marie.

The Neko watched the dragon with eyes like clear glass, completely unmoving.

“‘Why?’, you may be asking yourself. Some say it is because a malicious group had been sent in from a foreign country. But the truth is all buried in the sand by now.”

Wridra looked around at each of us, then returned her attention to Mewi.

“There were magic stones resting within the Ujah Peak Ruins. But the heavens would not leave them be. This is because the magic stones belonged to the demons, and were thought to be unneeded in this world. The Neko tribe were born with the power to cleanse them, and were eventually exterminated by those with malicious intentions.”

With that, Wridra held the dragon blood in her hand.

It was a rock that had absorbed the Magi Drake’s blood, and had a blue hue to it.

“And so, the Neko tribe had the power to banish evil, with a handful of them being able to change their nature. Here, I shall give you permission to process my dragon blood.”

“W-Well, I still only know how to refine things...”

“No need to worry, you will only be changing the rock into the form you desire. Try it. It should be a simple task, since the stone has a taken a liking to you.”

She handed the dragon blood to Mewi.

The stone seemed to be emitting a faint light, blinking at a pace similar to a heartbeat.

Then, we witnessed a magic item being created for the first time.

I sat on the short set of stairs in the workshop, watching the ceremony being

performed by the dragon and cat.

It was a bizarre sight, and the stone known as dragon blood changed shape before my eyes.

Wridra described it as changing into the form he desires, and that was exactly what it seemed like.

It wasn't as if he was forging metal, but it transformed as if it was assuming its true form.

Just like with Marie's ear covers from the other day, the stone made a fizzing sound and emitted a pale phosphorescence as it changed shape.

"How strange. It's almost like glassworking."

"Yeah, it's similar, but... so much more complicated."

Marie whispered into my ear.

We were trying not to distract Mewi as he focused on his task, but it tickled as she whispered with her cupped hands around my ear.

Fibrous textures and stick-shaped objects transformed into finer details.

The cat stroked it with his hand while the dragon assisted him.

He spun the shaft around, shaping it into a more intricate design.

"Remember this, Mewi. You are hearing the stone's voice and taking it toward the form it was meant to be. But you will be the one to determine its form, and guide the stone toward it."

"Y-Yes...!"

The final phosphorescence settled into the object, leaving a single...

"Ah! A magic staff?!"

Marie stood up and walked over to the magic item that had just been created.

The material was originally black, but it had become an artistic staff that appeared to be made with silverwork.

"Ha, ha, a gift for the elf who displayed courage at the hot springs. I inscribe the name of Mariabelle, giving new breath to this world."

She wrote Mariabelle’s name on the staff, then the girl reached out with her hand.

Light suddenly sparked like static as she touched it.

Another surprising thing happened in the same moment.

As soon as she touched the staff, her bracelet made a beeping noise.

“A limited secondary skill has been unlocked. Please select a skill.”

“Wizard’s Guidance will be active while in possession of the staff.”

Marie and I widened our eyes at the announcement.



I was able to open it because we had shared our status info, but...an additional secondary skill?

Since there were “primary skills,” many had wondered if there were secondary skills as well.

That question was finally answered.

“I see, so primary skills are ones you obtain on your own, and secondary skills are obtained with assistance. No wonder I’ve only heard rumors.”

Wridra nodded magnanimously in response, which told me I was right.

Who would have thought a magic item born from a Magi Drake could even get a skill imbued to it...

Wridra looked at me with mischievous eyes as I was reeling from the surprise.

“Hm, it is too early to give you one. The sword I gave you previously should suffice. I will train you first. Your skill level for your weapon is too low compared to your job level.”

With that, the black-haired beauty grinned.

I realized I was a man after all.

The thought of knowing I had a long way to go and that a dragon would be guiding me set a burning flame in my heart.

“I’m looking forward to it. You’re my superior in the dream world after all.”

“Ha, ha, I cannot wait. A dragon raising a human child is unheard of. Though I will not be able to fix that sleepy face of yours.”

Oh, didn’t think so.

But I’ve given up on that a long time ago anyway.

More importantly, I couldn’t help but wonder about Marie’s new skill.

Having finished eating my yakisoba, I decided to check out this so-called secondary skill, which was pretty much an urban legend, along with Ms. Elf.

＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋ ＋

Evil.

They existed everywhere, and only differed in the scope of how much harm they cause.

Frankly speaking, “evil” is a being that intentionally causes harm to others.

And those who lurk in the labyrinth could be said to be beings that cause local harm.

What’s more, they should be considered a drain on the country’s resources.

For example, there was a time when a labyrinth’s preliminary search party happened to run into them.

They cunningly pursued the party, and all they had to do was give them a little push to drastically alter their fate.

It was simple. They slipped by the search party once they entered a wide open space and messed with the door a bit.

The door was opened by turning the knob.

But if they cut off the knob and pour some oil on it, it would never open again.

In the darkness, the search party found a giant looming over them with a dinosaur-like head, slowly turning toward them.

They stood dumbfounded, at a complete loss for what to do.

Fear and panic set in eventually, their cries echoing all around them.

Oh, and one more thing.

Those who were watching the scene were laughing hysterically.

The sound of their nails scratching desperately at the door was horrible to hear.

Most people in this situation would pray to their gods, but they weren’t able to utter even a word of prayer.

Meanwhile, a report was received at the castle.

The report stated that they had lost contact with the party that had gone to the labyrinth for preliminary exploration. The man supervising the exploration

of the labyrinth stood up with a serious expression.

“Could this be the work of an agent from a foreign country?”

“We can’t be sure yet, but... if so, I’d like to capture them alive. They’d prove to be quite useful.”

The old man next to him stroked his beard and grinned wryly.

His expression was joyous indeed.

The old man, who was a Grand Wizard, seemed to be the type who could enjoy such a situation.

Conversely, the supervisor stood up with a loathsome expression.

With his sword at his waist, he left the room in his light attire.

The old man also rose and followed him.

“Hmph, the unscrupulous kind tends to get involved when unprecedented incidents occur.”

“It’s not surprising considering how valuable the treasure is. Now, it will soon begin... The excavation involving the entire country.”

That day, the exploration began a day earlier than planned.

The pride of Arilai, 140 elite soldiers.

Their numbers were tenfold in total with their support troops, and they headed down the west road.

The party heading toward the infernal ruins of Ujah Peak included two children and a beautiful woman wearing strange armor.

Chapter of Magi Drake END

Afterword

Hello, this is Makishima.

This is the prologue I wrote after completing volume two.

This may have been mentioned in this volume, but Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! is planning to be released as a manga.

Aonoesu, who has many titles under his belt, is the one who's in charge of the manga version.

I love reading manga myself, and seeing Mariabelle in comic form was very refreshing. I couldn't help but say, "She's so cute..." in front of the ticket gate at a public station.

This may be obvious, but there was an illustration of Marie on every page, and it was wonderful seeing pictures of her being happy and surprised and everything in between.

The artist's drawings are just that expressive and lovely.

I'm sure you'd understand if you read it, but there's a charm to it that's a little different from the light novel version.

I'd be thrilled if you visit the Comic Fire site and see for yourself.

Now, volume two is out thanks to all of the readers.

This is a happy announcement indeed, but I'm grateful to say volume three is scheduled to release as well.

To everyone who picked up a copy, and Hobby Japan, which published not only additional volumes but a manga version as well, I can't express my gratitude enough.

I'll continue to write many stories about the half-fairy elf, Mariabelle, and her adventures in Japan and the dream world.

Oh, and I've received a comment from one of my readers who read the afterword from the last volume saying they "vomited sugar."

This may be an unfamiliar term, but it apparently means "they heard a story

so sweet that it felt like sugar would come out of their mouth.”

As a progression of this saying, it can also be referred to as “vomiting sand.”

This is getting off topic, but that’s okay.

There are various interesting compliments for writers and manga artists like this, such as calling them “precious.”

I think these direct expressions of emotion are quite entertaining. If you’re interested in such things, please look them up on the internet.

Back to the main topic.

In the previous afterword, I wrote words of deep gratitude and love toward my very supportive wife.

I’ve been planning on repaying her kindness in other forms (like food and going on trips together), but I wanted to express my feelings first.

But she hadn’t commented on it even after a few days passed, and even a month later, and a month after that. Even when the new volume and comics were in the works, she hadn’t read my afterword.

After looking into it, I realized what the reason was.

It was my own fault. Since she helped me proofread the first volume, there was no need for her to read it anymore.

It all made sense.

But I’m not stupid.

I had a plan.

In order to have her read the afterword, I took the slightly sneaky approach of proofreading myself, and built up her anticipation by showing her Yappen’s illustrations and Aonoesu’s comic version.

It was too perfect.

Such a splendidly brilliant plan that I made myself dizzy, I must say.

And so, with the release of volume two, it’s time for my revenge match.

I’m sure it will work out, but I hope my feelings of gratitude will reach her this

time.

In the next volume, the story will enter the ancient labyrinth deep beneath the ruins of Ujah Peak.

Many of the protagonist’s colleagues will gather there to make the adventure even more lively.

There may even be a dark elf woman in there.

Please look forward to the adventures to come.





Wridra
(Fragment of the Arkdragon)

Attribute

Magician
(Creation, Talent, Fruitless Efforts, Bewilderment)

Class/Level

Magical Dragon / LV177

Primary Skills (Named)

Creation
Has the right of giving life to a being of magic.

Reverse
The ability to elicit a reverse physical or magical phenomenon.

Solitude
Possesses a domain in the dream world which belongs only to her. Capable of removing or applying limitations or causing others to perish within this domain.
Unlocked this ability upon entering the realm of the other.
Requires a massive amount of magic energy, so the arkdragon's main body must be used to activate.
*The arkdragon can switch skills with her main body, and is thought to have many others in store.

Secondary Skills

Auto Defense LV 177
Shock Absorption LV 177
Dragon Eyes LV 177
Mind Boost LV 177
Sonic Flight LV 177
...Unable to list the rest due to interception.



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 3 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 2

by Makishima Suzuki

Translated by Hiroya Watanabe

Edited by Kris Swanson

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 Makishima Suzuki

Illustrations Copyright © 2018 Yappen

Cover illustration by Yappen

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan

This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo

English translation © 2019 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: July 2019


Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
2
Makishima Suzuki
ill. Yappen