
Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf!
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"MY, HOW CUTE. YOU'RE A FROG, AREN'T YOU?"
The frog stopped making its throat bubble when Mariabelle whispered to it, then looked up at the girl with its black eyes. It cocked its head curiously, perhaps because it recognized the adorable girl as a half-fairy elf.


BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS...
ADORN THE PARTY.


There, she rested. A golden crown upon her head, and her body adorned in a beautiful grass-colored dress. Her appearance was befitting of a queen.
Before me was a rich forest. There were animals scattered all around, and I watched a deer shake its head after taking a drink from a stream. Mountains lined the horizon, and a rainbow hung over a waterfall in the distance. After the deer finished taking its drink, it stood staring at that sight.

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# Chapter of Slavery: Prologue

He exhaled, his breath coming out in a white puff and dissipating. They had only descended one level, but the temperature in the ancient labyrinth had dropped dramatically.

The light of his torch flickered in the wind, the fire struggling to stay ablaze. He could see the labyrinth's cold interior within the pocket of light it provided, but everything beyond its range was only complete darkness. The scenery remained unchanged no matter how much he walked, and he began to feel as if he hadn't moved forward at all.

Suddenly, it felt as though he was the only one there.

His companions were silently walking beside him, but he couldn't feel their warmth or sense their presence at all. He squeezed himself, pushing back the inexplicable forlornness that threatened to overwhelm him.

"So this is the second floor, huh? Sheesh, talk about a depressing place," he said out loud in an attempt to brush off the loneliness.

What could have been lurking along this dark path? There was a constant feeling that someone was watching, along with a looming sense of dread. No matter where he went, how far he walked, or whether he was sleeping or awake, they were always there. He felt as if he had become a child afraid of the dark again and wished he could turn back and leave this place. He wanted to relax in front of a fireplace with a strong drink and sleep until the morning. These thoughts had been whirling around in his head.

Due to his fear, the man failed to realize a simple detail. His companions should have been following right behind him, so why were they completely silent?

The pace of his walk gradually slowed. His heart drummed in his chest, his breathing growing shallow. And yet, he struggled to turn

around, and his feet eventually stopped walking completely.

Was something waiting just behind him? He felt as if something was watching but couldn't bring himself to turn around. He couldn't take another step forward, as his companions became more distant, and the area grew quieter still.

No, he couldn't turn around.

The big finger extending silently toward him was so pale it was nearly translucent, and he would have surely screamed if he had looked. A light veil fluttered around the being, but it made no noise and couldn't be sensed. Its enshrouded body was clear, as if it was made completely of ice.

The finger loomed toward the man from behind... It seemed the floor master intended to take his soul back to its nest.

Just then, the light of the torch that had been flickering in the wind finally went out. The area went pitch black, and only nervous, repeated breathing could be heard. Unable to turn to face the presence of death creeping up from behind, he let out a final sigh, and the silence fell completely.

The raid on the second floor was proceeding with great difficulty. The floor master, Shirley, had been appearing out of nowhere to impede their progress.

Still, with Gaston's leadership, Team Ruby had successfully defeated Shirley once, but then came a report that the floor master had appeared in a completely different area at the same time. Since then, the raid parties hadn't been able to find an effective method to take on that floor, and they had been continuing a fight with no foreseeable end.

In the depths of the dark labyrinth...

The floor master drifted around like mist, phasing through the stone floors and rooms.

Its presence was as cold as ice, and one's soul would surely be

ripped out of their body with just a touch of its finger.

The raid team's countermeasure for an encounter with the floor master was for soldiers to hide behind a wall and cover their eyes and mouths, curling up tight and not making a sound. Therefore, raids on the second floor were soundless, voiceless, and filled with a frigid atmosphere.

A secret grave had appeared at the floor master's destination.

The sight seemed unfit for such a horrifying monster. Shirley softly stroked a chair with flowers carved into it, and just for that moment, the creature's ethereal form took a solid shape. Its side profile could be seen clearly for that brief moment, then changed into icy, inorganic bones.

As the floor master watched, a stone coffin slowly opened with a grinding noise. There seemed to be humidity in this room only, as the coffin was caked with moss, and there was a moldy scent in the air. Gnarled fingers peeked out from the opening, followed by a terrifying face with missing lips. The monster absorbed the freshly harvested soul, and skin began coating its bones with a crackling sound.

Some time later, the raid parties would be naming this terrible creature… Reaper.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 1: Land of Dreams and Magic The rain fell lightly, running down the plastic umbrella and falling to the ground.

June officially marked the rainy season, and rain had been falling incessantly in Tokyo's Koto Ward.

It had been getting more humid by the day, with the temperature-humidity index rising consistently. But this didn't seem to concern the girl who was staring at the hydrangeas much.

Her long-sleeve shirt and navy skirt made her seem somewhat like a college student. Judging by her height and facial features, she seemed to be about fifteen. However, her non-Japanese appearance made it rather hard to tell her actual age.

Her skin was pale, and her silky, waist-length hair was whiter than the vast rain clouds in the skies above. These features, combined with her big amethyst eyes, gave her a fantastical impression that made even random passersby suspect she was a fairy. Here in Koto Ward... or rather, in Japan, she somewhat stood out. But the look on her face made it seem that she was as unconcerned with the curious stares from strangers as she was of the rain.

She leaned in to look at the flower bed with interest.

Before her were rows of hydrangeas with their vivid, joyful colors. Some strains were a refreshing blue while others were a classy purple, and some of them had a mix of colors despite being the same strain. This seemed to intrigue Mariabelle, and she continued to stare with fascination.

Suddenly, something else caught her attention.

A snail inching forward, then a frog that she noticed was right

next to her feet. The green frog seemed to be taking shelter from the rain, and it remained unmoving as it inflated its vocal sac.

"My, how cute. You're a frog, aren't you?" The frog stopped making its throat bubble when Mariabelle whispered to it, then looked up at the girl with its black eyes. It cocked its head curiously, perhaps because it recognized the adorable girl as a half-fairy elf. Although she lived in Tokyo, she was a bit different from the average human.

She crouched down, locking eyes with the frog. This seemed to be their greeting method, and when she extended her finger, the frog hopped up onto it. It waddled forward, then looked up at the girl again with its beady eyes.

Just then, a shadow loomed over Mariabelle.

The girl and frog both looked up to find a young man standing there. He had black hair and black eyes, and he gave a rather drowsy impression.

"Hey there, Marie. Made a new friend?" His voice was as soft as his facial features. The girl nodded in response.

The young man leaned in as Marie showed him her new friend, and the black cat that was at his feet meowed.

Perhaps this was a strange introduction, but the black cat was the Arkdragon… well, the Arkdragon's familiar, and the young man had the rare ability to travel between dreams and reality. His name was Kazuhiro Kitase, and he worked for a living here in Tokyo. The reason he had gained the ability to visit the dream world was still unknown to the two of them.

"Yes, we just became friends a minute ago. But I don't think we can bring him home."

"Yeah, his home is right here. He's a creature that loves the rain." The girl responded with a *"Huh."*

The frog was inflating its vocal sac again and seemed to be

enjoying the rain, just as Kazuhiro had explained. When Mariabelle pointed toward the spot where she had found the frog, it hopped back toward its home.

These two had been living under the same roof for two months now. Since they were together even in their dreams, they had been spending effectively twice as much time in each other's company than normal.

In a manner that was rather fitting for his sleepy-looking face, Kazuhiro had first met Marie in the dream world. From his perspective, he "thought it was a dream, but it turned out to be real," and the elf girl had been living there all her life.

He and Marie had lost their lives to the black cat, or rather its master, the Arkdragon, and then they woke up together in this world. That was how Kazuhiro had realized his dreams were actually a very real, separate world.

But the situation didn't end up progressing into something grand, and they primarily just spent the majority of their time in leisure, enjoying each other's worlds.

If they wanted to, they could have used their advantage over others to rise up in society, but they were satisfied with their current lives, so they opted not to. Additionally, the distance between them had been closing with each passing day. So much so that the elf secretly thought they would eventually end up stacked right on top of each other.

Then, a bag from the library appeared in front of the girl. It was the sleepy-looking young man who held it in his hand.

"Let's go home for some reading."

"Yes, let's. I'm getting used to the letters, so I will read to you today." The girl's face softened into a natural smile. It was an unconscious reaction to the thought of having some of the quality tea they had brought back from the dream world while listening to the rain and reading.

When she reached out, his hand was there to squeeze back, their fingers naturally intertwining with each other. The spots between her fingers felt sensitive as they were touched, and a ticklish sensation ran up her waist. It occurred to her that the reason why she didn't feel anxiety in either the so-called real world or the dream world was because it was immediately overshadowed by the fun she was having whenever he was around.

"Let's go, Kazuhiro-san." With that, they began to walk, the cat roaming around as if trying to figure out which one's umbrella would keep it out of the rain more effectively, eventually settling on the spot right between the two.

In the rainy season, it would rain for a long, long time, but the elf thought to herself that she didn't find the weather as unappealing as people made it out to be.

They would likely spend the entire day together again.

And after whatever activities they entertained themselves with, they would challenge the ancient labyrinth, where screams echoed within.

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The elevator door opened, and the black cat exited first. She left wet paw prints in her wake, then turned around to face us in front of our room's door. The cat blinked her big eyes and meowed cutely, as if asking us to open it.

"One second, Wridra. I need to wipe your feet first." With that, I opened the door. As the cat waited patiently, Mariabelle said, "Excuse me," and slipped past my arm. Then, I watched her as the sound of a splashing fish emerged from her fingertip.

As made evident by the ultramarine fish swimming through the air, Marie was a spirit sorceress. Her powers may not have been all that rare in the dream world, but it was a different story when it came to using such powers in Japan. Despite this, Marie stood there in the dim, unlit main entrance as if this was nothing out of the

ordinary.

“I’m having Undine absorb the pent-up moisture in the air. And this is a gift from a different spirit.” With that, she breathed onto her fingertip, and the room became filled with an elegant, flowery scent. It smelled rather familiar, and after thinking about it for a moment, I finally opened my mouth.

“Oh, it must be the spirit of cherry blossoms. I didn’t know they were still around,” I said as I wiped the cat’s feet. Marie removed her shoes and turned around. Her satisfied expression made it clear she was happy about being able to control spirits even in Japan. Her abilities had been improving by the day, and she may have been able to control them here just as well as she could in the dream world.

“That’s right. I made friends with many of them, so I think they’ll be around for some time longer.”

“The scenery in Aomori was pretty incredible. I didn’t think we’d be able to enjoy it here, too. I don’t think we’ll need to buy any expensive fragrances from now on.” The girl cocked her head curiously, and I explained that fragrances here were condensed aromas from things like flowers. The black cat hopped onto the flooring and meowed without turning around, as if to thank me for wiping her paws. Anyway, we were able to enjoy books or movies without the unpleasant humidity, thanks to the elf’s powers.

“Oh, I’ll prepare some tea. I think some cookies would go well with that one, but would it be bad manners to eat while reading?” I laughed lightly as I entered the room, then placed the library book down and answered her.

“It should be fine as long as you don’t drop crumbs everywhere. Just be very careful. Kaoruko’s the receptionist at the library, remember? She might be really scary when she’s mad.”

“Of course. Books are very rare and precious, after all. Normally, lending them to others would be very unusual and not allowed.

Though, a sleepy-face like you probably wouldn't understand." What did my face have to do with it? I thought about responding as such, but my protests likely wouldn't have reached her long ears. I actually liked how she currently looked, without her hat and with those ears exposed. It was almost like a fantasy world had appeared in my room... or maybe that was a bit dramatic.

She turned on the stove with practiced hands, her little butt pointed toward me. She had gotten more accustomed to the kitchen ever since we started cooking together.

When I looked outside, the rain was still coming down, beads of water rolling down the window. It wasn't that I hated the rain, but it became sort of tiring having the same weather every day.

I sat down on a chair and took a book in my hand, but as I was flipping through the pages, the cat leaped up from below. Our eyes met, and she meowed as if to say the book was in the way, demanding I clear room for a sleeping spot.

I didn't know very much about familiars, but by the looks of it, she looked like just an ordinary cat, and she seemed to be getting adjusted to luxury, since she now refused to lay on the cold floor. As I wondered to myself if all familiars were like this, the cat stepped in place several times on my pants, then curled up while purring loudly. Unable to stand up or move now, I placed the book back on the table without reading a single page. Though I had lost my ability to move freely, I no longer needed to worry about the cold of the rainy season.

Marie walked over with teacups in hand, then stared at the cat and made a remark.

"Now that I think about it, Wridra hasn't joined us in a while. I wonder how long it will be until things settle down with her children." The cat looked up sleepily, then meowed repeatedly.

"Four more days? Okay. Then we should rejoin the raid on the second floor once you get back." The cat responded with a drawn

out meow of affirmation.

It had been a while since Wridra joined our party. We were told this was an important time for her whelps, and she was doing some ritual to ensure their stability. When she tried explaining what raising dragon whelps entailed, she started going off about things like “transferring the dragon core” and “giving form to nebulous beings,” which I had a hard time understanding. I reached for the cup and nodded.

“I guess it’s like maternity leave. We’ll be fine; take all the time you need.” The cat closed its eyes sleepily and meowed softly.

And so, we’d been rather casual with our attitude toward the labyrinth. We spent our time in the dream world reading or going on a stroll, and we only visited areas that were completely safe. Without our powerful tank, Wridra, I wasn’t certain that I would be able to keep Marie safe. And so, we’d been taking it easy in the dream world, too, but once Wridra returned on Thursday, we would likely be taking on the second floor together.

The rainy season was a great time for reading, but I had to push the books out of the way so the cat could have a sleeping spot. With nothing to do now, I called out to Marie as she moved to sit down in a chair.

“Would you like to watch a movie with subtitles to help you with reading practice, Marie?”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Then, I’ll read to you later tonight instead. I’ll put you right to sleep after, so look forward to it.” Huh, I didn’t think I’d ever be put to sleep by an elf. I did wonder if we would be able to go to the dream world together if I fell asleep first, though. Either way, I had a sneaking suspicion that Marie would be falling asleep before me.

Well, the cat was *already* asleep, eyes narrowed and its body completely unmoving. I debated on what to do for a minute, then scooped the cat up in my arms and stood up.

The rain continued to come down softly on the other side of the window. According to the weather report, it wouldn't stop for quite a long while. The air was chilly and made me want some sort of warmth on my skin.

It was my day off, so I figured it should have been fine to let myself be more lax than usual. And so, I picked up the TV. The nice thing about LCD TVs was that they were lightweight, and I easily picked it up from the shelf separating the table and bedroom.

I tossed some cushions and brought over a blanket, and my preparation for a weekend of relaxation was complete. Undine the water spirit swam around and regulated the humidity, which was a comfort only we could prepare.

"Come on over, Wridra." Seeing the cat refuse to budge, Marie pursed her lips, then picked it up and sat down next to me. She scooted her small butt between my legs and leaned back against me as if it was completely natural. I was glad she seemed to rely on me, but this just meant I served as an adequate backrest. Still, I could feel her warmth with her back pressed against me, and I was enjoying the front row seat where I could see her long ears twitching happily. I didn't dare say that out loud, though.

The elf girl turned around and looked at me expectantly, which was the signal to begin. I took the remote in my hand, and the story that was unfamiliar to her began to play.

A thick book appeared on screen and opened up, as if to indicate this was a story from a long, long time ago.

This presentation piqued Marie's interest as a huge fan of picture books, and her lush lips curled up into a happy smile.

The sunlight peering in through the window was faint in the rainy season, but as the movie started, the presence of the rain seemed to fade away. This was how stories were meant to be. They would draw you in, making you forget about everything else, even if that story had a tragic beginning.

There once was a man who was born into a privileged bloodline, and he was one day struck down in a twist of fate. A curse had fallen upon him, changing his appearance to that of a hideous monster to match his violent behavior.

As the prologue ended and the screen faded to black, I heard the crunch of Marie biting into a cookie.

When the scene changed, she was in for a surprise. Not just the vivid color of the animation, but the expressive, lively people and animals and their emotions all represented in a song. The girl and the cat hadn't seen such a display before, and their eyes were like saucers as they stared.

"This is what you call a musical movie. Songs are even better at conveying emotions than just words. They're pretty common overseas."

"I'm surprised. It's so different from Japanese anime. They sing with such beautiful voices, and I can't tell what they're saying, but they seem to be having fun." Come to think of it, I found it odd that she thought it was that different, but at the same time, I knew what she meant. It was common knowledge that the culture and techniques of animation had originally come from overseas, yet Japan's animation had a distinct character to it, and its style could be greatly affected by whoever was directing it.

"Maybe the difference comes from the strong influence of manga culture. The presentation is just so different... Oh, manga might be perfect for your reading studies, Marie." Marie tilted her head at the unfamiliar term, and I thought to myself that there was a possibility I might have been leading her directly into otaku culture. The curiosity in her pretty eyes made me worry even more, but the movie continued to play.

There was one detail about this story that drew Marie's attention in particular. The beautiful heroine of the movie absolutely loved to read. Just like Mariabelle, the elf who lived in Japan.

Her pale purple eyes stared at the girl on the screen with great interest and glared at the villagers who made fun of her for her love of books.

“I hate people who try to prevent others from learning. They must be jealous of others becoming smarter than them. Why don’t they just try to learn themselves?”

“These people are busy living their day-to-day lives. I think there are a lot of countries where people can’t make the time to learn how to read and write.”

“I disagree; intellect is very important. You can’t become a fine adult without learning all sorts of things. Do you know anyone who didn’t study at all that turned out well?” I was taken aback. She did have a point. But to be honest, I didn’t want to study anymore, and I just wanted to enjoy movies or reading on my time off. I thought Marie was the same? She seemed to notice the look on my face and blinked her big eyes.

“Oh, I’m fine on that end. I’ve been keeping up my studies on Japanese characters. But you… You’ve been totally relaxing, and you’re even munching on a cookie.” She moved a cookie toward my mouth as if telling me to open wide, and I had to give in. I parted my lips and allowed her to put the cookie in my mouth, and I enjoyed its buttery fragrance and crispy texture as I accepted the label of a slob.



It seemed a crumb was left on my lip. She wiped it with her thumb and smiled at me, then turned back toward the movie.

Boy, that actually got to me. I'd never had a girl wipe my mouth with her soft, smooth thumb like that, and it felt like my body was growing warm.

I didn't notice at the time, but her face was supposedly bright red after she had turned away from me, too. She silently mouthed, "What did I just do?" to herself and squeezed her thumb. Maybe it was thanks to this that I was able to stay warm despite the weather.

Now, the aforementioned woman ended up meeting the monster, and the story finally moved along. But since the monster had been alone for so long, his arrogant attitude hadn't changed one bit. Of course, he ended up being aggressive toward the heroine as well. Marie was quite critical of his behavior.

"What is with him? Such an unpleasant man. Doesn't he know how to be kind to a lady?" It seemed she already disliked the monstrous fellow. Not just because of his appearance, but because she couldn't stand his combative demeanor. And yet, having an ugly side made him seem more human. So despite the fact that the characters were a collection of drawings, they seemed to be living, breathing beings.

Spending time with a complete stranger was like reading through a brand new book. As the monster grew to know the heroine, he began to reveal more of the side of himself that he usually kept hidden. It was nothing special. Getting entranced by how lovely someone's surprised or laughing expression looked was a normal experience that anyone could relate to.

It wasn't just the heroine who didn't know the monster had such sides to him. Even he himself didn't believe he had human emotions inside him.

As the story progressed and they overcame many hurdles, he began showing a new expression altogether. Who could be cursed to

be so unsightly and laugh so genuinely? In fact, even before his curse, no one had been so close to him or spoken to him like this. Before he knew it, his attitude toward the girl had changed, and he held her hand protectively. There was a definite tender love for a woman in his kind touch.

"I can't believe such a monster seems cute to me now," Marie said, her initial impression having been completely changed. He had seemed like a big, hideous monster at first, but now he gave the impression of a lovable animal. His sharp fangs now seemed charming, and she wanted to feel his fluffy fur with her hands.

The girl and the cat were both leaning forward with great interest, cheering on the two main characters of the movie. Watching such an unusual pair grow closer by the day was like watching a flower grow over time.

Though, it would have been nice if it was all sunshine and rainbows...

The girl and cat knew from experience that stories came with hills and valleys. Ups and downs gave depth to stories, and the unsettling music was enough to scare Marie as trouble arrived.

"Wh-What's with that man?! He's trying to get in the way of their love! This is why I hate cocky men who only care about training their body. He even brought a gun! Does he have no pride?" This title was a musical, and the overall mood had been cheery. That made the change in the tone all the more apparent, and the man creeping up to kill the monster seemed cruel indeed. Marie looked surprisingly fearful, her hands gripping her blanket tightly.

Yet, she couldn't look away out of her desire to see how it would all end. After all that time watching over them, she wanted them to be happy. Just as she wanted to see scary fairy tales through to the end even late at night, she had become engrossed in the story. I found myself absorbed by the sight of her.

Back within the movie, it was a night with a sky full of stars.

After overcoming many hardships, the monster that had once seemed so fearsome was now showing the lady respect, politely bowing and extending his hand toward her. He seemed more reliable than usual while dressed like a gentleman, and the woman loved him in turn, gently taking his outstretched hand.

His courteous attitude and expression of reverence was unfitting for his appearance, but the two of them were so close that it seemed natural.

There was no one there to celebrate their union, but her smile was enough.

His sharp claws could hurt the one precious to him. The monster's expression seemed worried by the thought, but she returned a tender smile. Ignoring his hesitation, she moved in closer and urged him to dance with her.

And under the starry skies, they began stepping into a dance.

They had forgotten about dispelling his curse, and they only saw each other in their eyes. Without even exchanging a word, emotions flowed into each other with only small gestures. In that moment, all their troubles and fun conversations had come to fruition.

As graceful music played in the background, their lips finally pressed against each other.

"Ahhh! My goodness! I can tell what they're thinking without any words!" We'd been cheering for them all this time. Marie knew just how precious something could be when it was obtained after working hard. The elf and the cat were drunk on the bliss of the small miracle in the starry night, tears pouring down their faces... Or so I thought, but as the credits played, they rolled over listlessly.

The girl pressed her face against a cushion, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

“This is awful. I can’t believe it. That big, scary monster was so adorable. I didn’t expect a kiss to dispel his curse and turn him into a plain, boring prince. Unbelievable… I don’t think I can stand up from the shock…”

Wh-Whaaa?! But I thought he looked handsome as a prince. Ah, even the cat is nodding in agreement.

I did see where she was coming from. The audience fell in love with the character in his monster form, so I couldn’t really blame them. Marie was so disappointed that he had changed his appearance at the very end that she was changing the shape of the cushion with her own face.

“You were rooting so hard for them. Girls really care about image, so this must be rough for you,” I said as I touched her shoulder, and she turned around, sobbing.

“Yes, it really is. They had such a wonderful kiss, too. But I also…” She stopped mid-sentence and froze. She remained motionless, staring at me without saying anything. Her face began turning red for some reason, and then she covered her own lips with her fingers…

I watched her, wondering what the issue was, then let out an, *“Ah!”*

“D-Don’t say it. It’s nothing! I’m taking a bath!” She pushed my face away with her hands before I could say anything. I watched dully as she put on her slippers and jogged away.

Yes, that was right. We, too, had kissed before. It had only happened once, at Hirosaki Castle in Aomori. It seemed like the cherry blossom spirits had used their powers, but the memory of that first experience was still clear in my mind, and I could distinctly remember her smooth lips. My face also began to grow hot after a delay.

As she mentioned earlier, Marie had probably gone to prepare a bath. The water heater played a little tune to indicate it was ready,

and I stood up. I tried to calm myself as I began fixing the positions of the TV and cushions back to where they originally were. I was sure Marie felt the same way, with her back turned in the dressing room and her long ears having turned completely red.

Even when the tub was filled with hot water, Marie didn't come back to the room.

When I slid the door open, the light from the bathroom was leaking into the dim dressing room.

The bathtub was full of steam, and I could smell the scent of the bath additives from here. I took a deep breath, then called out to Marie, who I assumed was soaking in the tub.

"Marie, think I can bother you for a minute?"

"Sure, of course. Um, sorry for getting so flustered earlier. Please understand I wasn't trying to avoid you or anything." She replied in a calm voice, which was quite a relief. I sat down on the floor, leaning my head back against the wall. Meanwhile, the cat wasn't in the mood to deal with this, so it was sleeping on the bed. Or maybe it was doing so out of courtesy. Marie and I didn't have the opportunity to talk like this often, so I appreciated the gesture.

I listened to the sound of the water splashing as I asked a very ordinary question.

"Did you enjoy the movie, Marie?"

"I enjoyed it very much, of course. It was wonderful. That scene where they danced together with that graceful music will stay in my memory for a long time. I liked it so much that I'm thinking of watching it while you're at work." The story was both kind and cruel, just as a fairy tale should have been. I was glad she ended up liking it, and I could picture her closing her eyes and enjoying the memory.

Was it magic that dispelled the curse or their love? No one knew for sure. Feeling the afterglow of the heartwarming movie, I uttered

to her.

"I'm glad. Then, maybe we can go visit some time."

"...Visit? What are you talking about? That movie was just for entertainment, wasn't it?" Maybe my comment was too out-of-the-blue. In my mind, I could see her tilting her head with a cute little wrinkle between her brows, expectantly waiting for an explanation.

"That story is really popular. So much so that you can find the real thing near here."

"I'm not sure what you mean, but that wonderful castle can't be here, can it? This is Japan, after all."

"Hm? Oh, it is. The actual castle is here and the characters, too." Marie stopped talking for a while, and I heard a loud splash as she stood up in the water.

"Such a splendid castle couldn't actually exist in real life. Don't you know that was all fiction?"

"It's so popular *because* you can actually see that fiction with your own eyes. Though, it's always crowded for exactly that reason. Why don't we go visit it this weekend?"

"Nnh?!"

We had the rare ability to go back and forth between dreams and reality, but even the elf was surprised to hear that dreams could become reality. Her purple eyes were surely wide with shock and staring at me through the steamy glass.

"Y-Yes! Let's go! I'd love to!"

"Meow! Meow!" *Wait, when did the cat come over? It's on my knees and rubbing its face against me... Haha, the whiskers tickle.*

Perhaps once Wridra returned and it stopped raining during the weekend, it would be a good time to go. It would surely be crowded, but even that might be part of the fun for them.

As I explained this, Marie was getting so excited that I could see

her face right up against the fogged-up glass. *Um, I can kinda see her… womanly protrusions, so she shouldn't get so close…*

"Promise! Promise me you'll take me to that world!"

"Of course. I've actually never gone myself. Wouldn't it be exciting, Marie?"

"Yes!" she replied, and I couldn't contain my joy for some reason. I could invite her into this world. It was strange to think about even now, but I felt like this fact had brought me so much happiness. Well, picturing the sight of me leading her to a big theme park by the hand, maybe anyone would have been looking forward to something like this. Even if there was a big crowd, the half-fairy elf would surely make an obvious comment like, *"There are so many people!"* with a cheery smile.

This all depended on the weather, but I stood back up now that the weekend plans were set.

We were back on normal speaking terms again, so as I thought about preparing dinner, I heard a small voice from the bathtub behind me. It was so faint that I could hardly hear unless I really listened. Maybe she had been talking to me this whole time.

"S-Say… Do you clearly remember that one time in Aomori?" Judging by the squeak in her voice, it didn't seem like she was simply asking for my feedback on the trip. It was also likely that she was remembering the moment our lips touched. Her voice sounded like she wouldn't be able to sleep for a while, and my own heart was pounding in my chest.

"Um… I remember. That was a fun trip. Marie, you, uh, we…" Oh no. Just as I was about to tell her my honest feelings, the beating in my heart grew more frantic. I found it hard to speak, and I leaned back against the wall, sliding down to the ground again. At that moment, I was incredibly grateful that she couldn't see my face. I wished I could hide my head under a blanket.

Though I couldn't tell at the time, Marie was pressing her hands

against her chest with her face bright red. She tried to calm her quick breathing by sinking into the bath water, then let out a long sigh with her face toward the ceiling. With our backs toward each other, the wall standing in between us, she hugged her knees and opened her mouth.

"Well, this might be a strange question, and you don't have to answer if you don't want to. Um, have you ever… done the same thing with someone else?"

"Huh? No, I haven't! Although, maybe I should be embarrassed by that, considering my age."

"O-Oh… Good. Ah, my gosh, my face is so hot I might pass out." She seemed to be squirming on the other side of the foggy glass, as I could hear her splashing lightly. After taking a few more deep breaths, I sensed she had turned toward me.

"Just so you know, there isn't much of a kissing culture in my village. And there have been many attempts to court me before, but I turned them all down. It's not that people haven't tried, just so you know."

Ahh, I couldn't really find a response. It was the first time for her, too, and just knowing that made my heart start thumping again. We both breathed in and out several times with the wall between us, and I spoke after finally regaining my composure.

"Then as each other's firsts, I guess we shouldn't be so embarrassed. Sometimes I think about how we're so similar. Even though we lived far apart, it's like we've always been together."

"I know exactly what you mean. I suppose it's comparable to being childhood friends. Like an old, familiar relationship." We pointed at each other as if to say, "*That's it!*" and laughed. It felt comfortable, and relief washed over us as we lightly chuckled together. The familiar feeling was so strange, considering our differences in origins, race, and culture.

"I think even our tastes are similar. So, how about I put some extra

effort into making us some dinner tonight?"

"Hehe, I'm looking forward to it. Did you know? There's something similar about your cooking and your grandfather's cooking, and it makes me feel fortunate whenever I eat it. I think everyone should have a childhood friend who's good at cooking. There's nothing better than experiencing so much fun in a day." It was such an offhand comment that I laughed out loud.

There was nothing to it. It was our first kiss, so we had been overthinking it far too much. At the core of it, we were just two people who enjoyed each other's company, and the term 'childhood friends' did indeed seem appropriate.

"Hm, I wouldn't hear the end of it if I burned our dinner now. All right, time to whip up something delicious," I said to myself, then noticed the cat had evacuated back to the bed, and it was staring at me with an uninterested look.

It was completely dark outside already, and I felt the weekend waning away.

*Chk, thunk, clack.*

The meal I quickly set on the table was a familiar recipe, the hamburg steak. It was popular among adults and children alike, and on top of that, it was even easy to make. Truly an ace of the cooking world.

Maybe that was a bit overboard, but the elf was so happy about it, she seemed reminiscent of an excited child with a knife in one hand, a fork in the other, and a towel wrapped around her neck.

"Wow, it looks delicious! So much sauce, and that smell of meat... It even has a fried egg on top! This is pure extravagance!"

"That's a bit dramatic for an egg, don't you think? But there's nothing better than freshly cooked food, so I recommend you dig in."

"Oh my, we should hurry, then. Come on, Wridra, you need to say

it, too.” The cat meowed with annoyance, eager to start eating right away.

Saying ‘*Itadakimasu*’ at the dinner table had already become routine for us, and there was a glass of red wine next to Marie as if it belonged there. Most people may have assumed she was underage, but Marie was actually over a hundred years old, and she looked a little sad when there was no alcohol, so I couldn’t afford not to serve her some.

The knife sliced through the meat easily with hardly any pressure applied. It was obviously going to be soft since it was made with ground meat, but she was taken aback by the amount of fat that overflowed as she cut into it. She seemed to have taken my earlier comment to heart and hurriedly put the piece of hamburg steak into her mouth. She easily chewed through the soft meat, and the juices that erupted with each bite made her eyes go wide.

“Nnnnnnh!” When onions cooked to a nice caramel color, soft ground meat, and bread crumbs were mixed together, they underwent a transformation. They created a fluffy yet buttery-soft texture and drew out the rich umami of the meat.

“Mmmmmm!” Marie chewed some more and held her cheeks as she groaned. The soft-boiled yolk and sauce entangled with each other to create an even greater depth of flavor. Umami flooded out with each bite, and her mouth was filled with happiness.

She hurriedly reached for the glass of red wine and tilted it toward her lips, filling her mouth with its rich flavor that complimented the meat perfectly. The wine *really* suited the meat. Marie stared at me as she chewed with a look that seemed to ask, “Is this really home-cooked food? Are you some sort of genius?” …She really could be a bit overdramatic at times.

“Ah, so good! I can’t believe I’m being treated to such a meal when it’s not even a special day or anything. Wait, is this some sort of commemoration for the day we kissed? It’s not, is it? Th-Then, if I

asked you to make it again, would you?"

"Hm? Yeah, of course I would. Not like it's expensive to make, either." I was surprised by her suddenly fast-paced speech, and I thought I heard her slip a rather scandalous comment in there, but when I replied to her as such, she reeled back from my bluntness as if she'd been punched.

But really, ground meat was rather cheap in price. You just had to be sure to mix it well, and it was easy to cook, too. It was extremely popular among kids, and I wasn't surprised to find Marie loved it so much.

"How about we add these to today's bento...?"

"Yes, let's! It's settled, then. You can't change your mind now." She nodded several times, and the issue was settled. All the while, the cat was stuffing its face frantically, not paying a bit of attention to our conversation.

I wasn't sure what to say next, so I went on to ramble a bit.

"Oh yeah, a lot of people like to put cheese on their hamburg steaks. The cheese melts onto the meat and gives it an even richer flavor. Let's give it a try next time..." I trailed off, noticing that the two of them were staring at me intently.

*You'd better. If you're lying, I won't ever forgive you.* Their looks said as such without words, and the intensity made me gulp hard before I even managed to take a bite of my food.

The cat was purring comfortably.

The room was lit only by the indirect lighting next to my bed, and the presence of night had filled not only my room, but all of Tokyo.

And yet, the fun wasn't over yet. A picture book was laid open before us, and it was being read to me in a hushed voice from right beside me.

"...Just then, a large bear appeared before the two of them. The

fearsome-looking bear approached them with a white handkerchief in hand." Her gentle voice tickled my ears, and its steady rhythm lulled me toward sleep. The black cat sleeping soundly in the middle and the elf's soft voice... These were the only things that existed in that moment, and the patter of the rain made us feel like we were in our own little world.

The voice of the resident from the fantasy world was just that beautiful. It flowed into my ears and resonated in my heart. Like cotton candy in water, its sweetness still remained even after dissolving, and my vision began to sway slowly.

Marie glanced over to me occasionally to make sure I hadn't fallen asleep, and her gentle eyes filled me with a sense of comfort.

Her white, silky hair fell onto me as she laid her head on my chest, asking, "Give up yet?" with an impish look on her face.

I was already half asleep, having given up a while ago. I could hardly mouth the words, so I tapped her on the back in response instead. Having successfully put a full grown adult to sleep, she flashed a victorious grin and tucked me in.

It wasn't fair. No one could resist falling asleep under such conditions. Unable to voice my complaint, I just held Marie in my arms as she joined me under the blanket.

Her sweet, feminine scent and the warmth of her skin assured me I would be sleeping well tonight. There was something comforting about the fact that she had put me to sleep so easily.

She placed her head on my arm and whispered in a voice just quiet enough that it didn't interrupt me from falling asleep.

"This is how I always fall asleep. Listening to your voice. Now you know why I always say it's not fair, don't you?"

I had to admit, I did. I smiled wryly, and I didn't even notice the sensation of something warm and soft pressing against my lips. When I opened my eyes, the elf's face filled my vision, and she

whispered, “Good night.”

Yes, good night, Ms. Elf.

I was surprised by how good you were at putting me to sleep.

I held her, silky hair and all, breathing out sleepily. I heard Marie yawning, and we sank into the dream world.

## Chapter of Slavery, Episode 2: Temporary Retreat from the Ancient Labyrinth *Bzzz, bzzz!* The strange sound awoke me in the dream world, and I mumbled out loud. I sat up and... Oh, Marie was holding me in her arms. I remembered her reading me a book last night and decided to let her sleep some more.

I gently moved her arm aside and listened to the noise in the darkness.

"All... retrea... *Bzzz!*" The noise continued, mixed with what sounded like a man's voice. Using the faint lighting, I turned to find the source of the noise was the Magic Tool on the table.

*Ah, the comm link.*

Judging by the time we fell asleep in Japan, it was probably seven in the morning or so.

The Magic Tool continued to emit the white noise, despite the early hour. We were in a small room on the second floor, and the walls may have been reflecting the radio waves or whatever the tool used. I had no idea how it actually worked, so that was just my guess.

I scratched my head in the darkness and turned to the side to find light peering in from the space under the door. Since it was bright on the other side, someone may have been passing by with a light.

I stood up, feeling along the walls as I moved toward the door and opened it. There, I found a large group holding things like lanterns.

"...Huh?" I said with surprise, but they also wore round-eyed

expressions at the sudden appearance of a sleepy face. I stared at the lantern-wielding men, the cogs in my sleep-addled brain starting to turn.

Judging by the direction they were going, they were probably returning to the entrance. The *"retrea..."* I heard earlier was probably an order to retreat. I rubbed my eyes and looked around, and then, a voice called out to me.

"Huh? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello, Zera. *yawn*... Good morning." I tried to stifle a yawn as I greeted him, and Zera, the leader of Team Bloodstone, shrugged with exasperation. He was a tall, black-haired man that we had retrieved in a rescue mission about a month or so back. Since then, we'd been talking to each other like this frequently.

Just then, I felt something lean onto me from behind. Mariabelle had finally woken up and staggered this way. She was probably still half-asleep and placed her chin on my shoulders to keep herself upright, then let out a big yawn.

"Aha, you look like you're still asleep. Hurry up and get ready. We're retreating temporarily to restore our energy." We tilted our heads in confusion at the sudden comment.

It seemed things had been happening in our absence.

The raid parties were full of elites, but they'd been having trouble on the second floor, their energy and morale gradually depleting. They wanted to get through it as soon as possible, but they had been getting less and less efficient. That was why they had made the decision to retreat for now and recover their vitality.

After gathering up our belongings and leaving the room, we walked with Zera as he filled us in on what was going on.

"Huh, so we're having a celebration for clearing the first floor this late?"

"Oh, don't put it that way. We need some sort of reason to take a

break so publicly." He slapped my shoulder hard, making my eyes bulge from the impact. Looking around, I understood where he was coming from. We were in the middle of the crowd as we all climbed higher and higher, but many of the people around us wore weary expressions. It was clear that they needed rest.

Raiding labyrinths was hard work that required wandering around for long periods of time. One could hardly ever let their guard down while hearing someone's screams in the distance.

As we talked, I sensed a dubious stare coming from behind me. When I turned around, I saw Marie looking at me with an exasperated look, several light spirits following close behind.

"Oh, you make it sound as if a labyrinth is so harsh and horrible and scary." It wasn't that arduous for us, of course. We had basically just wandered into this dream world for fun. Besides, this raid wasn't an obligation for us, and honestly, we had the option to pull out at any time if we felt like it. But before I knew it, I was saying the complete opposite.

"Yeah, it's incredible that such a rare labyrinth from ancient times still exists. From what I can tell, it seems to be equipped with exceptional air circulation and repair technology. The monsters are first-class quality, too. This labyrinth really is amazing." I wasn't sure if they understood, but I had been traveling all around the continent to find just this sort of place. Fighting powerful monsters, finding treasures, and steadily improving my own power... It truly was nothing short of a miracle that I ended up in such a place. Truly marvelous. I passionately explained as such, but Marie just shot a sharp look to Zera as if to say, "See?"

*Whaaa? But you were enjoying it, too, Marie...*

"I think I'm starting to understand this guy," Zera said.

"Yes, he's just as he seems. But please don't worry; he's a normal person once he steps foot outside of the labyrinth."

"..."

For some reason, I felt rather alone despite being a member of the raid party. *Wait, wasn't Marie the one rushing me to go to the labyrinth before?*

I nearly said so, but Marie hurriedly cut me off.

"Look, we're almost above ground. Umm, it's been a while since we've seen the sunlight. How refreshing. Yes, I can't wait." She sounded rather unenthusiastic just then, but it was possible that I was just imagining it. I looked toward the direction she was pointing to find a faint light shining down from the top of the spiral walkway. The lanterns and torches around us started to gradually extinguish, and the light spirits that had accompanied us were waving goodbye and vanishing.

We'd been looking forward to the ancient labyrinth, but we didn't expect the raid to go on break the moment we got back. But if I looked visibly disappointed now, the elf would surely tease me again. And so, we continued to slowly make our ascent.

The sky above us was a brilliant white.

Fresh air flowed in, and as I pulled myself up by the rails to step outside, there was no longer a ceiling above us. I stretched out, feeling refreshed, and Marie and the others were doing the same.

"Ahh, I feel invigorated. It's nice to be outside again. Look, the sky is cloudy. I wonder if Arilai will enter a rainy season soon, too."

"I think so. The sunlight has been getting a lot weaker, and I think it's gonna rain a lot from now on." I breathed in air that had the scent of humidity and looked up to the sky again.

It would soon rain, causing seeds to sprout everywhere, and plants would grow in places other than the oasis in a few days. The rainy season was very precious for desert regions, and I figured people here approached it differently from how the rainy season was treated in Japan.

I noticed Zera staring at the scenery as well and called out to him.

“We’d been holed up in there for a whole month. I’m sure we need to get some rest, or it’ll start affecting peoples’ health.”

“Yeah, though personally, I don’t like to sit still for too long, or I’ll grow weak. So, you lot came from another country, right? Are you going to have somewhere to stay once we get back to Arilai?” Marie, the black cat, and I struggled to come up with an answer. Oh, and it was too dark to see earlier, but the cat familiar was with us in this world, too. We were able to summon it by using the collar in either Japan or the dream world, respectively.

Marie seemed to remember something and opened her mouth to speak.

“Why don’t we go to Mewi’s workshop? That place should have plenty of room. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind letting us stay there for a bit.”

“Oh, you’re right. Let’s stop by later.” The last time we visited Mewi’s workshop, we got the impression that it was far too big for someone to live in alone. We assumed he would gladly accept us, and Zera nodded when we explained as such.

“Got it. Come visit me if that ends up not working out. I can let a few guests stay, no problem. Oh, it’s about time to go.” The entire group seemed to make it above ground, and they had begun giving out orders and mobilizing. Our destination was far beyond the sand dunes, and I couldn’t blame Marie for letting out a big sigh.

“You don’t seem too happy, even though we’re about to get some rest, Mariabelle.”

“Oh, Doula! I’m sorry if I was making some sort of face.” Doula, the woman with red hair reaching down her back, had started walking beside us out of nowhere. We had retrieved her along with Zera during the most recent rescue mission.

A faint breeze was coming in from the east, rustling her fiery hair as it passed. She turned her steel-colored eyes toward me.

“Hello, Mister Sleepyhead. When is Team Amethyst going to wake up?”

“Huh? Do I still look that sleepy?” Everyone nodded at once, which was followed by cheerful laughter.

Being in a big group like this was nice every once in a while. It was only the three of us when we’d first arrived, but things were completely different now. Crossing the dunes may not have been so bad with lively and fun company, I thought.

And, by the way, Team Amethyst was going to wake up when Wridra joined us on Thursday.

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Once the presence of humans had left the ancient labyrinth, it returned back to its original atmosphere. There was complete silence and an ineffable pressure like someone had died somewhere. All of one’s senses indicated that these were no mere ruins that had decayed long ago.

As soon as the first floor had been cleared, the raid headquarters moved into this hall. Piles of rations and equipment had been prepared there, with several tents for sleeping in. The place was so full of items that there was hardly any place to stand. Suddenly, a crunching footstep could be heard.

The old man stroking his white beard as he glanced around was a renowned wizard and the coordinator of information among all teams. He had made a name for himself in wars and raids long ago, but he had moved into a support role in his old age.

“Something’s here.” Hakam, the supervisor of the raid, rose from behind the old man. He had an impressive, muscular build with sun-bronzed skin. The old man nodded, expression unchanging, at the sudden comment.

“Indeed. It seems to be enjoying getting in the way of our efforts.”

“I thought it was the bandits that were reported a while back, but

something's fishy," Hakam replied. Indeed, something was off. A group had been interfering for some time, somehow evading the wizard's watchful eye. This didn't seem like the work of mere bandits, and the fact that they had been holed in for a whole month was odd in itself.

Mysterious incidents had been happening frequently, from booby-trapped doors to monster ambushes that seemed calculated to hostile ranged magic attacks appearing during combat. The biggest problem was the effect on troop morale. Little by little, their original plans were getting pushed back.

"Is someone supporting them? Or..."

"Something is going on. This is a labyrinth, but it smells like the all-too-familiar stench of the battlefield." They had already been struggling to get to the bottom of the undying second floor master, Shirley. They couldn't inflict much damage on it even with the power of priests, and even if they finished it off, the floor master would just reappear somewhere else.

Between the mysterious forces and the undying boss, there were many issues troubling them.

And that wasn't all.

"An order from the royal family. We are to integrate forces from each faction." Hakam shot a glare, wordlessly warning the old man not to complain. The old man also knew Hakam himself had tried many times to protest against the higher-ups, so he swallowed his words. The supervisor let out a long sigh and continued.

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"Aja, I have no faith in adventurers myself. I can't rely on those who won't even act unless they secure both safety and payment." He would rather do the work himself than go through the trouble of preparing such things. Hakam was implying as such, and the white-haired old man nodded in agreement. Participating in the raid was one thing, but supervising and protecting the team on top of

managing those responsibilities was simply foolish.

Hakam may have been old-fashioned, but he valued conviction above all else. Results were decided by the conviction of those who fought, and the lazy only dragged them down. He felt this applied not only to combat, but labyrinths as well. Those who mustered their courage to stand tall for their country rather than backing down out of fear were the warriors he loved and respected. The old man had been listening quietly, then muttered as he stroked his white beard.

“Hmm. Perhaps I will take a break and apply new military forces, then.”

“Hm? Oh, you mean that thing you mentioned before. Do you think that will be happening?” In response, the old man reached into his inside pocket, causing a metallic clinking sound. He then opened his wrinkled hand, and what appeared to be a large gemstone glowed dully. It was a Magic Stone that should have been lost long ago.

“Who knows? Someone deleted the records so thoroughly that I can’t even tell if it’s forbidden. But this is for me to worry about. You just sit back and look forward to it.” The old man grinned fearlessly, and Hakam shrugged with a sigh. For better or for worse, the old man tended to come up with ideas that disregarded common sense. He was a man who wasn’t subtle about his hatred for the royal family. There was a chance this could have ended up being a bigger deal than taking in the fighting forces of each faction, but the supervisor didn’t say anything in protest.

The ancient labyrinth was full of mysteries, including the insurgents, the Magic Stone, and the undying floor master. One thing was clear: this temporary break was not arranged merely to get some rest. Hakam’s eyes looked like those of a hawk until now, but his expression had softened upon taking his time off. He scratched his head.

“To think, the only bright side in all of this is that we were able to put up our base on the first floor before entering the rainy season.”

“You can say that again. I’d rather not get soaking wet in the rain.” They bared their teeth and laughed. They hadn’t smiled like that since those kids succeeded in their rescue mission. At times like this, it was up to the adults to show some spirit.

“All right. Let’s make sure they enjoy themselves, shall we?”

“Ahaha, I like that look you get when you cook up these sorts of plans. Well then, I will bring the drinks for the celebration.” They continued talking, and before they knew it, the two were looking forward to their first vacation in a long time.

With problems and sorrow to deal with, the way home may have felt like there was a long road ahead, but that was the nature of life. There was happiness to be found within pain and pain within happiness.

With those thoughts in mind, the remaining two left the base behind.

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The animal stepping on to the sand with a *thud* was known as a Fugoi. It got its name from the odd snorting noise it made when adjusting its body temperature by opening and closing its nose. I had heard that they were designed to resist the intense heat of the desert. It moved rather slowly as it deliberately stomped its large feet, but they were well-liked by the army and merchants alike for their ability to carry large loads. Its rough, thick skin was somewhat reminiscent of rhinos in the zoo. It pulled a cart with the ropes tied around its body, and an elf girl sat between some of the many bags of cargo.

She sat with her feet adjacent to each other and let out a big sigh. The water spirit Undine floated around in the air, waving its tail as if trying to cheer up its unenthused master. The black cat, however, slept in the girl’s lap with no regard for her current state. As for me,

I had no place to sit, so I was walking on the sand.

"I'm sorry for taking it easy while you have to walk. I should train a bit so I don't tire out so easily." She furrowed her brows apologetically as she said this, but I knew she had tried her best to walk, despite her lack of physical endurance. Not only was there no need for her to apologize, I thought she deserved praise.

"It's okay, I'm used to traveling. It wasn't too hot on the way here. I actually think it was just right, with the rainy season going on."

"Yes, I'm glad we didn't have to shrivel up into prunes on the way here. Though, we're very behind compared to everyone else. I hope no one will get upset." With that, Marie turned to face the direction we were headed. The sand and rocks were barely recognizable as the path we were supposed to follow, and many gentle slopes could be seen overlapping each other. The Arilai army was nowhere in sight, of course.

Perhaps the coachman felt us staring, because he turned and began to speak.

"Arilai will be in view once we pass those hills over there. Your friends who went on ahead should have arrived there by now. All the goods on this cart would've been flying off the shelves if we got there in time for the triumphant return." He laughed in a gruff voice. He had a white beard on his chin, which was wavering in the desert wind.

"I see. We're grateful that you're giving us a ride, but did we end up inconveniencing you?"

"This Fugoi isn't gonna go any slower just because we added an elf girl as a passenger. Besides, we couldn't just leave two kids behind in the desert. Ain't that right?" It may have just been coincidence, but the animal blew air out of its nose as if in agreement, making Marie and me laugh.

"We would've been able to sleep as much as we wanted and joined them if today was a weekend."

“Yes, it’s too bad. No matter how early we sleep, we can only spend half a day here. We can’t let people see us going to sleep in order to keep our secret, so we need to stay separated from others.”

“Yeah, I know it’s an inconvenience in that sense. It’s not as if we’re in a hurry, and I’d rather avoid a raucous welcome for our return. I think we can both agree there.” Marie raised her hand in agreement, and our little review meeting came to an end. Feeling the cool breeze and hearing the occasional sound of the Fugoi blowing out air, we decided to enjoy the trip to our destination.

When we crossed the hills, the country of Arilai came into view, just as the old coachman had said.

We heard the sound of bells chiming in the wind.

The main entrance opened, and we could see people celebrating the return even from here. The occasion for the grand-scale celebration was the conquest of the first floor of the ancient labyrinth. Three floor masters had been defeated, and the treasure hall had been opened. Overcoming the high difficulty had paid off in the form of countless treasures, Magic Stones, mysterious items and books, and other various spoils, and the citizens were shocked to find out all this had been obtained already from only the first floor.

I was surprised by the flashy celebrations, but maybe that was to be expected. The only other way to make such returns would be through war or the production of things like jewelry, so there was no reason not to be thrilled about it. The other elite squad members were welcomed as heroes. As for us, having come from another country, our greeting was rather perfunctory. Well, we had arrived much later, and it was hard to see us as anything other than two kids who just happened to wander in. I didn’t think we wouldn’t even be recognized as a member of the raid parties, though.

“Farewell. Be sure to buy plenty of my wares if we ever meet again.”

“Yes, thank you. Until we meet again!” We bowed and parted ways with the old merchant.

Everyone was still riled up from the heroes’ welcome, and the citizens were talking excitedly among each other. Marie gave one look around, then turned her gaze toward me.

“Let’s go to Mewi’s workshop, then. My bottom hurts from sitting on the cart for so long, so I’d like to rest up.”

“Sounds good. The workshop is in the outskirts of town. Let’s follow that path out.” Mewi, the child of the Neko tribe, was in a rather unique situation. He had the rare ability to refine Magic Stones and was affiliated with demons, which were considered a threat to humankind. Because of this, we had to trek through the rough sands along the deserted path just to get to his place. Marie must have been tired from traveling so much. It seemed like her white hair had lost its luster, and there was an air of exhaustion about her. She let out a tired sigh.

“We’re almost there; you can do it. I can brew us some tea when we get there.”

“Yes, I’ll be okay. I’ll show everyone that elves are strong and good at hunting, since we grew up in the forests.”

*R-Right… that’s not all too convincing when you can hardly walk straight.* Besides, I couldn’t recall ever seeing Marie wielding a bow. I asked her about it, and she nodded as if the answer was obvious.

“No, I’m too afraid to go hunting. The strings on bows are too tight for me to draw, and if you miss the target’s heart with those small arrows, you’ll end up being the one in danger. No thank you.”

“Hmm, but Koopahs are far stronger than boars, you know…”

“I’m used to them already. They’re like tadpoles once you’re used to them, and they’re not very smart, so they charge straight at you. But we already cleared the first floor, so I don’t think we’ll be running into any more.” She laughed awkwardly, as if to say it was

a shame, because they were good for farming experience points. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but I did basically say the same thing when I first introduced her to those monsters, so I let it slide.

As our conversation went on, I started to hear the sound of a familiar running river. The Neko tribe's workshop should have been just around the corner. The temperature here was cool, thanks to it being located next to the river, and it seemed like the ideal place to rest up from our journey. And so, we arrived at the corner with light steps.

Then, Marie crumpled to her knees.

"No way..."

"Whoa. Maybe it's because they brought back so many Magic Stones. There's a huge line in front of the workshop." I couldn't help but say it out loud in surprise. There was a group of what seemed to be government officials crowding the front of the workshop with guards surrounding the area. This was nothing short of a nightmare for both of us, who were weary from travel.

"Oh, careful. Are you okay, Marie? Come on, try to stand."

"Uuu, we can't even say hello to him after walking all the way here? This is too much..." I touched Marie on the shoulder as she sat in a squat, but she was so dejected, it seemed like she was going to roll over on the ground. There were tears welling up in her purple eyes as she looked up at me, and all I could feel was sympathy for her.

But if the workshop was no longer an option as a place to stay for the night, the only alternative I could think of was to find a cheap inn in town. Since travelers were highly unusual in this country, lodging facilities were very hard to find. It was going to be difficult to cheer Marie up from her exhausted state.

"Hmm, should we use my skill, Trayn, the Journey's Guide, to take us to your home country? But we have that celebration party tomorrow, and I can only choose travel shrines as a destination, so

we'd have to walk through the desert again." The girl shook her head sideways in protest. I couldn't blame her. That would've been too much even for me, and she normally would have scolded me for even suggesting it. That only left...

"Oh, didn't Zera offer his place for us to stay in?" Marie raised her head as soon as I said so.

That large man, Zera, had helped us once before. He set up a tent in the campgrounds for us and even lent us lavish furnishings. She seemed to be remembering this, and I saw life quickly returning to her purple eyes.

"He's really rich, isn't he?"

"Y-Yeah. I thought I could hear the greed in your words just now. Maybe I'm imagining it?" Elves usually tended to prefer a rather simple lifestyle, but it seemed I hadn't misheard her. Marie pulled herself up with her staff against the ground, then flashed a brisk smile.

"We should hurry, then. Before we get all dried up in the sun."

"Umm, but it's pretty cloudy right now. Oh well, I guess it won't hurt to take someone up on their kindness once in a while." Marie nodded in wholehearted agreement and began walking with renewed energy.

The thought crossed my mind that Zera probably wasn't simply wealthy. I had heard that, unlike merchants, he was able to live such a lifestyle due to his martial prowess.

Well, it was probably better to show her rather than attempt to explain it. And so, I adjusted my bag on my back and walked after Marie.

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The Thousand household.

Countless heroes had been born in this household, and it had a

deep history full of war and bloodshed.

Those who lacked the ability were deemed unworthy to name themselves a member of the household, and anyone who married into the family was also expected to be capable of battle. As the strong continued to pass their blood down generations, it brought about a change.

“The Thousand family’s blood is alive.”

Such rumors began circulating due to the fact that certain techniques were only passed down among the exceptionally talented of their bloodline. Thousand Burst, which had been previously seen in the labyrinth, was one of them. It was believed to be the steel will of the warrior made manifest.

It filled the caster’s body with energy, and as it was unleashed, the spray of blood ripped through anything it touched. When a group of soldiers on the battlefield were found dead with blade wounds all over their body, it was said that someone of the Thousand household could have been found there.

As I recalled such rumors, I heard a bird chirping overhead and looked up. The bird looked like a chick with yellow feathers that were not unlike the color of the desert, and it rested atop a large tree branch. Mansions could be seen ahead, and the sight was much different from what I’d been seeing in Arilai thus far.

“Wow, I didn’t expect a place like this! It feels a bit cooler with all these trees here. Is this where the rich people live?”

“It’s definitely cooler here. See? There are special waterways all over to help the heat escape. You usually can’t get to them because entry is forbidden, though.” A spear-wielding guard shot a glance in our direction. As I had mentioned, they were standing watch to make sure the general population didn’t try to enter. But having gotten an invitation from the household with a bloody yet prestigious history, we were an exception.

The upscale area was visible past the iron gates. The shrubbery

and build of the mansions made it hard to believe this was a desert country. Marie stood next to me, shading her eyes with her hands and staring curiously.

"Oh, maybe she's here to greet us. She's heading right this way." I turned to look and found a woman jogging toward our direction. The guards let her pass, and the woman stopped right in front of us. Her hair was a dark brown that fell right around her shoulders, and she reminded me somewhat of Kaoruko, the librarian. Breezy attire seemed to be the preferred style in this region. Her clothes had a relaxed cut with bright-colored fabric decorated with cultural embroidery. She smiled softly, then bowed her head politely.

"Thank you for waiting. You must be Lord Kazuhiho and Lady Marie."

"Yes, we're sorry for reaching out so suddenly."

"Please, not at all. Lord Zera was positively delighted, and we are also glad to welcome you." She spoke clearly and briskly, and I took her to be just as straitlaced as Kaoruko was. Her posture was impeccable as she bowed her head, and there was a dignified air about her.

"This way, if you please." Following her guidance, we finally stepped foot into the upscale area.

The brick-paved path was lined with trees, each of which were well-maintained. The waterway flowed gently beside our feet, and not only was the atmosphere here different, but the temperature was completely different from the other regions we'd visited. Marie looked timid in her mannerisms and was looking around restlessly like a country girl visiting the big city for the first time.

"Is there a water source nearby for this waterway to draw from?"

"There is a river along the south side, but we cannot use it directly due to the difference in elevation. We are drawing the waterway from far upstream. Drinking water is drawn from an underground source. Both of these things require many people to keep

maintained."

*I see. It looks like they have plenty of water on hand, but this is the result of lots of hard work.* It made me fully realize that this really was an area for rich folks. I glanced to my side to find the elf girl's eyes glimmering with fascination as I had expected.

"This place seems like a nice place to live. I had no idea such a place existed in a desert country with such intense heat."

"Many people who are important to this country live here, so the royal family has prepared accommodations fit for the work they do. I serve the Thousand household, which has made many great accomplishments across many years of war." She puffed out her chest proudly as she spoke. There was a shade of pink to her cheeks, perhaps because she was glad to be able to brag about her master.

The servant woman was a bit older than us, and she had a calm air about her. She stood with her back straight and gave the impression of being highly competent. As I observed her mannerisms while she talked to Marie, I wondered if the servants of a household of fighters were also skilled in combat.

"You must be very wealthy. I suppose you can't judge a book by... Oh, excuse me. That was rude of me."

"Oh, not at all. Lord Zera is a very kind person. He's very loyal, and he knows how to treat women with respect. Though, he may seem rather unrefined at first glance." Marie quickly shut her mouth, and the woman giggled. Her indigo eyes then turned toward me.

"Words cannot express how grateful I am toward you for saving Lord Zera. I am truly happy to have been able to meet you."

"We just happened to run into him and ended up being very lucky, really."

"Yes, a wonderfully fortunate happenstance, indeed. This must be the blessing of the Land God." I waved my hands to indicate that this wasn't the case, but she already seemed convinced. At this rate,

it felt like she was going to claim I was an envoy of God, which made me a bit uncomfortable, as someone who was born and raised in Japan. I'd grown up not paying much heed to temples, shrines, or Christmas, after all.

The woman stopped walking in front of the Thousand house. The greenery growing behind the iron gates reminded me of southern countries, and there was even a fountain placed at the center. The garden was well cared for, and the two-story mansion was built with closely lined stones. To the left, another separate building could be seen.

"Whoa... We seem really out of place here."

"Um, are you sure it's fine that we're here in robes?"

The servant lady giggled and said, "Please, think nothing of it," then guided us to the other side of the lot.

The paths around the mansion were also well-maintained. The gardener who kept this place probably had a playful desire to entertain any visitors who came by. We passed through some shrubs that were blocking our view and found ourselves dumbstruck at the sight of a clear pond stretching before us.

"Wow, they made a pond in a desert! Look, is that an arbor over there? And that classy building over there! Ah... If I lived in a place like this, I think I'd get too accustomed to the luxury." The servant lady must have found Marie's reaction entertaining, because she couldn't hold in her laughter. She then placed a foot on a crossing stone and turned around.

"This is where I will be taking my leave. Lord Kazuhiho, Lady Mariabelle, please enjoy your stay." She said it so naturally, but we only froze in response. This place was some distance away from the mansion and was likely made as a place to greet important visitors. They had let us in so easily, and the lady told us to enjoy ourselves, so maybe she understood how we felt.

Mariabelle turned to face me, and her face was flush with

excitement, as expected. Her eyes were shining like big amethyst crystals.



And so, I found myself sitting on a couch under a roof.

We were kind of zoning out for a while, but suddenly we came to at the same time. I never knew that people just sat there in a daze when they were in an exceptionally nice environment. Just then, Marie stood up and walked toward the edge of the arbor. There was nowhere to stand beyond that edge, only water where small silver fish swam around.

The breeze was refreshing, and I couldn't believe we were in a harsh environment like a desert. We could even hear birds singing, and it was as if we had wandered into a luxury resort.

"This is amazing! I want to be rich someday!" Marie said as she turned around with an innocent smile.

*Hmm... It's hard to believe such a crude comment is coming from an elf.* But as a humble salaryman, I fully understood how she felt.

This pond and its surroundings were made as a reception area, and the mansion proper was on the other side. There were fruits laid out on a table, and the wind carried the faint smell of incense. It felt like the perfect place to welcome visitors.

Marie grasped one of the fruits in hand and took a bite, but her happy expression suddenly soured, and she pursed her lips before swallowing the bite.

"...This is no good, I'm too used to sweet fruits, like Japanese apples. Not only is this not sweet enough, it's far too tart. Unforgivable."

"Well, I figured they wouldn't be able to beat fruits from Japan." There was something odd about Japanese fruits, as if they were the result of a search for the ultimate sugar content and flavor. They were basically expected to be modified to improve upon the original by making them sweeter without being excessively heavy in taste.

Marie looked like she would break out in a jig just a moment ago, but she sat down on a chair with a calm expression.

“Ah, that just reminded me. I’m not supposed to expect much from food in this world. It’s disappointing to know that no matter how rich you are, you can’t even have delicious food here.”

“I don’t know. Arilai is relatively rich in spices, so I’m sure they’ll have good food. But judging by how Zera is, I feel like he’s just gonna offer us some meat for food.” As we were talking, a shadow loomed over the black cat that had been curled up on a cushion. It was laying there blissfully with drool coming out of its mouth, but then it got suddenly scooped up by the newcomer.

“Well, I can’t deny that.” The cat was caught off guard, and it flailed around in the air as a large man held it in his arms. He seemed to find this amusing and flashed a smile. It was someone we had seen in the labyrinth many times and the very man who had invited us to the mansion.

“Oh, hello, Zera.”

“Hey. Sorry for the wait. My talk with my old man went on longer than expected.” Zera was wearing a black suit with the collar done up, and there was a different, dignified air about him from when we saw him in the labyrinth. Despite that, his curious expression as he stared at the cat gave him away as the same old Zera.

“Hmm? What kind of animal are ya? You remind me of the Neko tribe.” He stared intently at Wridra’s face but quickly got a swipe of its nails across his face. The Arkdragon was kind at heart, but she was still unaccustomed to humans. It used this opportunity to escape into Marie’s awaiting arms.

“Ow... Oh, I almost forgot. You can stay as long as you want until we depart again, but I gotta ask you not to get near that big building tonight. Things might get a little dicey there.”

“Dicey? Is something happening tonight?” The big building he was referring to was the residential building they must have been living in. I could see the two-story building from here, located between the pond and the woods, but I wondered what he meant by his

statement.

I asked him out of curiosity, but his face suddenly slackened in a grin.

“Ahem, this is more of an internal matter. Doula will be visiting soon to say hello to my parents. It’s been hard to find time to return from the labyrinth lately, you know? She insists it’s better to do this sooner rather than later.” Marie and I immediately realized what was going on.

The two had seemed to be moments from getting married, and they had been getting closer by the day. So, they had to be on their way to tying the knot.

“Congratulations! Wait, why do you say it’s going to get dicey?”

“Well, it’s just a hunch I have. My family has a long history that can be a bit of a pain in the ass.” It seemed he had no intention of elaborating, so we just tilted our heads and let it go. I remembered hearing that the Thousand household expected women marrying into the family to be strong, but they weren’t going to test her power, were they? Marie and I exchanged looks that said, *“No way, they wouldn’t…”* but Zera said nothing to deny it. He muttered, “Something like that…” and just then, we heard a carriage arriving at the premises.

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Doula felt as if she was stepping into battle.

Her dress felt heavy, like a suit of armor, and the long sleeves she was unaccustomed to felt awkwardly tight around her arms. The corset was uncomfortably tight around her well-trained body, and the clothing that accentuated her breasts felt disgraceful as a woman whose place was on the battlefield. Luckily, it wasn’t excessively revealing, since it was designed to cover up the scars on her skin.

The black carriage, her clothes—everything felt so stifling. Not to

mention the sky of the rainy season seen through the window was dark and nearing sundown, and she couldn't help but let out a sigh.

Another thing annoying her was the curious stare she felt from the companion riding with her.

"...What's that look for?" The words, full of displeasure, seemed to leak out of their own accord. The waiting maid stared at her without faltering. In fact, she leaned in closer as she looked on with interest blazing in her eyes.

"I simply could not believe it! Lady Doula, who was expected to be a virgin to her grave, is going to visit a man! Who would have guessed?!"

"I never said that. I got invited to a dinner, that's all. Why don't you go home already?" Doula shot her a look of annoyance, but the waiting maid was unconcerned. Her face was freckled like Doula's, and she seemed a bit younger than her. She would have read the room and kept quiet if someone else was there, but since they were alone, she didn't hold back from sticking her neck into things. The waiting maid waved her feet back and forth joyously as she continued staring at Doula.

"But tomorrow is the big day, isn't it? There will be many people at the celebration. I will make arrangements to ensure your outfit matches Lord Zera's."

"Yeah, I'll leave that to you..." Doula replied listlessly as she sat with her head resting on her hand, then let out a sigh toward the window.

She didn't come from a wealthy household. Though her house had a long history, it wasn't blessed with a skilled male, and it continued on by burning through its meager savings. This was why Doula, the oldest female of the house, had continually strived to be stronger even than any man.

It was uncommon for women to learn how to fight in this country. Yet, with unrelenting determination and effort, Doula's

skill achieved exceptional grades in mock war exercises, and she had been recognized for the various new battle tactics she had come up with.

There were many who had been stricken by the sight of her courageous and calm demeanor as she took lead and masterfully controlled holy barriers. But her unwavering desire to be stronger than any man took precedence over any attempts at romance, so there had never been a hint of such things in the past...

Suddenly, Doula realized the waiting maid was grinning at her mistress again.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Oh, nothing at all.” Earlier, the maid had been given an order to prepare an outfit matching Zera’s. They were attending a celebration party hosted by the royal family, which meant they were to attend together, where they would be announcing that they would be getting married soon. Doula wasn’t exactly an expert of social practices, but even she should have had some idea of what was to be expected. Not only did she not deny it, but she gave a positive response... The waiting maid figured that meant this was the real deal.

And yet, things weren’t so simple.

If Doula was to marry into that house, she would need to prove her strength to the master there. The rumors that the Thousand household sought ‘strong blood’ rather than social standing, appearance, or education were quite plausible. This meant it would be hard for the waiting maid to assist Doula with her knowledge. Marrying into a household with such a bloody history was not a simple matter.

The obstacles ahead were far from small.

There may have been conflicts ahead.

But the waiting maid knew in her heart that this was the path for

her mistress to find happiness. Deep inside, she wished they weren't dealing with such a difficult household and that they could simply focus on having fun instead.

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*Hoot, hoot.*

Just when I was starting to get used to this luxurious comfort, Marie heard an unfamiliar bird cry and looked up to the night sky. The room was detached from the main building, as it was surrounded by the pond and illuminated with a lantern, but it was too dark to see in the moonless night. This resting area, protected by its roof and pillars, had a sense of spaciousness that couldn't have been found in Japan. That was why I stayed there with the elf and black cat until it got dark instead of going back to the main building, but then we made an unexpected discovery.

"An owl?"

"That came from pretty close by. I wonder if there are owls in deserts, too?" As she said so, Marie's long ears perked up, trying to pick up a faint noise.

She then stood up from the thickly cushioned long chair and closed the book she had taken from the ancient labyrinth. She loved to read in both Japan and the dream world, and I thought that was the best way to spend time in the rainy season.

I followed her and stood with her at the edge of the pond, and then I heard the same sound from up in the night sky.

"Yeah, it sounds like an owl, though I can't be a hundred percent sure, since they're pretty rare in Japan."

"I haven't seen many of them since leaving the elven forest either. I wonder if it wouldn't mind coming over here to pay us a visit." To owls, night was an important time in which they hunted for food. I doubted it would come over just to hang out with us. I considered such thoughts as I picked up the fruit on the table, then handed it to

the confused-looking Marie.

"Owls in the desert are pretty uncommon, and I've heard they like to eat fruits. I don't know too much about the birds in this world, but maybe it'll come over to eat this."

"Oh, I would love that. Umm… Here's some delicious fruit for you… Though, it isn't not as good as the ones in Japan." The elf held it up in both hands, lifting it toward the sky.

She looked adorable, and the sight made me want to protectively watch over her forever.

Marie's appearance was changing by the day. I'd noticed that her body was taking on a feminine softness to it, and her facial features, attitude, and even her voice were different from a few months ago. I had heard that elves lived for a long time, but their growth was accelerated once they left the forest. It was as if the forest was their cradle, and they learn and mature into adults as they learn about the wide world.

Such thoughts were on my mind as I noted her long indoor wear and fairy-like side profile. I considered how I would continue to appreciate her beauty as she grew by the day.

*Flap, flap, flap…*

I heard a noise from above and looked up to the sky.

It was too dark to see for the most part, but the faint view of a bird flapping its wings entered my vision. We watched wordlessly as it eventually turned to change its trajectory, and then…

*Flap!* The owl folded its wings as it landed on the elf girl's arm, looking at us with what seemed to be a surprised expression. It stared at us with its big, round eyes. Its wings were the color of a sparrow's, and it was small enough to hold in one hand. It tilted its head at her as if to ask, "Aren't you gonna give me the fruit?"

"Ah, whoa…" Marie's amethyst eyes widened as she felt the little creature's weight on her arm. She looked at me, silently asking me

what to do, and I gestured for her to give the bird its treat. The desert owl accepted the offering of fruit with its beak, then flapped away into the night again.

It left behind Marie, standing with a blank expression, and the black cat, curled up on a cushion. Wridra peeked open one eye, but closed it soon after and began nodding off to sleep. Marie finally opened her mouth to speak.

"We just saw an owl."

"We sure did. I'm surprised it was so small." Marie nodded happily, then stared at her now-empty hand.

"It's been so long since I left the elven forest. Remember how I was known as a misanthropist? Everyone there assumed that I wouldn't get along with anyone outside, and I'd come back home right away."

"I'm not sure if I buy that you're a misanthropist. It doesn't seem that way to me." I took her hand as she cocked her head at me, and then I used a handkerchief to wipe the red fruit juices from her hand. Her soft hand was now clean, although a faint, sweet scent lingered. "There are all sorts of people out there. Maybe you just have a good eye for people."

"Hehe, I hope that's true. I was serious when I said I wanted to live in the Koto Ward. I want to stay there and become friends with all the neighbors." Yeah, if she really hated people, she wouldn't have been able to say that with such a beautiful smile. At the very least, Marie had developed a good relationship with everyone she had met in Japan so far. The fact that she had learned how to speak and read Japanese proved that she hoped to become a part of the community.

"All I can say is, have as much fun as you can. You have the ability to draw others to you, so I think the results will follow naturally. Just like with that owl earlier."

"Haha, you always do this. I'm going to end up spoiled if you keep complimenting me like this. Do you ever think about anything besides how to keep me entertained?" Actually, I did enjoy watching

her pouty and exhausted in the desert, but I decided to keep that to myself.

We were enjoying our time in peace for some time longer when we noticed a commotion and turned around to find someone's shadow walking across the other side of the woods. All we could tell from where we were was that a woman in a dress was leading the way, and a man walked behind her.

"Could that be Zera?"

"Then maybe the woman is Doula. She should have been at the dinner to introduce herself, if I'm not mistaken." We both tilted our heads as we watched, and then Zera grabbed onto the woman's hand. After a short exchange, the woman in the dress changed her direction, seeming to have reconsidered, then came stomping our way.

"Wait, is she coming toward us?"

"I can't tell from here, it looks like she's upset from the way she's walking." She eventually made her way to the pond and lightly hopped across the crossing stones, and the woman with the fiery-red hair approached us. The dress seemed heavy, but she moved with ease in it. As I stood there appreciating this fact, the duo's voices finally came into earshot.

"Hey, calm down, Doula."

"I am calm. I'm perfectly calm. Good evening, you two. Sorry to disturb you. I actually have a request." Doula was illuminated by the light of the arbor, her cheeks flush and her eyes sharp. There was an intensity about her, as if she was about to go charging into a labyrinth. I was a bit taken aback by her aggressive demeanor, but I wanted to know what the nature of this request was.

Now the center of attention, she rolled up the sleeves of her dress to reveal her bare skin and well-shaped muscles.

"Let's all cooperate together to defeat the second floor master. I'm

going to prove my abilities to the master of this household." We looked at her, our eyes round and full of confusion. How did a pre-marital greeting end up leading to this conclusion? I glanced at Zera, but he only gave me a nonverbal apology, and I could only tilt my head questioningly again.

But seeing the angry, razor-sharp look in Doula's eyes as she breathed out of her nose with agitation made it hard for me to ask her anything. There was no time for consideration. The woman's face, beautifully done up with makeup, moved in closer, and her sharp, commanding voice called out, "Team Amethyst, my Team Andalusite, and Zera's Team Bloodstone. I am requesting for these three teams to form a cooperative raid team." She slammed the table, causing Zera and me to respond with a *"Yes!"* and *"R-Right,"* respectively.

I finally understood. It was a fact that this household sought only the strong, and the head of the house must have provoked Doula by telling her to prove her abilities in the ancient labyrinth in order to marry Zera.

But judging by the usually calm woman's seething rage, I could only imagine how brutal the dinner must have been. It was a good thing we were hanging out all the way out here, as Zera had advised, but it seemed we were going to end up being dragged into their affairs anyway. Though, I had to admit, I was feeling a little excited about the prospect of forming a raid team alliance for the first time in my life.

Now, it was bedtime for good boys and girls. Rather, it was about time we headed back to my world to get back to work.

I slid into the high-quality bed, enjoying the feel of the silky sheets. As I basked in the comfort, I found that the thin down quilt was astonishingly light. It seemed great at regulating heat while being nice and airy, too.

I flipped over the quilt, and Marie's face popped out from

underneath. She smiled, as if to say, “Isn’t it amazing?” and I nodded in response.

“Rich people’s houses are really nice.”

“I love the fancy bed. I wish I could take the whole thing back to your room. Oh, maybe it would take up too much room.” She giggled, then buried her head into the pillow.

The faint lights glowing around the ceiling were coming from light spirits. They blinked like fireflies, seeming to understand that we would be going to bed soon.

“Hehe, Doula sure was intense earlier, wasn’t she? I mean, I would be annoyed if I was told to go defeat the floor master, too.” Marie whispered as such, and we happened to let out a small sigh in unison.

It seemed the condition for marrying into the Thousand household was indeed just that. Supposedly, Doula and Zera were harshly criticized and told that their marriage couldn’t be approved when they ended up needing to be rescued back in the labyrinth.

“I never would have thought their marriage would get shot down because we helped them.”

“There’s not much that could be done about that. It wasn’t as if we had any other choice in that situation.” According to the master of the Thousand household, Doula’s family standing wasn’t an issue, but he couldn’t welcome anyone who carried such a shame in their history. Dishonor like that could only be washed away in blood, it seemed.

Seeing how the master of the house was taking such a stubborn attitude, Doula had apparently left her seat as soon as the dinner ended. After enduring such an unwelcoming attitude, she had no choice but to leave in anger.

“An alliance raid, huh? That does sound exciting, but we need to make sure our secret isn’t discovered.”

“Yes, we can’t let anyone know that we can travel to Japan. We may be spending time with others for days at a time, so we’ll have to be careful. I see you sleeping without a care in the world, Wridra, but this involves you, too.” She flipped the blanket over to reveal the black cat slumbering peacefully.

This was the familiar of the Arkdragon herself, who would be rejoining us in a few days. It would be a huge issue if everyone found out the grand dragon had been tagging along. Such powerful beings could affect everyone around them with their very existence.

One of the cat’s eyes opened and glanced toward us. It seemed to tell us, “There’s nothing to worry about,” which gave us a bit of relief.

“Well, I’m relieved if Wridra thinks it will be fine. Most things you say end up coming true. Sometimes I wonder if you’re some sort of prophet.” Marie let out a small yawn. Since we would be getting ready to sleep soon, she reached out toward the cat’s collar as usual. Flipping off the switch when leaving this world was part of our daily routine. But surprisingly, the cat resisted the attempt by hiding deeper into the blanket.

“Hm? What’s wrong? You want to stay like that tonight?”

“Oh, maybe it wants to keep watch for us while we sleep like in the labyrinth?”

“Meow.”

It seemed that was the case. Marie looked at me with confusion, and I decided to explain in place of Wridra. If I guessed wrong, Wridra would surely correct me anyway.

“This building is for guests, but someone will probably come wake us up later. I don’t know what will happen, but maybe Wridra will cover things up for us while we sleep?” I shot the cat a glance, and it nodded in agreement.

It was the same deal back in the labyrinth. Our location was transmitted to the other teams and headquarters through the Magic Tool, but Wridra had controlled the outgoing information for us while we slept.

"You really are brilliant, aren't you? Come here, Wridra. I'll give you some well-deserved pats." The cat walked over with a reluctant expression, but as a cat lover, Marie's pats were quite advanced. As Marie delivered on her promise, the cat purred uncontrollably as it squirmed around in delight. Wridra's main body was probably giggling back at her dragon's den, too.

I may have been slow to pick up on certain things, but even I got the picture as I watched them interact. Wridra's whelps would settle down soon, and she would soon be reunited with the elf. We had made promises to visit an amusement park, and it made me smile to see them playing around as if they couldn't wait for the fun to begin. That was probably part of why the dragon was so protective of Marie.

"Let me get some pats in, too. Whoa, your stomach is so warm." The cat purred, letting me touch its defenseless stomach without resistance. Its fur was so soft that I wanted to bury my face in it, but… Wridra was technically someone's wife, and I thought that might have been a bad idea.

"All things considered, you're the overprotective type, aren't you, Wridra?" Considering the characteristics of her body, it would normally be better for her to avoid people in general, but the cat insisted that wasn't necessary. There was a glint of intelligence in its large eyes, and there was a deep sense of tolerance to it that was uncharacteristic of a kitten.

It opened its paws wide, and I tried to figure out what the gesture meant.

"Wait, do you mean I can stick my face in your fur? Um, then don't mind if I do…" I buried my face in the cat's chest, letting myself

become enshrouded in its softness.

*Whoa, that feels nice.* The comforting warmth and smell of the sun in combination with the softness of a kitten felt almost addictive. The cat's paws with tiny claws held on to me, and its cheerful purring threatened to lull me to sleep.

"I can't wait to see you again in a few days, Wridra," I found myself blurting quietly.

It meowed back in agreement.

Wridra probably felt the same way. She had acquired maternal instincts for us somewhere along the line, and she must have been looking forward to seeing us, which explained why she watched over us until the morning. Though, she really didn't need to worry about us so much.

"Well, let's go to sleep soon. We've been up pretty late."

"Yes, let's do that."

The cat curled up nearby, and the bed creaked as Marie moved closer. She placed a hand next to my face and looked up at me, her silhouette outlined with a faint light.

But for some reason, she didn't embrace me like she usually did.

The gentle sound of rain could be heard from outside as Marie and I stared at each other. I wondered why she wasn't saying anything when her pretty lips finally spoke.

"You're so small and cute in your dreams." With that, she slowly moved toward me.

My heart thumped as I waited, and the girl's body pressed against me, her soft arms holding me in an embrace. Her smooth hair fell upon my collarbone, and as I narrowed my eyes at the sensation, she placed her thigh on top of me.

*Ah, she's so attractive.* So much so that even her breath felt steamy.

Her lustrous skin, the look in her eyes as she looked at me... I

couldn't help my heart from drumming with her body so close to mine.

Then, I felt her chest press against that pounding heart in my chest.

"Good night."

"Good night, Marie. Though, we'll just be waking up in Japan again." Her giggle tickled my ear.

The light spirit eventually vanished, and my thoughts began to slow. Waking from a dream was a strange feeling. It was almost as if the outlines of my body gradually faded away. Maybe the process of melting was part of the ritual of departing into the world I came from. I still recognized the softness I held in my arms, but that, too, grew more and more vague.

We sank down, eventually waking in the sunlight.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 3: The Hero Candidate's Encounter Once I finished working in the real world, I played in the dream world.

I played by wandering through labyrinths and grass fields, raising my level by defeating ferocious monsters and finding occasional treasure chests. I had done this for nearly twenty years, and this was all part of the norm for me by now.

Even so, what I was doing now was hard to explain.

I was at a rocky area near the arbor, doing a handstand on Astroblade, the sword of stardust. I steadied myself on one hand, my free hand behind my back and my legs wavering to maintain balance.

I was unfamiliar with the position, but this was the dream world. It wouldn't hurt even if I fell, and I didn't feel much fatigue, either. This allowed me to continue the exercise with a peaceful mindset and without a shred of fear.

"Hmm, you seem awfully calm for some reason."

"I guess I am. I often get told I look absentminded, but maybe that's just because of my face," I said to the upside down Zera. The black-haired man was tall with a solid build. His dark skin was likely tanned in the desert sun.

He thought about it for a moment, then did a loop around me as he observed me.

"I thought you moved fast for being so young, but it looks like you've been through a lot of training. You must have a great teacher."

*Oh, I guess he's not gonna respond to the part about me looking absentminded.* Though, I wasn't going to touch on the fact that my

teacher was the Arkdragon, either.

"So, these sorts of acrobatics will help me learn energy manipulation?"

"Hm? Oh, this is just for me to gauge how much training you've had... Hey, straighten out your toes." He was upping the difficulty without mercy.

He adjusted my position, and I rebalanced myself with my back arched. I probably would've cried if this was occuring in my own world, but this was just a dream, after all.

Now, it wasn't as if I was a fan of doing morning acrobatics. Zera happened to walk by as I was doing some practice swings with my new weapon, Astroblade, and he drew me into a conversation.

This weapon had a special effect that allowed its user to charge up to unleash a long-range burst of energy. Despite that, I was a complete amateur when it came to energy manipulation, so this feature was being wasted on me.

"If you wanna learn to manipulate energy, you need to familiarize yourself with your own body first. I remember my dad used to make me do this, too. Really takes me back." With that, Zera stroked the scruff on his chin.

Zera was undoubtedly leagues ahead of me in terms of energy manipulation, and he decided to give me some advice when he saw me struggling with it. The black cat, or rather, Wridra, wandered around my feet and looked up at me, seemingly confused by the concept of energy manipulation.

Marie was reading a book at the arbor some distance away, occasionally glancing toward us. The look on her face seemed to remark, "Looks difficult," as if it didn't concern her in the slightest.

"You know, your weapon is the perfect catalyst for learning how to control energy. You get immediate feedback with that thing." I looked up, wondering what he meant, and he grinned.

“Try activating it from that position. If you keep it at low power, maybe you can float.”

*Wow, he’s pretty ambiguous with his explanations.* The look of excited anticipation on his face told me he just wanted to watch me for fun. Oh well… He wasn’t going to let me go until I did it anyway.

*Fwoom…*

I sent some faint energy into the sword, and Astroblade began to glow.

I felt the energy draining from my body, and I started to sweat more profusely. The sword hilt nearly slipped from my hand, but I managed to subtly activate it.

“And, there… Whoaaa!” I kept the firepower at a minimum, but the power unleashed from the blade threw my body off balance. Apparently, I wasn’t allowed to fall, because Zera’s thick arm caught me and returned me to my upside down position.

He chewed on an apple-like fruit as he peered at me.

“…Thank you.”

“Let’s keep it going. We can eat once you learn how to float.” *Ugh… What a pain…*

But this pushy attitude reminded me of something. It reminded me of those monks who first tried to teach me to control energy. They were so enthusiastic about training me, like some hot-headed gym teachers.

“Almost there. Keep your energy at a steady level as you unleash it. You can do it, Kazuhiho. I know it. You just gotta try!”

*Oho… This is reeeally becoming a pain now…* Energy was such a vague concept in the first place. It wasn’t displayed on the status screen, and many people were skeptical whether it was even real. The majority of people didn’t want to dedicate time to such a nebulous thing.

“Hng, urrrgh…”

“Oh, oh, you’re almost there. Come on, come on! You can do it!” My body lifted up, floating for the duration of a breath. But as soon as I stopped breathing, the flow of energy stopped as well. The blade sunk back into the rock.

I breathed out roughly, feeling exhausted, then looked up at Zera. “I did it, right? Will you let me go?” I asked wordlessly.

“All right, let’s aim for ten seconds next. You’ve got this; you’ll get it in no time.”

*Oof!* My eyes nearly rolled over, and Marie laughed out loud while clutching her stomach.

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We walked in the sprinkling rain toward the two carriages parked at the premises. We moved at a brisk pace to try to escape the rain, and the awaiting coachman opened the door with a bow.

Rainy season in the desert reminded me of Japan’s rainy season. The ever-increasing humidity was downright unpleasant, and the temperature dropped by the day, as if the rain was draining away the heat.

Marie jogged over, then looked up at the thick rain clouds.

“It’s raining pretty hard now. Oh, excuse me, is it okay if this cat joins us? It’s not dirty.” The coachman gestured that it was fine, and the small elf entered the carriage with the cat in her arms. The interior wasn’t too spacious, but it was fine enough for people our size. Not used to the length of her skirt, Marie nearly slipped down as she climbed in, but I hurriedly supported her from behind.

“Oh, thank you. I nearly stepped on my hem.”

“It’s okay. Be careful now.” Her body was light, as expected, and her amethyst eyes smiled when she turned to look at me. Her dress was white today, unlike her usual outfits, and I felt it that

highlighted her beauty even more.

Inside the carriage were leather seats facing each other, and Marie and the black cat quickly took up the seats next to the window. I brushed the beads of water off of my shoulders and climbed in with Zera, who was a resident of this mansion.

Zera called out to the coachman, and the carriage began to move forward with the crack of a whip. Vivid gardens passed by in the somewhat cloudy glass windows. The sight surely would have been even nicer had the weather been good.

I loosened the collar of my outfit and took a deep breath, then spoke to Zera, who was sitting across from me.

“Thank you for letting me borrow your clothes.”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. Those are from when I was a kid, and they were just gathering dust, anyway. Were you planning on going in your usual getup if you hadn’t stopped by my place?” he asked, and we just laughed the matter off. Marie and I didn’t even own houses in the dream world, so we obviously didn’t intend to buy such fancy clothes or have any on hand.

Unlike our usual apparel, I was wearing a long-sleeved robe in a muted color, black boots, and a shawl. I also hung a short sword from my waist in the fashion of the military Thousand household, but this was for ornamental purposes only.

“Oh, it actually makes you look somewhat dashing. All you need to do is shut those sleepy-looking eyes.”

“I can’t really argue, since you look especially good in your outfit. I think that flower hairpin is very pretty on you.” I gave Marie my rather conventional feedback, and she grinned happily and hugged my arm. Feminine as always, she seemed to be enjoying her current attire so unlike her usual sorceress getup. Her subtle lipstick and the embroidered laces ornamenting her long ears accentuated her natural beauty even further. The servants had been gleefully giving her a fitting session just a little while ago.

The road turned to stone pavement as we passed the gates, and the clacketing wheels grew noisier. It didn't rock the carriage too hard, but it was much louder than riding in a car would have been. There were suddenly no more trees lining the street, and we started moving into a somewhat dark road. It seemed we were heading in the opposite direction from the castle in the middle of the country.

"We're heading to the celebration ceremony, but we're stopping by somewhere first. We need to go pick up Doula."

"Sure, of course. Are the other team members on the way, too?"

"Yeah, but this isn't a stagecoach. Personally, I don't think we need to go out of our way to bring foreign culture into this desert country of ours."

*Huh, so the horses can only travel over roads that have gotten maintenance.* They could walk over hardened paths, but a different animal was necessary if one intended to travel over sand.

Doula's residence had an antique atmosphere to it.

The garden was well cared for, but the lot size was rather small—compared to the Thousand household, that was. Zera had the coachman wait as he began walking through the rain. Marie watched him for a while, then uttered, "Say, do you think those two will be able to get married?"

"Who knows. With effort, sure, but we haven't even seen the second floor's floor master yet." The floor master was full of mysteries, if the rumors were to be believed. I'd heard that it appeared out of nowhere and quietly stole a warrior's soul. It was notoriously hard to defeat, considering that it just reappeared again even when taken down with focus fire.

"The undead are my natural enemies, so I've always just ran away from them."

"Oh, that's… not too surprising, actually. It's better to flee if you don't have access to holy attribute attacks. Most people do the same

thing." To be honest, I didn't really 'get' them. It was probably the very fact that they were so annoying to deal with that made everyone struggle so much with clearing the second floor.

As our conversation went on, we heard a door open. There stood Doula, water dripping from her long red hair. She wore a collared cape, perhaps to ward off the rain, and her dress accentuated her femininity more than usual.

"Oh, look at you cuties. Where are you two headed, all dolled up like that?"

"Hello, Doula. We were about to go enjoy a fancy dinner party." Doula met eyes with the black cat that was taking up the seat. They blinked at each other, and then she picked the cat up and took a seat. The door was closed behind her, and Zera entered from the opposite side. Doula looked at him with a sidelong glance, then opened her mouth.

"The undead are difficult to deal with. At least physical attacks are still effective if they have a body, but I can't stand their appearance and smell. There have been sightings of Living Armors reported, as well."

"Ohh, how interesting. I'd love to see one with my own eyes." When I replied as such, the two women gave me a look that clearly told me that they thought I was a weirdo.

*I mean, it's not like I want to face a zombie, but who wouldn't want to see a Living Armor at least once in their lifetime?* Trading blows with an opponent equipped with a sword and armor… That was the very essence of fantasy worlds.

I explained this to the women, but they didn't seem to understand. Zera, on the other hand…

"Yeah, I get you. A formation of those types is way more exciting to square off against than the type that just hops around. One time, I got surrounded by those things, and the battle… Oh, we're good to go." Another crack of the whip sounded, and the carriage finally

began heading toward the castle.

Zera and Doula were wearing matching outfits, and they looked incredibly good sitting next to each other. However, the bride-to-be wasn't looking at her future husband but the elf sitting across from her instead.

"You really are exceptional even among elves, Mariabelle. Can I look at you from more close-up?"

"Now, now. Don't mess with the people who saved us."

"Oh, what's the harm? We're allies now, so we should get to know each other better." With that, Doula tried to pull Marie toward her by the arm and shoulder, but the cat's expression grew disgruntled as its footing became more unstable. In contrast, the elf girl looked rather uneasy.

"Um, Doula, aren't you getting a little close?"

"Don't mind me. I just love to stare at pretty girls, and I'd already given up on everyone else."

*Whoa... She's pretty wild when she's not on the battlefield, huh...?*

I couldn't help but feel awkward as I watched Doula touch Marie's supple cheek and whisper with an enraptured expression. It seemed she, uh... had a thing for girls? But she seemed to sense my question and shook her head, causing her red hair to flail about her face.

"No, I am simply admiring a beautiful flower. You two should stay the night at my place tonight."

"Eep! H-Help me, Kazuhiro!" Ah... I wanted to help, but I really didn't know how to stand up to women. All I could do was rescue the black cat from getting squished between them.

Anyway, we were on the way to the celebration.

The wheels rolled about noisily, and we passed a large gate to find the venue decorated with flowers.

There were many attendants for the celebration. There was much

to be gained from a successful raid on a labyrinth, and so the royal family had sent many invitations to show off the results. They wanted to show off to the various organizations that hadn't yet received permission to participate in the raid, such as adventurers, guilds, clergymen, and influential individuals who had been sitting on the sidelines.

Many skilled fighters with promising futures, as well as dressed up young ladies and gentlemen, were also in attendance. The houses would gain stability if a match was made here, so dresses had been flying off the shelves in the past few days.

We listened to such behind-the-scenes details from Zera and Doula as the carriage slowly made its way through the site.

In this country, there was a title of "master." It basically referred to very important people who had authority over the members of a party, and there were also various assemblies with great military prowess, like the Thousand household. They were at the center of the upcoming raid, and those who didn't have the right to participate were only permitted to watch.

The venue was splendidly decorated, and although it fulfilled the pretext of welcoming us to the event, the main objective of all this was to gain funding from the rich and affluent. The royal family had perfectly manipulated the narrative to convince everyone that they needed to ride this wave, or they would be walking a long and dark path for many years to come. That was why deals were being made all around us, and the treasury was getting filled in exchange for the right to participate in the raid.

"*sigh*... It's sad to know that this is all about money..."

"Aw, don't say that. Controlling the flow of money is part of what needs to be done to run a country. We're able to enjoy the food and drinks because of it. Right?" Zera grinned, and we walked down the carpet-lined floor.

Once I had learned what was actually going on, our seemingly

resplendent surroundings gave off a different vibe. What seemed like well-mannered smiles were actually disguised desperate attempts to hold on to their power and authority. This glorious event was being supported by such hidden intentions. *Hmm, how boring.* Or maybe to them, this was the opportunity they had dreamed of.

The only saving grace for me was that I was leading Marie, who was so cute that she stood out among everyone there, by the hand. She had been looking around curiously along with the black cat but noticed me looking at her and smiled.

"Look, this place is so fancy. Let's walk around together later."

"Yeah, I'd love to. Think we'd be able to have some drinks?"

"I can, since I'm an elf. Not you, since you're a human."

*Whaaat? No fair.* This was the complete opposite of how things were in Japan.

Marie saw the sad look on my face and hugged my arm, and her carefree laughter was enough to make people around us stop mid-conversation. I heard them whisper things about elves being uncommon around here and how she looked like a fairy, and Marie shrunk away from them as she embraced my arm tighter.

The party went on as such, but the atmosphere changed completely when it came time for each labyrinth raid team to be introduced. Each team was to be introduced by a representative as grand string music played in the background—a process that was plain torture for an average salaryman like me.

This process may have also served as a means for people to appraise future prospects for marriage. I saw women who could hardly contain their excitement hide their mouths with fans as they spoke to each other with glee. It was like some sort of prize show, but the raid teams seemed to be reveling in it, and this was an opportunity for a master to display his own worth. The group accepted the applause as they entered the hall.

“Lord Zarish of Team Diamond, who is said to be a hero candidate…!” The cheering was so loud that the introduction could hardly be heard.

But this was to be expected. Not only was he the most skilled fighter in all of Arilai, but he boasted an inhumanly high level of 140. His features and outfit were quite sharp, and out of the multiple floor masters residing on the first floor, he was said to have defeated the most powerful one.

Eight beautiful women accompanied him, and each of them were rumored to be mighty warriors in their own rights. The group demanded the attention of men and women alike, an extraordinary amount of excitement filling the hall. The crowd pushed each other in an attempt to speak to one of the group members, and the chaos didn’t seem to be dying down any time soon. Amidst the commotion, the person in charge gestured for us to go up next.

“Oh, I was pretty nervous, but I doubt anyone’s paying attention after those guys. Whew.”

“Listen, we’re the ones who defeated a floor master before anyone else did. We deserve just as much recognition for our accomplishments.” I took Marie’s hand, and we descended the stairs, still talking to each other in a hushed tone. We probably could have spoken normally without anyone taking notice, and we didn’t even hear our own introduction.

“Lucky us,” I thought, but it may have been a bit premature to think so.

Marie clenched her teeth in frustration, then took in a deep breath and blew it out at her fingertips. Half-translucent flower petals danced through the air, flowing out into the heated venue.

“Oh, is that…”

“Yes, the same thing I used in your room. Though, it doesn’t have any effect other than smelling nice.”

All Marie did was deliver a cooling breeze, but the uproar came to a momentary halt, and when the crowd looked up, they saw a young girl alongside a young boy holding a black cat in his arms. The impression they gave off had such a stark contrast with their surroundings that it was enough to draw everyone's attention.

The attendant unnecessarily raised his voice to declare our introduction.

"And now, the youngest team, with the fewest members that brought bounties upon Arilai by defeating the floor master faster than any other team… Team Amethyst! Despite being participants from a foreign country, they are rumored to have left without so much as a glance for the vast riches they had unlocked, and no one knows the depths of their abilities. Not to mention…" I had experienced enough stories and anime alike to know that what drew a crowd's eye more than anything else was the nature of something being 'unexpected.'

The first impressions of the beautiful, fairy-like young girl and me, a sleepy-looking guy, were shattered by the attendant's excited introduction. Honestly, I wanted to walk up to him with a smile and tell him to cut it out.

"Hmm, you get weirdly competitive sometimes, you know that?"

"Hehe, nothing wrong with getting competitive every once in a while. It's unacceptable for us to get no applause after all the work we did. We already got ignored when we arrived here, so I'm not letting it happen again." It seemed she didn't realize that her flowery smile drew the crowd's attention even further. Even I still got enchanted looking at her, so the crowd surely didn't… Ah, yeah, they all had that dreamy look on their faces.

Unbeknownst to us, Zarish of Team Diamond had been staring intently as well, but he wasn't looking at either the cat or me. He maintained his smile as he half-heartedly interacted with those around him, but his eyes were locked on the elf girl the whole time.

The girl who had the rare class of Spirit Sorceress… According to the reports by his people, the traps she prepared had laid waste to hundreds of monsters and successfully trapped a level 82 demon. Adding the draconian woman into the mix, defeating the floor master must have been a simple task.

Zarish, who was said to be the hero candidate, had been rather concerned about the fact that he hadn't seen that beautiful black-haired woman since that one time. He figured she had given up on that incompetent-looking boy and abandoned him.

*That was quite a big fish he let slip through his hands. I won't make the same mistake.*

His cold smile grew wider.

The dark-skinned elf who was part of his team was standing some distance away, and a shiver ran down her spine when she saw the expression on his face. It felt as if her master, Zarish, was comparing her to that other elf girl.

"That elf brat has you beat, don't you think?" The man standing next to her said into her ear, and her heart pounded in her chest so hard it pained her. It was just a joke, but it hit far too close to home.

And so, the party continued on into the night.

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I let out a sigh of admiration as I looked up at the display case.

A full suit of armor was proudly on display. Even its joints were fully reinforced with metal, and its powerful yet delicate form was nothing short of breathtaking.

"Veiron's latest work… It looks amazing." It wasn't just any ordinary armor, of course; the metal it was built out of was extracted from giants. This meant that despite its rigid appearance, it had an elasticity to it, and by adding magic to the mix, it had the capability to support the human form. When worn by a proficient user, one could lightly kick off the ground and leap up onto

rooftops.

"You have some odd hobbies, you know. I don't understand what's entertaining about staring at this thing," Marie said as she peered at it with confusion.

I was a bit too short to wear it anyway, and it would have disabled some of my skills due to exceeding the weight limit... but medieval gear like armor and shields was something I had admired since childhood.

"I wonder why my equipment is just cloth, then. Maybe I should start training my muscles."

"Please don't. If you had a muscular body with that face, I may have to leave you behind."

...*Wait, seriously?!* I reacted with shock after a brief pause and hurriedly turned to look at Marie. But someone who appeared to look like a sorcerer happened to speak to her just then, so she never got the opportunity to laugh it off as a joke.

"...Yes, I will look into it."

"I hope to hear back from you with a positive reply." Watching her talk, the cat and I let out a sigh.

Because of our unnecessarily conspicuous entry, all sorts of people had been coming up to talk to her. Recruitment by other sorcerers, questions about how we had defeated the demon, offers to join a party from masters, *etc.* We could hardly walk around because of the persistent conversations.

Marie cracked her neck as she returned. Her mood had been progressively getting worse since we had entered.

"See? I knew we should have gone in quietly."

"I hate to admit it, but I regret it now. We would have been able to enjoy this dinner party in peace if I decided to live as an outcast like you..."

Wait, since when was I an outcast? She looked to be in distress, but I was pretty sure I had it worse.

The hall had a stairwell where we could look down the walkway at the commotion below. When I glanced back again, Marie seemed to be exhausted. The half-fairy absolutely hated being in rowdy crowds, and I knew that having to entertain so many strangers in conversation was causing her a lot of stress.

“Why don’t we rest at that balcony over there? We’ll have to leave soon anyway.”

“Yes, that’s a good idea. Now that you mention it, tomorrow is another weekday.” Indeed, we couldn’t stay too long on a weekday. Not to mention, there were no holidays in June, which was why we called it “the cursed month” in my household.

“People who get married at this time of year are called June Brides, right? I saw it on TV once. Why do humans like to give these nicknames to everything?”

“Huh? You know about that? Well, it’s because people don’t really want to gather in the rainy season, so it’s just a fancy name to trick people into…” *Oh, that might be a rude thing to say, considering where we are.*

Marie had a habit of bad mouthing things when she found herself in a bad mood. I had to prioritize getting her somewhere quiet rather than focusing on the conversation. I shut my mouth and took her by the hand.

The night air was cool on the balcony, and Marie let out a sigh of relief to find peace away from the boisterous venue. Rain came down softly on the opposite side of the handrail, with a gentle breeze blowing by. There was no one at the resting area, since this was an important social gathering. I had Marie sit down on a long chair, and her moody face turned toward me.

“I’ll bring you a drink or some fruit. What would you like?”

“Sweet fruits from Japan…”

*Haha, she’s still going on about that… Well, I think the refreshing sweetness of strawberries would cheer her up more than anything right now.* They would have been out of season in June, but it was possible that they would’ve still been in stock at some stores. Or maybe it would have been better to get her a cake…

I mulled over these thoughts as I waved to Marie and the cat and started walking back indoors.

Maybe I was too preoccupied thinking about her. I didn’t even notice that someone had been watching us. The man hiding behind a pillar whispered out of earshot, reporting to someone quietly.

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The room that had been prepared for our stay was blinking with a bluish-white light.

The man standing in the middle of the magic circle was none other than he who was said to be the hero candidate, Zarish. He possessed a power level that was on another scale from most others, and it was said that all before him would be wiped out as soon as he drew his blade. His smile widened as he spoke into the void.

“…Are things moving along on that end? Yes, I know we need more numbers. That will be taken care of soon enough. I’ve been arranging to move things along on my end as well.” He recalled the prominent figures of the Adventurer’s Guild he had just been speaking with earlier. He’d kept his desires hidden under the surface, watching and secretly enjoying what he would gain soon enough.

“They will push forward as soon as the celebration is over, but focus on slowing the invasion for now. Yes, I will arrange the rest.” The humming magic circle was created with one of his unique skills. Standing inside the circle prevented all detection or analysis abilities and kept him completely safe. This meant that the circle shut off all sound from leaking out of its area.

“Good luck. Things will get very busy starting tomorrow.” With that, the conversation ended. The pale blinking faded away, and Zarish sighed excitedly.

Just then, private chat messages came in. It seemed someone had been trying to contact him multiple times while he was in the defensive field.

“Ah, I was just having a conversation with a lady. So, was there any movement?”

“Yes. That kid just moved away from the target. The elf is on the balcony alone.” Zarish straightened his collar and opened the door, letting in the lively atmosphere from the stairwell. A sleepy-looking boy could be seen walking around the hall, and Zarish sent a private chat message to the dark-skinned woman nearby.

“Begin the mission. Eve, don’t disappoint me any further.”

“...Yes, sir. I will be sure to meet your expectations.” He had formed a party with some members beforehand, allowing them to communicate via the private chat. They began walking forward. To them, this wasn’t an occasion for celebration; this was a battlefield. As usual, Zarish nonchalantly activated his skills, such as those that would prevent him from being detected by others.

“Boss, aren’t you going to use your usual method?”

“There’s no need. This is just some girl we’re dealing with. You take care of that boy, Eve.”

“...Yes, sir.” Eve wasn’t happy about the task she had been assigned. There was a possibility that person might have ended up replacing her, and she had been asked to assist that... but if she didn’t comply, she would be banished from his collection for certain.

She clicked her tongue with frustration, looked at the boy as he got his drink, then stood up slowly.

The hall at night was filled with a quiet excitement. Performers

began playing traditional music that had been around since olden times. The crowd listened with a dreamy expression, and those who hadn't come only for entertainment purposes began making business dealings in the hall with hushed voices.

"I heard the neighboring countries have been preparing for war..."

"They're but savages of demonic descent. It comes as no surprise that they would be... Oh, if it isn't Lord Zarish." The arms dealers bowed their heads in a hurry, and Zarish passed by after giving them a nod. The closer one got to the royal family's stronghold, the more they would hear of shady dealings.

But a thought crossed Zarish's mind.

It was now dawning on him that dismissing the elf as just some little girl and letting her do as she pleased was a mistake on his part. He had known of the Spirit Sorceress class for some time, but he hadn't expected her to be able to wipe out such a massive amount of foes. No, there was something special about that elf.

As Zarish stepped out onto the balcony, he saw the girl looking up at the rain with an unfamiliar animal on her lap. His eyes were drawn to her slender neck and sophisticated side profile, confirming what his intuition had told him earlier.

She was like the queen of fairies.

Despite the darkness, her hair and skin seemed to glow in the night. Her skin was pale, and her flowing hair was whiter than any he had ever seen before. She stood out above the rest and had a distinct air about her like she was in the midst of maturing from a child to an adult.

*...She's perfect for my collection. I wanted that draconian, too, but... Oh well.*

Draconians were so rare that they could only be found in written records. They were said to be very fickle with an astonishingly short temper but possessed vast power beyond imagination.

It was all because of that dopey-looking boy. Hatred boiled within Zarish, and he wanted to slap that boy for failing to keep her around for just a few more days.

As he stepped forward, the pet in the girl's lap perked up, and she also turned to face him.

"This rain is a blessing upon this desert land. Are you alone?"

"Ah, Lord... Zarish." The elf's eyes widened and she tried to stand up in a hurry, but Zarish waved for her to remain seated.

At the corner of his vision, he caught a glimpse of Eve running into the boy. The drink he had in his hand spilled all over her dress, and he gave them a sidelong glance as he continued walking forward.

Zarish's presence demanded such respect that even foreigners addressed him with a title. It wasn't merely attributed to his high level but also his vast fortune, education, etiquette, and handsome face that could captivate women. His presence exuded an aura of success that women couldn't help but take notice of.

Zarish smiled calmly, then spoke in a gentle voice.

"I came out here to get some fresh air. Would you mind if I rest next to you?"



“Not at all, please take your time. I was just about to head back inside.” Zarish’s thought process froze for a moment.

Many would have risked their life for the chance to spend time with him. He had great power, and whatever he wished for, he could make happen. Despite that, the girl stood, bowed gracefully, and moved to pass by him.

“A-Ah… I meant, there is something I wish to tell you,” he blurted out, and the girl turned around with a puzzled expression. They stood closer to each other now, and he could see her amethyst eyes and soft, vivid lips in greater detail.

“I had just heard earlier that you have been challenging the ancient labyrinth with only a party of two. I want to know why he puts such a lovely girl like you in such a dangerous situation.”

“‘He’? Do you mean Kazuhiro?” She looked up at him, seeming surprised by the comment. It seemed that the boy had at least earned the bare minimum of her trust, judging by how she didn’t seem to be expecting anyone to bring this to her attention.

In that case, the matter would be simple.

“Indeed. Normally, a leader must take the utmost care in ensuring the safety of his team. Yet, he has completely abandoned his responsibility to do so. I’m sure you’ve been put in situations where your life has been in danger before.” Considering that there were only two of them, three when that draconian was present, there was no way they hadn’t run into such perilous situations along the way. No matter how powerful a Spirit Sorceress she may have been, the group didn’t even have a tank to keep enemies at bay for her.

“If it were me, I could promise your safety and a life full of comfort and riches.” It seemed Zarish’s title held little bearing to the elf who had come from a foreign country. Therefore, he decided to have her picture a lifestyle of luxury beyond her wildest dreams.

No matter what race she may have been, women tended to be far

more realistic than men. When presented with two different paths, they would seriously consider which one would be more beneficial, and this thought would affect their decision in some way. Such negotiations were clear-cut and simple to understand. Balance the choices on a scale, and it would become obvious which one was more valuable.

The girl thought about it for a moment, then exchanged a look with her pet with a troubled expression. She parted her beautifully well-shaped lips.

"No, actually. I haven't had a scratch on me. Hehe… Strangely, I've heard rumors of people getting injured on your team."

"That… was my fault for failing to see that she was feeling unwell." He felt something cutting into him. Her reply had rebounded right off of the scales he had presented for her, and he wondered if she hadn't sensed his value, despite him having been lauded as the hero candidate. The purity she exuded clearly made her seem like an innocent young girl, but there was a sense of deep intellect that contradicted that energy.

Zarish was honestly taken aback.

*This is why savage elves are such a pain to deal with… Very well, I'll take my time.*

"Eve, how much longer can you hold him?"

"…If you command it, I can lead him into my room, but…"

"Do it now."

He cut off the private chat quickly and smiled at the girl looking up at him. His handsome face must have seemed straight out of a fairy tale to her. It may have been too much to handle for a girl who had grown up in some no-name forest.

"Ah, Mariabelle, I only wish to become your friend. This almost makes me sound like I came to bad-mouth your leader."

“Friend…? Um, no thank you… I don’t need any more of those.”

*No thank you? Does she think I’m trying to sell her something?* He maintained his smile but internally struggled to comprehend what was happening.

He was getting frustrated by his inability to control the flow of the conversation. He failed to get any results whether he pushed or pulled, and his irritation only piled up ever higher. How could this be, when he had the status, the looks, the power, and the experience in handling women?

And so, he decided to go straight for that dull heart of hers.

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her in by the waist. Her back arched naturally, as if swept into a dance, and she was left positioned so that her glossy lips were right in front of his.

But her slender hips and smooth skin sent a thrill down his spine… Her eyes were wide and shining with an amethyst glint, riling up his desire to make her a part of his collection.

Yes, he wanted to make her his.

He wanted to force her to obey him unquestioningly, giving her the occasional punishment and forming a bond between master and servant. The excitement coursed through his body, coming from his hips. This was a sensation he hadn’t felt in a long, long time.

“Pardon me. I’ve been too roundabout in my approach. Mariabelle, I couldn’t stop thinking about you since the moment I saw you. Your eyes are too beautiful to forget.” For a moment, he wondered if it was his own heart that had been taken by her. He felt his own desire clearly and moved in to close the distance between his lips and hers.

He loved how slow everything seemed to be moving.

Her heartbeat was like that of a little bird, and he enjoyed the sensation of her soft breast pressed against him. Her beautiful face

moved away from his, and… Wait, moved away?

*Crack!* Her cute forehead was rammed directly into his nose.

"Oaaargh!" He instinctively released the elf girl and reached for his nose in a state of complete shock. He didn't feel any pain, of course. One's level was everything in this world, and he couldn't show such a pathetic display as having a bloody nose.

"That's quite enough! I'm calling the guards!" The elf shouted with obvious anger, her forehead red from the impact.

He hadn't expected her to threaten to call the guards on the man who would become the hero someday. He had the ability, of course, to take them out with ease if the situation came down to it. But he remained there, motionless, his ironclad self-esteem having been crushed.

He watched the hem of her sleeve waving as she sprinted back into the venue. After staring blankly for some time, his lips curled into a twisted smile.

*…Ah, so be it, then. I will just need to discipline her as I would a wild horse. I'll spend time with you every night and make you unable to think of anything but me.*

Zarish laughed quietly, feeling the dark flames of desire igniting within him.

Now, he hadn't realized it, but there was a chance that his heart had been taken by the elf girl, if only a little bit. That was why his desire for her never faded away, and it only continued to boil as the days passed.

There was something else that he failed to notice. The black cat that was with the girl had been staring at his ring.

Each of the eight rings worn on his fingers, excluding his thumbs, had subtle differences in their intricate ornamentation. Wridra the Arkdragon's familiar observed them with great interest, a slight glint shining in its eyes.

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“I’m sorry, but I need to go back to wor… I mean, back home soon.”

“What? Are you telling me you’re going to leave me all soaking wet like this? Just be quiet and take me into that room over there.”

“I promise to repay you later for the clothes I ruined. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” The boy’s attitude had changed suddenly, and he was no longer listening to anything she said. She wondered why his demeanor had undergone such an abrupt change when the night was just starting, and he was turning red when she’d shown off her ample cleavage not too long ago.

Not knowing what to do, she reached for his shoulder, but ended up swiping at thin air. He moved as if he had just teleported a few steps ahead, leaving Eve behind.

She stood there dumbfounded while the elf in question appeared from the balcony. The boy and the elf took each other by the hand and began descending the stairs.

“Wait, where’s Lord Zarish? Ah, there they go…” Her quiet comment immediately faded into the clamor of the party.

What she hadn’t understood was that a salaryman’s work hours were absolute. They marched into work in an orderly line even if they were in the midst of an earthquake, like modern-day samurai. Though, that trend had been changing as of late…

Regardless, the two stepped into one of the two carriages that they had arranged to take them back, then quickly crawled into bed to get some sleep.

If this had been a weekend, the story may have been completely different. But Wridra would be returning from her maternity leave by tomorrow night, and things would be moving forward quickly from there.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 4: Meeting with Unagi I looked up at the wall clock as soon as I snapped awake. My heart was pounding like crazy, but I saw that I still had time before work and let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh good, we made it..." I couldn't help but comment in a tired voice.

Spending time in the dream world was what I lived for, but I wasn't able to enjoy the party last night all too much. I'd thought I would have been able to explore an unfamiliar castle with Marie, but we just ended up getting hassled by a bunch of strangers instead.

It was still raining just outside the curtains, and I heard what sounded like sparrows chirping on the veranda amidst the rain. Then, I felt Marie roll over and place her head on my shoulder.

"Good morning, Marie. I suppose you aren't in all too good of a mood today."

"You suppose right. I'm mentally exhausted. The blanket is so fluffy and comfortable, but I'm just completely fatigued." I'd been spending most of my time with Marie, but it seemed there were just too many people to deal with last night. We weren't even able to enjoy conversation together, and I had to admit that I was tired of all the eyes everywhere we looked.

"Let's refrain from attending such lively places in the future. I don't think we're ready for it." The elf nodded profusely at my suggestion, then playfully pressed her cheek against me. She was still warm from just having woken up as I patted her back comfortingly.

We had been given a warm reception in the dream world last

night to restore our vigor, but I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable from all the attention we had received. We barely had any time to eat with everyone talking to us, and we couldn't even enjoy alcohol because of our youthful appearances. If I had slept in and ended up late for work on top of that... Yeah, I didn't even want to think about it.

Just then, I heard the rice cooker beeping from the kitchen.

"You know, they say cute little fairies feel a lot better after eating breakfast. How about we try and find out?"

"Yes, I'd love some sweet rice. And some furikake seasoning. Sunny-side up eggs, bacon, and some tea would be lovely, too. I want some of that genmaicha tea we bought the other day." The way she rubbed her face against me with her long ears drooping was pretty adorable.

Ever since returning from the Aomori trip, our rice cooker had been seeing far more use for making breakfast. We had bread every once in a while, but Marie seemed to enjoy the sweetness of rice. Or maybe it was more like her palate had adjusted to Japanese food.

I stepped onto the flooring with my bare feet and made my way toward the kitchen. Despite the bit of fatigue I was feeling, it was a work day, so I needed to work until evening.

*I have to get through all the work I have so I won't need to stay after hours... Never mind, I don't want to think about that right now.*

It must have been tougher on Marie, who was smaller than me and disliked having to deal with other people. She seemed uncharacteristically unsettled earlier, so I at least wanted to make her something tasty for dinner. When I thought about what dish would make her the happiest... something came to mind right away, and I decided to get the ingredients on the way home.

I lit the stove under a pot, and then another thought crossed my mind.

“Say, do you think Fire Lizards could be used as a stove substitute in this world?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. They can be a bit aggressive, so I’m not sure if that would be a good idea. I’d like to get more accustomed to controlling them first. You wouldn’t want this place to be burned down, right?” Marie hopped off the bed and said as such while walking toward me. The black cat was curled up on the bed, and Wridra had mentioned taking care of things to ensure we would be hidden in the other world, so I figured it would be quiet for the rest of the day.

It would have been incredible if Marie had learned to control Fire Lizards. We would have even been able to make kakuni without spending anything on gas. I considered such silly thoughts as I cut up some daikon radish and greens and put them into the pot of stock. I put in some miso once the pot began to boil, and then a gentle aroma filled the kitchen.

The half-fairy elf leaned back against her chair and took a whiff with her cute nose.

“Mmm, that smells nice. It reminds me of Aomori.”

“I didn’t expect you to like Japanese food so much. I’ve been putting it off for a while, but maybe we could give natto a shot.” I dropped the bacon into the hot oil, and the girl cocked her head dubiously.

“Na-tto…? What kind of food is that?”

“I bought some for myself. Wanna check it out?” As I asked, her previously moody expression turned into one of curiosity, and she walked up even closer. She was wearing slippers with bunny ears and adorable sky blue pajamas. Then, her adorable face twitched. She had witnessed the rotten soybean—I mean, bowl of natto.

“No, no, no, I can’t do this! Whaaat? What is this? I can’t believe it. Is it some sort of monster repellant?”

“Umm, soybeans *are* used for that sometimes, but this is a Japanese staple food.” Though… not everyone liked it, and some regions didn’t eat them at all. But since Marie loved Japanese food and even claimed Japanese people had an unnatural passion for good flavor, she was leaning toward looking at it favorably, despite her reservations.

“Is it… good?”

“Hmm, it depends on the person. You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want to.”

“…Are you going to eat it?”

“I did already open it, so yeah,” I answered as I transferred the bacon and eggs to a plate, and Marie mulled over her decision. She held her head with both hands with creases between her eyebrows, an expression of agonized indecision I hadn’t seen often before. I caught bits of her rather accusatory muttering, like “Am I being tricked?” and “Japan’s supposed to be a gourmet country…”

Then, she opened her mouth with a look that said she was prepared for the worst.

“I-I’ll try it!”

“Huh? Are you sure? You can try a bite and give up if you don’t like it.” She balled each hand into a fist, then nodded. To be honest, there was no way for me to tell how she would react, so I was rather worried. I added some eggs and green onions to at least mask the smell and mixed thoroughly. I also prepared some roasted nori, which made for a very familiar and generic Japanese breakfast… I still wasn’t sure how she would react.

“Th-This is natto?” She picked up a single piece with her chopsticks, and a sticky string extended from the bottom. She let out an audible “Oof,” and I couldn’t blame her. It clearly looked rotten, and natto actually was a fermented food.

“You’re supposed to eat it with rice, but be sure to start off with

just a little bit."

"I-I'm supposed to put this on my beloved rice? Am I about to make a terrible mistake?" I was getting nervous just watching her.

I felt each beat of my heart as I watched the freshly mixed natto on her bowl of rice... *Oh, I really hope this doesn't turn out badly.* It would have been awful if she ended up hating Japanese food because of this.

I watched anxiously, and she brought the rice with natto toward her mouth with her chopsticks. Even the cat, which had been curled up on a chair, was watching with its golden eyes wide open.

It probably would have said, "Are you really going to eat that?!" if it could talk, and it jerked its head toward me accusingly, as if this was all a prank. *I don't understand cat-speak, but no, I didn't trick anyone.*

*badump... badump...*

Marie threw the food into her mouth with her eyes closed, then slowly began to chew. She immediately put a hand to her mouth and stood straight up, causing the Arkdragon and I to break out into a cold sweat. But...

As she continued to chew, the shape of her brows began to relax into their usual positions. She tasted it with an astonished expression, looking up at the ceiling, then into the natto bowl, then swallowed.

"Hm? It does smell like it's rotten, but... Hm... It has such a deep flavor. It's hard to believe these are beans. This is good!"

"Oh, uh, I'm glad. That's great!" *Whew... What a relief.* If she ended up running into the toilet, I would have been racked with guilt even at work.

"Why are you two sweating so much?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. I just didn't think you would like it."

She still looked a bit confused, but then turned back to the natto and dumped half of the bowl onto her rice. It seemed natto had gotten the Ms. Elf breakfast seal of approval. Good for you, natto.

"How do I say this... It has such depth, but it's strangely sticky and has a rich taste. Oh, the smell doesn't bother me so much anymore. Is it because of the green onions?"

"I hear you get used to it once you eat it. I think I'll have some, too." I glanced at the cat, and it shook its head violently. It seemed that it didn't want any, but I wasn't sure if cats should have been eating it anyway. The natto might have made its mouth all sticky, too.

So, for Wridra, I had prepared some white rice with furikake and a plate of bacon and eggs instead. The cat dug in happily, and it seemed to particularly enjoy the bacon covered in egg yolk, though I wouldn't have given it such a meal if it had been a normal cat instead of a familiar.

"There are several recipes that use natto as an ingredient, but I like eating it as-is the most."

"The smell is a bit noticeable, but it goes so well with rice. Oh, the miso soup is delicious, too. I feel like this is melting away all my fatigue from last night." It was a bit strange to see an elf narrowing her eyes with joy as she sipped miso soup. Though, I already knew she was no ordinary elf.

"That miso soup is packed with soybean flavor, too. Tofu, miso, and the soy sauce used on that nori are all made from soybeans." Marie looked around at the contents on the table. She knew what tofu was, and natto maintained its original form, despite going through a fermentation process, but the other dishes looked nothing like soybeans, and she looked at me as if she was unsure if I was joking or not.

I wanted to clear this up for her, but it was unfortunately almost time for work. I thought about our plans for after I left as I ate my

breakfast.

"We got up late today, so do you think you can handle lunch yourself?"

"Of course. I wanted to try that oven dish you taught me the other day. Kitty, the honor of being the first one to try it will go to you." The cat made a face as Marie pointed at it, then stuck its face back into its bowl of food.

As I put on my leather shoes, I turned back toward Marie.

Unfortunately, I couldn't sustain my lifestyle without working. I would have loved to play in the dream world all day, but... *Oh, I shouldn't be daydreaming in the real world, too.*

"I'll be going now. Are you going to be taking a bath now, by the way?"

"Yes, I can't stand the smell of people all over me. Oh, but you're special, so don't worry," she said as she grasped a bath towel in hand. It seemed she really didn't like that party. Even so, she had spent time around people in Japan and never had such an adverse reaction. I thought that was a bit strange, but then she gave me an explanation. I was taken aback to hear what had happened.

"Last night... That Zarish guy, he tried to... recruit me? Court me? I didn't know what he wanted, but he approached me. I wasn't sure if I should mention it, but I wanted you to know."

"Huh...?! You mean that really flashy guy?" She nodded, and I was so shocked that I forgot I needed to get to work.

I mean, Marie was obviously attractive and talented, so she was sure to get those sorts of requests... but the one who made that request was many times higher than me in terms of level. I was in for another surprise when she looked embarrassed and added, "He wouldn't leave me alone, so I headbutted him."

I felt lightheaded for a moment. I really wasn't expecting to hear that she had headbutted the man who could become the hero. So

that was why she came running over while covering her forehead at that time...

I was relieved to know that she hadn't changed, but I had a feeling this wasn't over. I mulled over these thoughts as I walked along my path to work in the light rain.

Holding on to the hanging strap in the train, I absentmindedly watched the droplets of water flying off the window. Familiar sights passed by as the train rumbled along. However, I was far more nervous than usual.

A level 140 person had proposed his feelings for Marie. I still hadn't asked for details, but she turned him down with a headbutt to the face.

That was all she had mentioned with an embarrassed look, but I had a bad feeling about this. The way he made sure I wasn't there when he made his move... Thinking about it, the woman who had run into me as I was getting drinks was the same one I had seen at the oasis. She was connected to that Zarish guy, so they could've been working together. That meant that all of this could have been pre-planned. I decided I needed to be very wary of him and felt unusually high-strung. An uneasy feeling was welling up inside of me.

If it had just been a genuine attempt to confess his feelings, and Mariabelle had turned him down, there wouldn't have been an issue, but the feeling of unease only continued to build without going away. As I considered why I was feeling this way, it came to me.

*Why would she headbutt him...?* It sounded almost comical, but I wondered why a smart girl like her would decide to do such a thing. What if she couldn't convince him to back down, and he invaded her personal space? As the unsettling feeling began to boil over, I felt a vibration in my chest pocket. I was a bit irritated as I pulled out my smartphone and looked at the screen. As I had somewhat

expected, the screen displayed Kaoruko's name. I hardly connected with people at work, so the number of people who would reach out to me was rather limited.

"Good morning. I hope you're doing well." I felt a bit more relaxed after reading the message. It was strangely comforting to get a message with no real purpose besides to simply enjoy a conversation.

Kaoruko lived in the same condo as I did, and we occasionally had such exchanges like this. We'd gone to eat with her and her husband, and she had shared her leftovers with us before, too.

Come to think of it, there was that promise with Marie. I was supposed to bring her to a certain recreational facility this weekend if the weather was good. I debated for a bit about whether or not to bring this up with Kaoruko.

"I'll be taking Marie to a nearby recreational facility this weekend. Though, I don't think I'll need to do any research for it this time, haha." I settled on this message and sent it after rewriting it several times.

The Ichijos knew a lot about domestic travel, and they had given me tips on vacation spots several times before. I thought about asking for advice again, but we were basically just going to an amusement park. I assumed that only telling her that we would be going would have sufficed. But…

"Oh, I disagree. I would argue that there is no other place that needs as much preparation and research as that one." I read her reply and blinked.

I mean, it was a place for families and couples, and I figured we would just wander around and check out whatever we felt like. Was I misunderstanding things?

"I'm afraid your understanding *is* wrong. This is particularly common with men who came here from the countryside, but there are many rumors of couples who have gone there without any plans

and ended up breaking up due to having arguments."

That couldn't have been right. I mean, I *was* born in Aomori, so that part did fit my description, but... Come on.

"Do you know about the Free Pass?"

*Free... pass?* I had no idea.

Having been a single guy who didn't go out with friends much, I hardly knew what amusement parks were really like. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd been to one. Most theme parks in Aomori ended up going out of business.

"Very well. Let's have a strategy meeting tonight. How about I bring some salad and you bring side dishes?" *She wants to have dinner together? Ah... Her husband must be working overtime tonight.*

I debated on whether I should accept the invite or not, but then a thought crossed my mind. I pictured Marie, who disliked being in crowds, growing more and more upset without even being able to get on a ride. That would have been terrible. She may have even ended up hating Japan a little bit. She was a very kind elf, but I could imagine Wridra bluntly telling me, "You are so... useless..."

Yeah, I could see it clearly in my mind. I typed my response with unusual swiftness: "Please teach me, sensei."

It was decided. We would come up with plans for next week over dinner.

I put my smartphone away, and the uneasy feeling from before had mostly subsided.

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My shoes clicked on the corridor floor as I walked with shopping bags in hand.

The rain hadn't stopped after all, and the clouds continued to loom above the Kanto plains persistently. I looked up to find the thin moon glinting dully, giving off a strangely cold impression.

A co-worker had asked me if I didn't find living by myself lonely.

I would have laughed it off and told him it wasn't before, but now... My opinion completely changed as I pushed the door open and became bathed in the light of the room.

"Oh, welcome home." I stepped into the warm air that Marie had been spending time in, and she looked at me with a happy expression. Her amethyst eyes narrowed in a smile, and she thought for a moment before spreading her arms toward me. I made the same gesture, and she moved into my arms. There was no way I would want to go back to my old life now.

"I'm back. Nn, you're so warm."

"You must be cold from the rain. Oh no, you're a bit wet."

Marie brushed some water off of my shoulders, then turned her jewel-like eyes at me. She then buried her face into my chest and said in a cute voice, "It was the same in Arilai, right? The sun goes away after it rains for a while, and it gets chilly."

"It'll be summer as soon as that chilly season ends. This will be your first summer in Japan, won't it?" Marie smiled excitedly. She seemed to be enjoying the seasons of Japan to the fullest.

Although she was a full head shorter than me, her colored lips had a definite feminine allure to them. I had been getting such thoughts ever since getting a taste of those lips. If I wasn't holding the shopping bags in each hand, I would have been running my hand through her flowing white hair.

When I removed my shoes and entered the room, I saw the Arkdragon's familiar curled up on the middle of the bed. Judging from the tea that was placed nearby, it seemed they'd had a relaxing day today.

Marie took my bags for me, and with her long ears wavering, she asked me, "So, what time is Kaoruko visiting?"

"I said I'd be home around seven, so she should be heading over

soon. I need to get cooking." I had already informed Marie of the visit. We were able to communicate at any time thanks to the Magic Tool Wridra had made. I spoke to her through the accessory around the cat's neck, and on my end, I talked into my smartphone so it wouldn't seem strange to onlookers. I was grateful that I didn't have to worry about running up my phone bills.

We spoke for a bit as I changed out of my work clothes, and then it was time to prepare dinner. Although, I wasn't putting too much work into this one since it was mostly ready-made.

Marie looked on curiously as I produced something from my shopping bag.

"That's one glossy-looking fish. It already looks tasty."

"It's called 'unagi,' or an eel. It's like a snake that swims at the bottom of rivers… You know, those things the demon on the first floor was summoning." She looked at me, confused.

"Huh? Do you mean those slimy-looking Ailinya?"

"Yeah, those. Their name is so different from what we call them here, so I have a hard time remembering it."

"But those things smell like mud, have a hard texture, and taste awful…" She shot me a look of suspicion.

Well, that was a shame. People didn't care much for cooking in the other world, so Marie seemed to have an innate bad impression from experience. That meant I had needed to wipe that image away tonight. *We can do this, unagi,* I thought to myself as I rinsed it with water.

"Isn't that going to wash away all the sauce?"

"Yeah, I learned how to cook them from my grandpa, but he taught me that we usually wash the sauce off first. He might explain why if we give him a call." The girl nodded, watching with curiosity.

The food my grandpa had prepared for us was delicious, and I remembered the elf and dragon digging in with enthusiasm. It seemed bringing him up increased her expectations toward the unagi dish.

If I had to guess, the sauce it came with was washed away because it came with unnecessary food coloring and preservatives. It was said that a person could rinse off the smell if they used hot water, but I'd gotten high-quality domestic unagi, so that wasn't necessary.

After washing it off for some time, I opened the fish grill.

"Whoa, it opened! I didn't know it looked like that inside!"

"We don't grill fish at home too often. It looks kind of cool, doesn't it?"

She shook her head and said, "No, not really." *Oh.*

After pouring some sake over it and cooking it for about five minutes or so, Kaoruko arrived, as well. The doorbell rang, and Marie threw on the device made for hiding her ears and answered the door.

As the door right behind the kitchen was opened, Kaoruko stood there, wearing a skirt of a muted color and a long-sleeved shirt, and bowed. Her shoulder-length black hair was cut neatly, and she gave off a mature impression despite being pretty close to me in age.

"Good evening, you two. Oh, Marie—this is that bath additive I was recommending the other day. Give it a try."

"Oh, thank you! Will your husband be working late again tonight?" Kaoruko laughed bitterly as she removed her shoes. We had gone to dinner with her husband several times, too. He was a bit of a connoisseur of hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and every place he'd recommended had been a hit.

"He doesn't know how to say no sometimes, so he takes on a lot of unnecessary work." I couldn't help but feel a stinging sensation

from those words. I was a guy who lived for his hobbies, and I prioritized sleep and family far above my work… Not that I thought Toru didn't care about his family.

I sat down at the table and looked at the ladies.

"I prepared some for Toru as well, but it's unagi, so it'll taste better if you cook it when he's ready to eat."

"Oh my, thank you so much. But I'm from Hokkaido, so I don't really eat unagi much." Huh… I hadn't known that they didn't eat unagi often there. Now that she mentioned it, she did have a bit of an awkward expression on her face. I set my resolve to show them both just how good unagi could be.

I opened the fish grill, and the scent of cooking fat filled the room. My grandpa had taught me that pouring sake on the unagi before grilling it made it come out nice and juicy.

I removed the freshly cooked unagi and began cutting it into pieces on the cutting board. Then, I placed them on bowls of hot rice, followed by sauce and some Japanese peppers, making the smell even more appetizing. I placed the bowls on the table before them while it was still piping hot, and they let out a cheer of excitement.

"Wow, it's so fragrant! It's making my stomach growl!"

"Mm, that smells delicious. My husband has been wanting to eat some unagi, but he's been rather down about the fact that it's been so expensive lately."

This dinner was meant to help Marie recover from the tiring party from last night. This was a special, once-in-a-while luxury, so I hoped it would help her feel better.

I placed some pickled dishes and miso soup on the table and added Kaoruko's tofu salad, and it made for a rather nice-looking meal. We all said "*Itadakimasu*" together, and then our little lavish dinner began.

Marie cut up the plump piece of unagi with her chopsticks, then took the piece, along with some sauce and rice, into her mouth. This may have been a dish she hated in the dream world, but she couldn't resist the appetizing aroma and appearance this time around. The sweet smell and steam rising into the air was irresistible. The scent of the Japanese pepper stimulated her senses, stirring her appetite and captivating her attention. The distinct, fatty flavor and umami seeped out of the eel with each chew.

The rice was already tasty with just the sauce, but the plump meat and the soft yet springy skin was a joy to eat. The salty-sweet sauce had seeped into the burnt parts of the unagi, filling it with a ridiculous amount of flavor.

It was worth spending extra for domestic unagi. It didn't smell fishy at all, and I enjoyed watching Marie chew slowly with an expression of bliss.

She shook her head, then finally swallowed.

"Whew... So much flavor. I can't believe it... Is this really Ailinya? The sauce compliments it so well, I just want to keep chewing forever." She let her body loosen up and leaned her shoulder against me. She proceeded to roll her head onto me, too, then rubbed it against me as if she couldn't control herself. It was adorable, but we also had to keep in mind that we had a guest.

"No, no, no. This is too good. I would have no choice but to approve of your Fishing skill. I just can't let that happen." R-Right... I wasn't sure why that would have been an issue, but I had not only removed Fishing from my Secondary Skills, I also took them out of my Sub Skills because she and Wridra had protested so much. Suddenly, Marie took my arm in an embrace. She then put her chin on my shoulder playfully and whispered in a dreamy voice.

"Oh well, let's think about this after we go level up next time. We could keep all of the delicious Ailinya for ourselves. Wouldn't that be wonderful? No one knows how tasty they are, so it should be

easy. We'll have Ailinya for dinner every night. What do you say?" Somewhere along the line, it seemed she picked up a way to charm me with her tone of voice. Her whisper was just that sweet, but her actual words were full of a lust for food.

I was glad to receive her invitation, but Kaoruko was sitting in front of us, completely red in the face. Marie quickly backed away from me, and we both shook our heads, saying, "It's not like that!"

"Uh-huh... I'm not sure what you were talking about, but that was a bit surprising to see. You're so, um, close."

"N-No, it's just that Marie isn't used to good Japanese food, and she just so happens to hug me like that sometimes." Kaoruko gave me a dubious look.

Maybe it was inevitable that she would catch on. Marie and I had been getting closer as we spent more time together. At this point, we didn't feel comfortable unless we were in each other's presence.

When I looked to the side, my eyes happened to meet Marie's. I wished that someday we would be able to tell Kaoruko that Marie wasn't actually a relative of mine. But for now, I didn't have the courage to say it.

Just then, something scratched at my foot. I looked down under the table to find the cat's eyes shining in the darkness. Apparently, it had smelled the food and woken up.

"Oh, I didn't know you had a cat. It was so quiet that I hadn't noticed." Kaoruko looked surprised as she noticed the cat's pleading meow. We were allowed to have pets in this condo, but the cat didn't have much of an animal smell due to it being a familiar. Regardless, since we were in front of a guest, I couldn't just give Wridra some unagi right now. I did have some set aside for her, but the cat would have to settle for little bites in the meantime.

I placed a piece on my palm and lowered it under the table. It tickled as the cat ate out of my hand. I smiled as it narrowed its eyes with joy.

“Yes, we just got it recently. It’s a very quiet and smart cat.” The cat meowed, as if to scoff at me. Wridra knew we couldn’t feed her outright in front of the guest and licked my hand, seemingly in thanks.

*Hehe, you’ll get plenty more later.*

I tickled the cat’s chin, and it looked rather pleased.

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We had cleared off the table after eating our fill, and a single book was placed there in place of our meal.

I spread a map out on the table and stared at it. It was a map of Grimland, a giant amusement park we were going to visit on the weekend if the weather allowed. I wanted to keep it a secret from Marie until the day of the visit, so now, while she was taking a bath, it was the perfect time to make my plans.

The one who would be introducing it to this Aomori-born bumpkin was none other than Kaoruko.

“You need to prioritize this area and the one over here. They’re both very popular, and I’m sure Marie will love them.”

“There are so many places we could visit. Ohh, so that’s how you get this Free Pass thing?” She walked me through how to enjoy our time efficiently, and it made me realize that I definitely couldn’t have pulled this off without prior knowledge. The park was just that big, with so many unique attractions. If we had attempted going without any planning beforehand, we would have ended up tiring ourselves out just walking around.

“I’d like to recommend their official hotel, but you won’t be able to secure rooms on this short notice. You may want to book a room about six months in advance next time.”

“Wow, I didn’t know they were that popular.” It was like night and day compared to the ruins we called amusement parks back in Aomori. Though, I suppose that went without saying.

Kaoruko then pointed at a restaurant on the map.

"If you have time, you should try to make a reservation at this restaurant. You'll be able to enjoy the atmosphere at the park to the fullest alongside your meal. The food is quite delicious, too."

"Oh, that sounds great. I'd definitely like to go!" I could hardly contain my excitement. We continued our discussion, solidifying our plot to ensure our guest from the fantasy world would have the time of her life. She would definitely be excited about this. On this we both agreed, and we smiled gleefully at each other. What would she think of these attractions, so full of dreams and wonder? I could hardly wait.

The black cat had a rather late dinner that night. It ate from a plate of white rice and unagi, narrowing its eyes with joy as it savored the rich flavor. The cat let out a blissful sigh, and I couldn't help but smile.

It looked at me as if to ask, "Yes?"

I patted its head, then looked back at the table. There sat the park map, which was inscribed with notes left by Kaoruko.

"I see, we should go get a Free Pass as soon as we get inside." I rubbed my chin as I read over the notes. The Free Pass allowed us to make reservations for attractions, allowing us to ride without waiting in the long lines.

"I would have stood in line for sure if I didn't know about this." The cat was focused on attacking the unagi, and Marie was still taking a bath. No one was actually listening, so I was just talking to myself.

*Hmm, we can only have one Free Pass at a time, so it would be a waste to use it on something with a short wait time. I also need to know what kind of attractions Marie and Wridra are into…*

I was glad Kaoruko had given me this little tip. There was no need to plan out every little detail, but I wanted to make the most out of

our day. Now we just had to prepare for the big day, and the elf and draconian would surely have the time of their lives.

Just then, the bathroom door slid open. I glanced over to find a fresh-out-of-the-bath elf standing there with a satisfied smile.

"Ahh, that was wonderful! I completely lost track of time."

"Welcome back. Guess you liked the bath additives Kaoruko gave you, huh? What did they smell like?" I asked as I slid the memos and map into the drawer. I wanted to keep the plans a secret to maximize the effect. I hoped she would like the surprise. As I thought about it, Marie struck a peculiar pose.

"Wooooaaahhh!" She said with one leg raised, suddenly drawing my attention. In fact, I was staring wide-eyed with a blank expression.

*That's right.* When I had gone out shopping the other day, she had taken a liking to an unusual, Tai Chi style pair of pajamas. She had seen her fair share of movies by now, and she had developed a bit of an unusual interest.

She maintained her strange pose and brought her hand down in a chop, and I couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"Vengeance for my master! Hoaaa-taaa!" *No, no, I can't take it!* She was still a bit steamy from her bath, and her blow delivered from an unexpectedly proper fighting stance was dealing more mental damage than physical. It was just too adorable, and I had to look away to hide my smile, crumpling down to the flooring to avoid her attack.

Marie the Tai Chi master quickly seized this opening.

"This is it, Kazuhiho!" With that, she plopped her little butt on top of my back. She mounted me with her featherweight body, though I didn't think that was a Tai Chi move, and repeatedly hit me with ineffective bops. Her playful attacks were too much to handle. I had no idea who her master was, but I turned around and raised my

hands in surrender.

Her triumphant expression was backlit by the ceiling lights, and she turned her face, revealing her side profile. Maybe she was worried about what Wridra would think. I wondered what she was thinking at that moment, but then she ran her hand through her hair and moved her angelic face up to mine.

The floor was cool against my back, while Marie's freshly bathed thighs felt hot by contrast. It suddenly grew dark as her head eclipsed the lighting above. Her thin neck was pale, accentuating her vivid lips as they demanded my attention. She seemed so childlike in one moment, and then exuded mature allure the next, so I could never let my guard down around her.

She held her hair out of the way as she brought her face closer to mine. A sweet scent wafted up from the hint of cleavage below her collarbone. It was Marie's smell. I felt my head go numb, and I became acutely aware of the warmth radiating from her thighs.

She smiled at me as if she knew what I was thinking.

"It smells like this. Kaoruko gave me some jasmine-scented bath additives. Isn't it nice? This is why I was in there for so long," she said with a cocky expression, and my brain stopped functioning.

*Ah, I see. She brought her face closer so I could smell it.* I felt like I got cheated... or maybe I felt lucky. I wished she would understand that staring at me from so close was a little too intense for me.

Having lived on this earth for twenty-five years, I had come to realize that people didn't change too much no matter their age. I'd never had such an experience, so I was pretty much a middle schooler in that regard. As I thought this over, I suddenly realized Marie was still staring at me.

"..." My vision suddenly darkened, and I felt something press against my lips. The scent of jasmine grew stronger, and her soft body pressed against me as she laid her weight on top of me.

We shuddered. My hand had slipped behind her and touched the back of her neck, signaling that I wanted her to stay. She was still warm from her bath, the heat of her body transferring directly into me. It felt like we were burning up, and I could feel her heart beating in her chest.

Our lips parted, and we let out a long sigh.

“Maybe it’s the smell of flowers. I sometimes get all lightheaded, and it makes me do things that surprise even myself. I hope you don’t find it vulgar…” she whispered while resting her chin in her hands atop my chest. Her cheeks were flushed red, and there were little wrinkles between her brows, suggesting that she was worried.

“The flower spirits? Yeah, I’d heard of them in a land far away. A nomad once told me as they were gathering flower essences, ‘They teach us that this moment is everything, and we must bloom all the stronger because we will wilt all too soon.’” Those nomads I had met in a far, far land had a tradition of music and dance. They had festivals in the springtime and displayed a passion like flowers blooming wildly.

“They say all things come full circle, and each emotion must be cherished. Whether it’s anger, sadness, or joy, they will cycle through and bloom. That’s what life is, according to them. They may not have been the academic types, but it was too profound for me to understand even half of it.” Marie seemed to calm down a bit as I talked about this foreign land, and I noticed she was staring at me again. She then tapped me on the nose with her pointer finger.

“Next time you go on a journey, take me with you.”

“I will. I think you’ll be able to understand the half I couldn’t make sense of. Though, it’s mostly just walking around and camping wherever I find a good fishing spot.” Marie thought about it for a moment, then stood up. I felt a bit sad about her warmth leaving my body as she moved away.

“I’ll think about it if there are any plump Ailinyas in the area. Or

maybe if there's a Tai Chi teacher there." I nearly spit out laughing. I wondered out loud if a Tai Chi master would be in the area so conveniently as she pulled me up by the hand.

Suddenly, I wanted to see her cute pose again.

"Marie, how does the stance go again?"

"Like this. Whaaa-chaaa!" She was actually pretty good at it, which I found all the more hilarious. It was adorable how serious she looked, and I wondered if this was what people called 'moe.' But what I ended up saying was completely different from how I felt.

"I don't think they shout that when doing Tai Chi."

"Huh?!" The surprised expression on her face as she turned around made me crack another smile.

Ms. Elf was just so captivating that she threatened to fill my mind every waking moment.



# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 5: Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust After spending our day in Japan, Marie and I went to bed in each other's arms as usual. Her skin felt warmer than usual, and she let out a heated breath as our bodies came together.

*We might have a hard time in the summer.* Actually, Marie may have been able to find a solution to even that. My consciousness began to fade as I thought about it, and the door to the dream world was opened.

*Where is the line between dreams and reality?*

I looked to my side in a daze to find a girl in pajamas that seemed out of place in Japan, her pale purple eyes opening slowly. With her always by my side, it felt like that line had been blurred.

This place was a dream, yet it was a real world in and of itself. A world different from Japan. A place where magic and levels existed, and people and countries alike strove to become stronger in order to survive. But there were many similarities, as well.

One of them being the universal truth: people died, never to return again.

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The people were enveloped in a white cloth with a message from their families held to their chests. They were each placed in a small boat full of flowers and floated off down the brown river.

"..." The priest splashed some perfumed oil and prayed for the dead to reach Eden, a world where there was no pain or suffering. The warriors who had survived along with their conviction would someday return to the heavens. It was interesting how this teaching

was shared across different countries and religions.

We each held a hand to our chest in our mourning clothes, standing silently as the deceased made their way down the river. It continued to rain lightly, wetting our hair and foreheads.

A total of eight had died during the advancement to the second floor. Though they weren't present for this funeral, an equal number of people had never regained consciousness. Their souls had been stolen by the floor master, and they had been unconscious ever since.

The boats continued straight down the river, burning bright as they were ignited with fire arrows. A mother cried out as it came time to part with her child forever, and the master of the household held her shoulder supportively. The red-haired Doula stood at their center, her eyes red from tears.

Those who had done battle with evil would eventually be sent to Eden. Death came suddenly, and those who were taken would never return... but everyone understood that death wasn't the end.

We bowed to the priest, and as we left the attendance, two people stood before us. It was Zera, who had provided us with a place to stay, and Doula, her eyes still red. We were a bit taken aback as they bowed politely. They turned without saying a word and walked away.

"What do you think that was?"

"I think they were showing gratitude. If we hadn't helped them, they may not have been able to give the deceased a proper send off on those boats," Marie replied as she beckoned over the black cat that was hiding in the shade of a tree. The elf girl scooped the cat up in her arms when it trotted over to her.

"It wasn't that big of... Well, maybe it was that significant to them. I'm glad we could help in some way."

"Maybe it wasn't just those two who were saved." I asked Marie

what she meant, and she began to walk by my side. The ground was wet with rain and hard to walk in, so I laid a supportive hand on Marie's slender waist so she wouldn't trip. Being more knowledgeable about this world than me, Marie continued her explanation.

According to her, there was more than one "master." Each parent and child often had their own teams, and distinguished families tended to have quite a number of members. So, when masters or sub-masters perished, those who served them would suffer as well.

"The reason things ended up in this structure is mainly an issue with maintenance costs of the military. In times of peace, each household is responsible for gathering resources to support their own military forces."

"Huh, so that's how it works. So Zera's kinda like a CEO managing his own company." I watched the many funeral attendees along the path from the river to the city. The one thing that was notably different from an ordinary company was the way they all faced hardships with their lives on the line. I felt a pang in my chest, seeing the mothers and lovers of the deceased grieve for their lost ones.

"Well, our goal for now is taking down that floor master in our alliance raid. I hope this leads to those two getting their marriage approved."

"Yes... but be careful not to get too caught up on that. You tend to have a wide perspective on things, but that can be all the more worrying sometimes." I did agree that when it came to battle, I had a tendency to look at the big picture. That was what allowed me to make moves without panicking or risking the loss of any lives.

But, either way, I did see what she was getting at. I'd almost lost against those bandits at the oasis some time ago. I stood before them as they tried to attack Marie, which ended up leaving an opening for the enemy. I figured that was what she was trying to

tell me.

Of course, I would cooperate with Zera and Doula, and I hoped they would be able to get married, but my number one priority was the safety of my team and myself. I didn't mind straining myself, but I couldn't afford to do anything to put us in danger recklessly. Also, I had to make sure I got to work on time.

"In that sense, I'd like to continue enjoying things at our own pace. Is that fine by you?" The girl and cat raised their hand and paw respectively and voiced their agreement. Wridra, who tended to avoid anything remotely inconvenient, decided not to join us until we got to the ancient labyrinth. And so, we decided to get dressed and depart with the others.

That day, the raid party set out to the labyrinth for the second time. Unlike last time, adventurers, guilds, priests, and additional teams funded by influential individuals had joined the ground, tripling the number of total forces.

・Masters and their troops: 140 members ・Adventurer's Guild: 89 members ・Priests: 42 members ・Faction troops: 74 members The third wave of regular soldiers, also known as the knight corps, would secure the main roads, and the other teams were to act as support as they pressed on. Since everyone had struggled against the undead last time, priests would be assigned to any team that requested them.

We turned them down, of course. We didn't want a stranger joining us and running the risk of letting anyone know about our visits to Japan, and Marie was capable of applying a holy element buff, anyway.

The two rows of troops marched through the rain, moving straight from the city to the ruins. As we progressed through a worn path, I looked up at the horizon. Lightning flashed in the distance, and the sound reached my ears after a delay.

Rain in the desert was somewhat of a surreal sight, and I could see

the clouds in the entire area at once. There were thick clouds ahead in the direction we were heading, and the rain and wind were sure to get stronger as we moved forward.

"You don't see sights like this in Japan."

"Good. I think I would get sick of the strong winds very quickly. I miss those vinyl umbrellas dearly." When I turned around, I found Marie's raincoat hood was soaking wet, her mouth frowning with displeasure. Not to mention, the cat had returned into the jewel to avoid the rain, making her mood even worse. I smiled a bit, then decided to give her a bit of advice.

"Then, why don't you make one? If you spread Undine overhead, it should work as an umbrella, don't you think?"

"Oh! How do such great ideas come from a sleepy-looking face like yours?" *Wait, what does my face have to do with anything?*

Marie raised her staff, and Undine the water spirit appeared in the form of an ultramarine fish with a splashing sound. It was far bigger than it had been in Japan, and the sound of rain grew distant from our surroundings. When I looked up, I saw a film of water covering us overhead.

"Whoa... This feels weird."

"Hmm, I guess this is what it would look like if a puddle could float in the air. I do agree it's a bit strange to see so many ripples in the air like this." Spirits that couldn't directly contribute to battle tended to be helpful for expeditions like this. The unusual sight in the night air caused the others to stop and point up. The film of water gradually spread out in a sphere, preventing the rain from reaching the area around us.

"Hehe, that was easy. Maybe I've finally awakened my powers." It was pretty amazing how she could pull off something like this so easily. Though, a big part of it was due to the boost she was getting from the Arkdragon's Wizard's Guidance ability. Undine was still slowly floating around in the air, managing the invisible shelter

that kept us out of the rain.

"You've always been very talented, Marie. Let's see... How about Rain Coat?"

"Why, thank you. You do deserve recognition for your cooking skills, too. I would praise your swordsmanship, too, if only you fixed your tendency to be a bit too reckless. I'd say... Spirit Umbrella." We started pointlessly making up names for her ability as we trekked through the rainy desert. In any case, I always did things at my own pace, and I planned on enjoying the dream world to the fullest. I was more concerned about improving Marie's mood than about how the others might look at me.

"Heeey, mind letting me join in?"

"Oh, Zera. Are you sure you should be here? The others are giving us envious looks."

"Eh, let 'em. We can just say we were making plans for our alliance raid." *We're using that as an excuse?*

Maybe women disliked rain in general, because Doula brushed off the water with an irritated expression. Her red hair was dark with moisture, and she let out a heavy sigh.

"This is why I hate the rainy season. Thank you, Marie. This is much better."

"Oh, this is nothing. About our plan... Do we have any countermeasures for this mysterious floor master?" Doula shook her head.

The elusive floor master, Shirley. Many had already had their souls taken by the creature that was said to be death itself. Even when it was somehow defeated by concentrating forces to take it down, the floor master quickly reappeared again.

I considered it for a moment. "Maybe it has some way of reviving itself, it has a main body somewhere, or there are multiple copies of the same creature."

“That last option would be ideal. At least we’d be making some sort of progress.” But we all knew that was very unlikely. The creatures should have been acting more wearily if we were whittling down their numbers one by one. From what I’d heard, Shirley had been consistent in its actions: stopping our advances and taking souls.

*So is its objective to gather as many souls as possible? Wait a minute…*

I came to a realization and privately sent Marie a message via Mind Link Chat. We couldn’t reveal this to the others just yet.

“Marie, where do you think it takes the collected souls?”

“Hm… There must be a place they’re being stored. Maybe that’s where the main body or some sort of secret could be found.” *Bingo.*

This was a monster we were dealing with, and it wasn’t just letting those souls rest in peace. It was likely that it was hiding a secret of sorts somewhere on that floor.

“It could just be taking those souls out of spite. It’s worth looking into, though.”

“Don’t say such troubling things. Knowing you, you must be thinking something foolish like, ‘This is just a dream, so I might as well go follow it.’”

*Dang, she got me.*

She acted indignant and puffed her cheeks. Anyway, I felt like we were onto something. We continued walking through the rain and having conversations as we made our way toward the ancient labyrinth.

Meanwhile, someone among the group was raising his hood and scanning the surroundings. Though it seemed like this was just to casually look at the scenery, he was taking a mental note of the number of people, their equipment, and the faces of each person there. Unlike many of the others, the members of his squad had looks in their eyes like they had seen battle before. His partially

veiled eyes were deeply set, and he had a powerful build. The arm band depicting an olive leaf indicated that the man was sent by one of the political factions, making him a new member among the group.

"When do we make our move?" A whisper asked from behind, inaudible to the others in the rain.

The man replied stoically, "After we hear of their plans. Once we get inside, we break off from the main group and rejoin the others."

"Got it. I just hate those dogs of the kingdom. I've always dreamed of killing them all. I can't wait for the fun to begin." The large man quietly wondered if this truly would be any fun at all.

But one thing was for sure: this would be a nightmare for them. He let out a rare, muffled laugh. Many groups with differing intentions lurked within the rainy desert.

The rain began to come down harder, and everyone watched the elf's spell with envy.

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A light spirit drifted overhead, radiating a gentle light. Despite being deep in the ancient labyrinth, it provided plenty of illumination for us, allowing us to spend time there in leisure.

We were in a private room on the first floor, with a single table and bookshelves all around us. It was dust-free, thanks to the air circulation system, and it was actually more comfortable than some inns I had stayed in. That was why we used this area as a rest stop pretty frequently. Since we knew how to read ancient text, the stockpile of books was a good way for us to pass the time. But we weren't reading the books this time. Instead, we each stared at the wall, our hearts pounding quickly. The ordinary wall, with nothing particularly special about it...

Eventually, a black stain formed on the wall and slowly began to spread. The blackness was darker than the abyss itself, and it was

actually rather terrifying to behold… but the two of us had actually been looking forward to this moment.

A fingertip emerged with a splashing sound, and then hands reached out and grabbed either side of the wall. The darkness expanded some more, eventually revealing the smiling Wridra.

“It has been a while! Now that I am here… Awah!” We shouted in joy and dove at her into an embrace. Yes, she was a woman, but we’d hugged a bunch of times already… Well, it sounded weird when I put it that way, but in any case, this wasn’t an issue for us.



“Long time no see, Wridra! Wait, you’re looking a little pale.”

“Oh my, you’re right! We should have an early meal today!”

*“In what world did a child worry about the health of a dragon?”* Wridra’s blank expression seemed to wordlessly ask, but then she broke into an amused laugh. Although she was a being to be feared by most of the world, no one would have believed this was the legendary Arkdragon if they saw her now.

“Hah, hah! I never would have expected a dragon like me would feel such joy from our reunion. Nn… Come, let me take in your smells, half-fairy elf and human of the other.” Wridra brushed off her dress and kneeled down, bringing her attractive face right in front of mine. Her nose was perfectly shaped, and her obsidian eyes reminded me of her dragon form.

She held us in her slender arms, pulling us in so her smooth cheeks were pressed against ours. We smelled her familiar scent, which made Marie get emotional.

“I’m happy, too… but seeing your reaction is making me tear up, so cut it out.” Wridra nodded slightly, then closed her eyes.

She rubbed her nose against the teary-eyed girl the same way she did in her cat form, which made Marie sob out loud. They had missed each other dearly. The elf and dragon speaking in each others’ embrace had spent so much time having fun together.

It was strange how well they got along, despite being of completely different races. Traditionally, this was highly uncommon. Cultures between races were just too different.

That aside, I said to Marie, “Now that Wridra’s here, we have a lot of fun to look forward to. Don’t forget, we’ll be going to Grimland on the weekend if it doesn’t rain.”

“Yes, indeed! I have heard of these terrifying recreational facilities created in the realm of men. I shall get a taste of the theme parks where evil spirits lurk and steal money from unsuspecting visitors.”

*Hm? Where did she get that description? Oh well, that's not all that far from the truth…*

Marie had calmed down by now, and she giggled happily, seeming to enjoy the familiar atmosphere the three of us had shared so often. Maybe Wridra sensed this and cracked a joke on purpose… but probably not.

"Anyway, we have this raid ahead of us, and then we'll be hanging out in Japan again. By the way, it'll be an alliance raid this time, so we can't stray too far from the two other teams."

"Hm, tell me more about this alliance raid. Also, I am ready for that early lunch now." That sounded like a good idea. Wridra's familiar had been hiding from the rain, so she didn't know anything about what we discussed on the way here.

Marie summoned her stone spirits as I took the food out of my bag. Her spirits were actually pretty convenient, saving us the trouble of finding the perfect rock to place the pot on.

I poured the soup I'd prepared into the pot, and Marie began explaining in my stead.

"We're going to maintain just enough distance so we can rush in to help until Shirley, the floor master, appears. The Adventurer's Guild and some other groups are with us this time, so they're getting a briefing on the plan right now, too." We were foreigners here, so we couldn't step into their business. They had told us we could spend our time however we pleased in the meantime.

I heard a dull *vwoom* and turned around to find a pale-blue light coming off of the three-dimensional map Marie had displayed. She was using the Magic Tool we'd been assigned for this expedition. The new members that had joined for this raid got their own as well, albeit with restricted functionality.

I pointed at the points of light displayed on the map.

"These bright lights are teams registered via Mind Link Chat… Zera

and Doula. We can specifically send messages to them instead of the entire group."

"Hmhm, they took good care of my familiar as well, so I shall give my greetings later. That was quite a comfortable room they let us stay in." That much was true. Rich people spared no expense for bedrooms, though I guess that much was to be expected. Suddenly, Marie seemed to remember something.

"Now that I think about it, remember that treasure room we unlocked? Zera mentioned we would be getting a share from there, but did he mention how much we would be getting?"

"Oh, I think he said two platinum coins... but I don't have much use for money..." I said as Marie was taking a sip from her canteen, and she nearly spit out her water. She began coughing repeatedly, and Wridra and I cocked our heads at her.

"You okay? Also, can you summon your Fire Lizard? I'd like to heat up the pot now," I asked, but she seemed busy trying to regain her breath. Had I said something that surprising?

"You... I see, you don't know. You can be absentminded sometimes, Kazuhiro, so I'll put this in simple terms." She slowly rose to her feet, looking a little... no, way more intense than usual. She raised her staff and brought it down upon the hard floor, summoning forth the spirit known as a Fire Lizard.

It crawled across the ground as ordered, then curled up under the pot.

"Those coins are worth about four times more than a salaryman's yearly earnings."

"...Huh? What do you mean?" Rather, I understood what she meant. Platinum coins needed to be cast in such high temperatures that only certain sorcerers could make them, and they hardly ever entered the general market. They even had anti-counterfeit measures, like markings to identify them as authentic and a crest that appeared when they were placed in direct sunlight. I

understood that the coins were just that valuable.

"But why would I need so much money in my dreams? I'd be more concerned about carrying around such a fortune, personally."

"You could have bought all that armor that was displayed at the party the other night."

*Wh-Wh-Whaaat?!*

My knees trembled, and I slid down onto the ground. *I mean, I could buy such supremely premium wares like that? No way! Wha?!*

"I've realized the error of my ways. I understand the value of money now."

"Very well. But you do have a point. I realized there isn't much I actually want in this world." Wridra nodded in agreement. The pot began to boil, and I began throwing in ingredients as I listened to the girls talk.

"Yes, I do agree with that. All I ask for in this world is a place to sleep in peace. Riches and treasures do not bring me joy."

"Exactly. I'm far more excited about the thought of maybe going to Grimland this weekend. Just like when we went to Chichibu and Aomori, I can't wait to find out what's in store for us. A place where everyone from children to adults can have fun... Doesn't that sound wonderful?" The two continued talking and laughing out loud.

As I watched them, that small question within me faded away.

Why did they get along so well despite being of completely different races? It was probably because they shared each other's joys. Race had nothing to do with having fun or enjoying delicious food together. And so, I decided I wanted to enable their fun conversation further and encourage them to have some of this hot pot.

I lifted the pot to find the Fire Lizard was still curled up and sleeping underneath. It opened its beady eyes, then vanished upon

Marie's command.

"Thanks for waiting. It may not be the most refined way to eat, but I'm gonna put this on the table."

I placed the pot on the table, and the girls gleefully shouted, "Finally!" Now, it was time for us to enjoy this unorthodox hot pot.

I lifted the lid, releasing a puff of steam as I revealed the red soup. It was a stamina (mild) kimchi hot pot I had prepared for Wridra. I scooped some white rice into bowls and passed out plates, chopsticks, and bottles of tea. The lively atmosphere as I set the table wasn't too different from the way it was back in Japan.

"Oh, the rice is cold now. Is there any way to make it steamy hot?"

"We would have to cook it again, but I assume that would take quite some time."

"Yeah, it would take a while. There are bento boxes that can preserve heat, but they seem pretty pricey." It didn't usually bother me when I ate bento, but we were having kimchi hot pot today.

There was a kick to the scent of the hot pot, and the elf, who had a keen sense of smell, looked rather confused as she took in whiffs while asking, "Spicy? Sour? Hm?"

The boiling pot was full of Chinese cabbages, chives, tofu, bean sprouts, and pork, all of which should have provided plenty of stamina. The tangy smell came from the kimchi base, which was mixed with the miso soup base and provided plenty of flavor. Wridra, who loved spicy food, licked her lips as she said the premeal greeting, hardly able to contain her excitement.

"Let us dig in! Itadakimasu!"

"Itadakimasu!" We began picking at the pot with our chopsticks and poured some of the piping-hot soup into our bowls.

I usually went for a gentle flavor for my hot pots, and this one packed a bit more of a kick in comparison. Their tongues got a bit of

a shock from the spiciness, but it was rounded out by the sweetness of the pork and Chinese cabbage soon enough. The miso provided a greater depth of flavor, and once the girls swallowed, they were surprised to find there was more to the dish than just spiciness.

"Ah, it's spicy, but so tasty! The soft cabbage is yummy."

"Hnnn, it goes so well with the pork! Huff, mmf, I love this sweet rice!" They complained about the spiciness, but couldn't help themselves from drinking the soup, too. After each mouthful, the stimulating heat made you reach for another bite with some more rice.

"Ahh, I wish I had some beer right now. I'm sure it would go perfectly with this."

"Do not mention such things. I have been holding back the urge this whole time. Oh no, I cannot stop thinking about it now..." The ladies struggled in agony against their urges, but I couldn't really help them there. We were in a labyrinth full of monsters, so it was probably a good idea to hold back on drinking anyway.

Even with the good circulation here, eating such a hot meal left us hot and sweaty. As I watched Marie wipe herself off with a towel, I spoke.

"I'll go open the door real quick. That should help us cool down a bit."

"Yes, please. Ah, so spicy... Mmm! The shiitake mushrooms are good, too!" Shiitake were famous for their aroma. I had always thought it a bit odd when they were called "shee-tah-kee" when featured on overseas cooking channels. I'd looked into it a bit a while back, and I found it interesting that they were pretty well-known globally.

Wridra ate with a satisfied expression, and she seemed to be regaining the color in her face. She was a bit sweaty now, but she had a healthy complexion, and the meal may have helped get her blood pumping.

After eating two bowls, Marie had some tea and began to talk.

“So, why did you look so pale earlier, Wridra? Were you exhausted from raising your children?”

“Hm, this may be a bit difficult for an elf and a human to understand.” She demolished another bowl of rice, then offered it to me to scoop some more. I accepted the bowl, adding the rice that I was planning on using for porridge later.

“Normally, a dragon just provides nutrition to the egg, right?”

“For lesser dragons, perhaps. They are closer to reptiles than dragons, and so they follow the laws of the world as a normal creature.” Yeah, this was getting confusing already. Umm, so, what she called lesser dragons were completely different from an Arkdragon.

According to Wridra, dragons were ancient creatures that were more closely related to spirits, and they existed in this world by harboring what was called a dragon core in their body. This dragon core contained its own unique world inside it, as unbelievable as that was... This conversation was on a whole different dimension. As a humble salaryman, I made the decision to stay quiet and eat my meal.

“Oh, I see. I’m a half-fairy, but you’re genuinely more like a spirit.”

“Close. Despite our large bodies, we are able to fly. This defies the laws of the world, but our existence makes it an undeniable truth. In other words, we have the ability to deceive the world, and I had been transferring some of this power to my children.”

“Huh,” I said noncommittally. Arkdragons were quite mysterious, but the more I heard about them, the more questions I had.

Suddenly, Wridra seemed to remember something and pointed her chopsticks at me.

“Ah yes, there is something I must mention. I could not say this while I was a cat, but...”

“What is it?” The cat was rather expressive, though, so I thought I’d understood most of what she wanted to tell me.

However, Wridra’s expression grew stern, and I felt a shudder go down my spine. *Wh-What is she gonna say?*

“I am generous, so I laughed it off at first. You are just a child, after all. But I must say something, precisely because I care about you two.” The heavy air about her blew away the lighthearted feeling I had moments ago. The beautiful woman looking down at me with a black aura emanating from her was simply terrifying.

I swallowed hard, then fearfully asked, “Y-Yes? What is it?”

“...Too sweet.” *Hm? The kimchi hot pot? I did make it kind of mild...*

I cocked my head, thinking I’d misheard her, but then Wridra slammed her hands down on the table, making the pot lift a few centimeters into the air. Marie and I shrieked and clung to one another, trembling in each other’s arms.

“What were you two thinking, acting so sugary in front of others? You fools never noticed I was watching with disapproving glares the whole time, did you?!”

*Now that she mentions it, I thought the cat did seem displeased looking at us...* In retrospect, I knew exactly what she was talking about.

“You two flirted at every opportunity you had! Here, there, everywhere! Especially that one time with your Tai Chi pajamas!”

“Kyaaa! Please stop!”

“I have secretly saved footage from that day. Here, how would you like it if I showed your shameful display with the image projection magic I have been practicing?!”

“Kyaaaaaa! Noooooo!!!” Marie screamed while still clinging onto me, nearly blowing out my eardrums.

This humiliation was worse than just the embarrassment factor

alone, and the monster-filled ancient labyrinth was quite lively with our screams. By the time we were released from Wridra's lecture, we were on the ground and breathing heavily.

"I-I'm sorry, Lady Wridra. We needed to be put in our place."

"Good. Ah, I feel much better after letting that out. There is too much I cannot communicate while in the form of a cat." Wridra stretched out her limbs with a cheerful smile on her face.

This was just supposed to be a meal, but I felt incredibly drained. I decided to be more mindful of Wridra's position watching us. I glanced to the side, and Marie nodded in agreement.

Washing the dishes was an easy task.

The environment in the ancient labyrinth was incredibly convenient regarding waterways, and it even had a sewage system. It was surprising how well-equipped this place was. Marie utilized the water spirit Undine to the fullest, using it to create a water current and wash the dishes clean.

"Huh, you're really good at this, keeping the dishes from clanking against each other. Have you done it before?" Marie, who had been sitting next to me, turned to face me. She had returned to her usual self by now, the redness in her face having subsided.

"Yes, I do this in your condo all the time."

"Ohh... So that's why my dish detergent hasn't been getting used." This was good in an economic sense, but my daily life was becoming more and more fantastical by the day. Though, I definitely wasn't complaining. I had been bored of my life in Japan until this girl turned it all around.

Our domestic vacation, relationship with the neighbors, and plans to go to Grimland all attested to that. I realized that, as I thought of how to entertain the elf and dragon, I had been provided joy and entertainment in return. I had been given the warm and lively life I'd given up on long ago.

“Speaking of water, there’s an aquarium in our neighborhood that has a bunch of fish from the sea.”

“Oh? Why would they put up fish for entertainment? Isn’t the Koto Ward close to the sea?” *I guess it would be hard for an outsider to imagine a facility where you looked at fish.*

I opened my mouth to explain, then felt her fingertip press against me, seeming to interrupt. She then whispered with her amethyst eyes staring into my own. “Hehe, surprise me like you always do. I want you to show me the aquarium.”

*Of course I can do that, Ms. Elf.*

We both smiled and cheerfully watched the dishwashing machine… I mean, spirit continued its job, sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with each other. My days off were getting filled with exciting plans to spend time with Marie.

Suddenly, white noise began buzzing from the Magic Tool that had been sitting on the table. Once the white noise cleared, a deep, male voice began speaking out loud.

“This is Bloodstone; I need the alliance raid teams to copy. Let’s regroup on the second floor tomorrow and start our operations.”

“This is Andalusite. Hear you loud and clear. Copy that, Bloodstone. Is Team Amethyst still off playing somewhere?”

*Oh, I guess I should answer, too.* I let Marie handle the dishes and hurried over to answer the message.

“This is Team Amethyst. We’ll be ready to go as soon as we’re done washing the dishes.” I heard chuckling from the Magic Tool, and then we decided on our meeting spot.

We were ready to take on the second floor. It was supposedly crawling with the undead, but we were humming as we packed our bags and left the room.

A simultaneous assault from the east, west, and center teams had

begun.

The three that had each defeated a floor master in the first floor, Teams Diamond, Ruby, and Amethyst, were split among them, and a mass of raid members the likes which had never been seen before was rushing down the center.

This was the strategy that had been ordered by the royal family. Using their numbers to their advantage, the troops advanced even as a portion of them engaged in combat, their tactics much like those that would have been used in war. This also allowed them to switch out fighters as they grew fatigued while covering each other from ambushes. They were up against not only the floor master Shirley, but also the mysterious group that had been intervening with the efforts to advance through the labyrinth.

War and raids on labyrinths seemed similar, but there were actually some major differences. In particular, Hakam had been unsettled about the lack of coordination with these various troops being put together in such a rush. The responsibility of leading these various teams had been pushed onto him, and he had been wracking his brain trying to figure out the optimal strategy to get through this with as few deaths as possible.

He stared at a small group in a corner of the map projected by the Magic Tool and let out a sigh. Some of them were sitting on the ground, while others leaned against the wall, the others scattered around them resting as well. The wavering torchlight illuminated the rock walls and cast shadows. He took a swig from his leather bag and called out to one of his men.

“Things are moving smoothly for now. Even the priests are going all out this time.”

“Seems so. The undead are an absolute pain to deal with, so it feels good to see them getting banished left and right.” The others, who had been sent in by the Adventurer’s Guild, wore expressions of relief. After all, they had been told this would be an extremely

difficult mission in an ancient labyrinth. They were all practically forced by their guild to come here despite being afraid for their lives, so they had every right to complain.

"I was thinking of running away if it came down to it, so I'm glad we can just switch out if needed. Oho, look at 'em go."

Through the corridor, a mass of enemies could be seen getting banished at once. Since these monsters weren't being defeated through combat, they didn't contribute experience for leveling up. Even so, these men were far more interested in safety and riches instead.

"I just wanna know about that rumored treasure room. I heard whoever unlocked the one in the first floor was rewarded with platinum coins." They all laughed. The idea of receiving such a reward was simply ludicrous. One could spend frivolously for years without running out with that kind of money.

And yet, there was one thing they were all aware of: getting greedy for such a reward was a sure way to get yourself killed. They had only survived this long because they understood their place in the world.

"Looks like it's almost our turn. But no one's gonna notice if we sit here for a few more minutes."

"Agreed. Those soldiers hired by the country have a lot of energy with how well they've been eating. They wouldn't mind working for a little longer." They chuckled again, but didn't understand the true horror of ancient labyrinths. They assumed the countless tales of monster attacks were nothing but rumors. This was because they had never heard of such things happening on this large of a scale. But many of those who were in the upper floors were beginning to realize something was off about this place. The difficulty level of this raid far exceeded expectations, and the existence of Shirley the Undying was unnatural in and of itself.

Just then, shouting could be heard from the battlefield.

The men looked up, assuming a powerful monster had been taken down. Maybe if they hurried, they could get in on the looting. They stood up in a hurry, but then something came crashing down on them from above.

*Boom! Thud, thud, thud, thud!*

It seemed to be a wet, red bag, and there was some heavy commotion going on. They readied their weapons, expecting a monster attack, and they weren't too far off. An old man missing both arms thrashed about, looking like he would be joining the dead soon.

"Whoa, where'd this guy come from?" His white beard and robe were soaked in red, and he continued thrashing around with inhumanly jarring movements. The men thought about helping, but hesitated, recognizing this crazed old man as a healing priest himself.

"Looks like it's too late to help him..." In that moment, the old priest expelled his last breath and fell to the floor.

Just then, the group watched in shock as the corpse steadily rose before their eyes. A white haze emerged from the sockets of the old man's missing arms and began to glow. His once-frail body began to bulge with muscles as he slowly drew a breath inwards...

"Finish him off, quick! He's turning undead! Reaper is coming!" A pained voice suddenly cried out from the hall.

No one could predict when and where Reaper would strike. It drove its evil soul into the hearts of its victims to turn them into its minions. But despite the warning cries of desperation, the men stood frozen in place. The old priest's level rapidly increased by the second, and it was as if an unseen force prevented them from moving.

"This... is bad. He went to hunt the undead and became one himself."

“Do we attack? Hey! What should we do?!” They were like a deer in headlights, unable to comprehend the sight before them, but as their survival instincts kicked in, they finally began to move. At that point, however, it was too late.

The old man muttered a holy incantation, and then, his hazy arms struck out to attack.

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The stone pavement slid open, revealing a man-made object underneath.

It looked like a log at first glance, but it had the hand-feel of stone material. There was a winged ornament at the top of it, and it grew taller in height before our eyes. It was the Primary Skill Marie had recently obtained known as Prison Keeper. This structure appeared upon activation, and its peculiar structure made it a rather unique skill. Thing was, I didn’t really understand what it was for.

“Hm, it seems like some sort of monster watch tower,” Wridra commented.

“Oh, can you tell? The height of the tower affects the range of monsters it can detect. I’ve been looking for a similar skill in scriptures, but this was the only one I could find.”

I’d never come across a skill like this before, so it was hard to judge its effects. Once it was set in place, it gradually grew taller, effectively increasing the enemy detection range at the same time… but to be honest, our first impression was something along the lines of, *“Is that it?”*

“Detecting monsters is definitely useful, but this takes a while to set up, and we can’t move its position once activated unless we take down the first one. It has a lot of limitations, so I would’ve expected it to have some other functions, too.”

“Maybe it isn’t such a good skill, after all. It was my second Primary Skill, so perhaps I was expecting too much out of it…” Marie

said with a hint of disappointment in her voice.

She had obtained this new skill after that time she gained a bunch of levels at once. Acquiring new Primary Skills was dependent on one's level, and it was greatly affected by the user's talents and abilities. Oftentimes, most people got them around level 35.

With that in mind, level 42 was definitely on the late side. This would have implied it would be powerful, but not all skills were winners, it seemed. Despite this, Wridra thought the contrary.

"Hmm, it does seem to be useful. I see there are magical pathways prepared as well... It may be possible to sync it to exterior devices." Marie seemed to be feeling pretty down about her long-awaited Primary Skill being nothing but an enemy detector and had been quiet for some time. She grew all the more hopeful as she heard Wridra's comment and perked up, her pale purple eyes shining brightly.

"Speaking of which, you mentioned you registered Zera's contact, did you not?"

"Huh? Yeah, we registered it through the Magic Tool so we can communicate or check on each other's positions at any time," I said as I showed Wridra my Magic Tool, which she took in her hand. She observed it from various angles, then made an affirmative noise.

"This is the additional feature. It may be possible for Marie to send enemy information to her party and any registered contacts. Let us see..." She pressed a few buttons. Marie noticed something and looked up, then tapped her Magic Tool with her staff.

"What was... Oh!" I stopped myself mid-sentence. My Magic Tool activated, displaying colors that weren't present on the map before. There were three lights indicating our position, along with several red dots far away.

"Oh, there! These are the Living Armors and Undead Soldiers I detected."

“I can see them now, too. Hmm, it looks like it’s affected by obstacles in the way.” Marie nodded. It did seem to see through objects somewhat, but enemies on the other side of walls showed up a bit faded on the map. The dots were hardly visible when obstructed by two walls. It reminded me of the radars that showed enemy positions in RPGs. This probably worked in a similar way.

“You can use that Mind Link Chat function in a party, but this should allow others to utilize that feature in combat. Well, I suspect it has other secrets, as well.” Marie and I looked at Wridra wide-eyed. She sounded pretty confident, and the word ‘secret’ got us excited at all the possibilities. Wridra only laughed amusedly and handed the Magic Tool back to me.

“Well, you two can figure out the rest for yourselves. It would not be interesting if I spoonfed everything to you.”

“Oh… But you gave us a lot to work with. Thank you, Wridra.” Although Wridra didn’t give us the answer outright, Marie smiled happily as if she’d received a precious gift. If Wridra had said there was more to this skill, it must have been true. I was sure we would realize it eventually and make good use of its effects in battle.

“Good for you, Marie. Let’s figure this thing out together and make the best use of your Primary Skill.” Marie turned to me and smiled cheerfully.

Though, personally, I thought this thing was powerful enough already with its radar effect. Rather, the toughest part about labyrinths was that you never knew where enemies were lurking. Exposing their location would be a huge advantage.

As I thought about this, Wridra suddenly singled me out. Her obsidian eyes were staring directly at me, her finger pointing accusingly.

“The problem is you. Your swordsmanship has gotten better, but we cannot expect too much more of an improvement.”

“But I can only be as strong as my level, so that’s normal, right?”

She looked at me as if I was a dunce.

"You should know that you can become stronger with the right combination of skills."

"Yes, of course. Swapping skills around and trying out different builds is what makes combat so fun." Primary Skills should have been considered one's defining characteristics, and I had three of them due to my high level.

Reprise, which allowed me to register and perfectly replicate attack patterns.

Over the Road, which enabled instantaneous movement.

Phantom Image, which left behind an illusion of myself.

I was able to fight enemies with ease thanks to the combination of these three skills. Though, it definitely helped that I had the distinct advantage of not feeling much pain at all in this dream world.

"I guess the quickest way to get stronger would be to master my Acceleration skill and Astroblade."

"Yes. I can teach you to use Acceleration, but drawing out that sword's potential through energy manipulation is not my strong suit. I have no interest in how the human body works, after all." That meant I would have to learn that part on my own. Zera did give me lessons before, but getting to the bottom of it by myself would've been a difficult task.

"I don't really want to, but maybe I should ask Zera for some more training." His lessons tended to be a bit too intense for me. I wasn't really feeling up for it even in my dreams, but oh well. ...Then again, I *really* didn't want to.

"Do you have any tips for using Acceleration, by the way?"

"Yes. Effort and guts. I will beat your lazy personality into shape."

*Yikes, Wridra's the intense type, too.* How odd, I thought the only thing that was slacking was my face. Also, I wasn't actually sleepy

all the time; I just looked like I was.

"It is time to put your skills to the test. Now, don't just stand there, Living Armors! Come!" The door slid open, and the monsters that had been trembling in the corner of the room ran out into the corridor in a fluster. Battle music began to play after a delay, but… this was pretty awkward. It wasn't exciting at all, and I actually felt sorry for my opponents.

Translucent ghostly entities could be seen wriggling in the cracks of the battered black armor's joints like hermit crabs. They readied their swords and shields, and four souls could be seen floating behind them. Their teeth chattered as they glared at us, as if casting incantations. This was Marie's first time facing humanoid monsters, which should have been a terrifying experience for her.

"How sad… They're sneaking around, trying to hide from Wridra…"

"Ah… Yeah. But their levels are higher than the Koopahs from the last floor, so don't let your guard down." Their levels were visible with Prison Keeper active, so I hoped she knew not to take them lightly.

"I will add that you are forbidden from using holy enchantments. It would make the fight too easy." *What's with that restriction?*

Physical attacks were still somewhat effective against undead enemies with a corporeal body, but souls that had been around since ancient times could nullify them completely. Still, Wridra could be unreasonable at times, but she didn't often expect me to do impossible tasks. I decided to try and figure out what my options were.

They began moving toward us, armor clattering, so I drew Astroblade while deep in thought. The blade hummed, seeming to drain the energy from my body.

"Oh, I get it. I just need to be careful."

"Yes, and for now, you can activate Acceleration only at the exact moment of your attack—" Wridra's voice warped. I had activated Acceleration as a blade came swinging toward my head.

*Clang!* I landed softly on the ground, and a Living Armor's head and right wrist hung uselessly. Since my enemy was a soul, it just floated in the air and stared at me instead of falling to the ground.

"Hmm, I wish they had weak points to aim for—like Koopahs..." There was a pause in my comment because I had teleported to avoid the three bolts of lightning aiming for my abdomen. I reappeared behind the Undead Soldiers, but I was still at a loss regarding an efficient way to take them down. I had been told to use my energy to defeat them, but that didn't really tell me much about what I was actually supposed to do. Even then, if my teacher wished it, I had to give it all I had.

I tentatively fed Astroblade more of my energy, and the weapon sucked it up greedily. I began breathing heavily, but neither Marie nor Wridra seemed to notice the change. Well, they wouldn't have just sat there looking so unconcerned while drinking boxed tea with a straw if they did, right?

I did prefer challenging fights, of course, but when facing so many opponents at once, I was beginning to feel like this was a bit much.

"Oh my, there are twelve Living Armors gathering in a formation."

"Indeed, their form is impeccable. That reminds me, Kitase, you mentioned how you admired such clean troop formations like that one. Good for you; you must be quite ecstatic."

*Did I say that? Huh, I guess I did...* I vaguely remembered mentioning that fighting enemies armed with a sword and shield was the essence of fantasy worlds.

*Yeah... It'd be nice if I could go back to the moment I made that comment and give my grinning face a good slap right about now.*

Footsteps could be heard from around the corner, and there were more than ten sets of armor on the ground around us. They had thoughtfully provided us with more enemies to fight.

The moment more black armor appeared, I leapt.

I pierced through the midsection of the two enemies in the front, then placed a hand over their wound to send a direct wave of energy inside. The soul inside the armor leaked out immediately, immobilizing the monster.

“Ah, I see you are getting accustomed to banishing the consciousness of souls. You can immobilize them for some time using that method. Now, accelerate.” Well, I did memorize the effective movements with Reprise, so it was only getting more optimal as time went on. Even so, the thing was, fighting the undead while deliberately restricting holy enchantments was unheard of. I wondered if she really understood that…

I began to understand the flow of energy running through my body and unleashed Acceleration for just a brief moment. More accurately, I had expended so much of my energy already that those brief moments were all I could manage. Maybe this was what Wridra meant when she talked about using it at the exact moment of my attack.

The attacks swinging toward me practically stopped in place, and I weaved between my opponents to sink my blade into their joints.

Marie applauded as time returned to normal, likely because I had struck them down in a single flash from her view. The armor lost its humanoid shape, and the soul inside vanished like mist.

“*huff, huff* …Rock wall, please!” Marie quickly tapped the stone pavement with her staff, and a wall rose up from the ground. It was like watching a shutter slowly close from the bottom up.

It sealed the way off with a heavy *thud*, and I finally let out a sigh of relief.

“Whew, I’m exhausted… I’d like a moment to catch my breath, if you don’t mind.”

“That was impressive. You took down about thirty of them without even using a holy element,” Marie said in an impressed tone as she handed me a water bottle. She seemed to trust my abilities, judging by the lack of anxiety in her eyes. I figured she was smart enough to watch my movements and judge that I wasn’t in any real danger.

I gratefully took some tea and drank it in big gulps. I hardly felt fatigue in the dream world, but I could tell my body was thirsty. After quenching my thirst with the lukewarm tea, I let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Illusions don’t work at all against the undead. They didn’t even glance at them.”

“Yes, they are practically blind. Their movements are similar to slime molds. Now, what do you think you should do?” The black-haired woman asked as she looked down at me, who was a head shorter. A sweet smell wafted from her silky, straight hair, making it hard to believe we were in the middle of a battlefield. Seeing her up close, I couldn’t help but notice how beautiful she was, but I tried to focus on her question.

“So, you’re saying I do have options. Hmm, I don’t know much about slime molds…”

“Maybe she means that they may look erratic, but there’s a method to their movement. You know, like how they say in the news that they seek the shortest path through a maze.” I did recall hearing something like that. They didn’t seem to be intelligent, but they moved as if they were.

“I also read in a library that they congregate to survive when they don’t have any food,” Marie continued.

“Food? You mean the undead eat, too?” I asked. Wridra nodded.

“It is said that the undead mainly feast upon the souls of the living. This labyrinth has been secluded for a long time. Look, here they come again in search of a meal.” Marie looked where Wridra was pointing and let out a scream. The souls had abandoned their armor and slowly crept through the slight openings in the rock wall.

“They must be sensing our presence. Let me try something.” An idea came to me, so I had the other two stand back and watch. I walked up toward a soul that had finally made it through to our side.

My illusions only affected the visual senses. They were very convincing even for me and had the ability to trick intelligent opponents. But...

“Let’s give this a shot... There.” I created an illusion in front of my opponent but used a different method this time. The soul that was inside the Living Armor then opened its mouth wide and took a bite at the illusion.

“Oh, it reacted! What did you do, Kazuhiro?”

“I knew Wridra wouldn’t ask me pointless questions, so I figured this had something to do with the energy manipulation I’ve been practicing and put some of it into my illusion.” I had weaved energy into an illusion for the first time, but it seemed to be pretty effective. More effective than I expected, really. An intelligent opponent would have come after me after realizing it attacked a dummy, but the soul still continued foolishly biting at the illusion.

I approached it from behind and gave it two quick swipes of my sword, causing it to scatter into nothingness. I channeled energy into the tip of my sword at the exact moment of contact, minimizing my energy usage.

“Oh, this is nice and easy. I feel dumb for wasting all that effort earlier.”

“Some of them will be smarter than this one. Do not get

overconfident." It seemed like my illusions would be more useful here than they had been on the previous floor. Despite that, as Wridra said, there was a chance I could've potentially gotten myself into trouble if I got too cocky.

"Oh, we need to wake up in Japan soon. Marie, could you open the wall so I can wipe out the rest?"

Marie nodded, then ordered her stone spirit to return. The spirit responded, the rock wall slowly receding into the ground this time. In the meantime, I created an illusion and filled it with the last of my energy. This technique was pretty draining, but I wasn't too concerned, since we would be sleeping soon enough.

I held Astroblade at my hip as it hummed like a jet engine fueled by my energy. Light ran through the blade like a shooting star, indicating that it was charged and ready to go. This was like my ultimate move, in a sense. Even though I was a full-grown adult now, cool effects like these filled me with excitement. Too bad it had to drain my energy to the brink of me passing out.

The wall came down fully, revealing fourteen monsters like the Magic Tool's sensor had told us. I wondered if their thought process really worked the same way as slime molds' did. It hardly seemed as innocent, and it was chilling to see them attacking my illusion with such unrestrained violence.

*Fwoooooom!* Astroblade revved up as I unleashed its full power in a single stroke.

I swung it from my hip in a flash, leaving a blade-shaped trail that annihilated the undead in its path like a shooting star had blown through them. It was satisfying to wipe out their entire cluster with one shot and see pieces of their armor flying into the air.

*That's some good stress relief. Really tiring, though...*

"That was so cool. Like a scene from a movie," I commented.

"I know—how about you give this move a name? Or you could

shout, ‘Feel my rage!’ as you use it.”

“Hahaha! Yes, this is an order from your teacher. As part of your training, you are required to say that from now on.”

*No way… Could you imagine me shouting that with a face like this?*

I gave them a look that clearly disagreed with their idea, but they just laughed all the harder. *Sheesh, I had enough to worry about with work coming up soon.*

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As Wridra had said, the undead appeared where they could find food.

I wondered what was happening to the center team that had a massive group of fighters.

Meanwhile, one of the battle lines was crumbling somewhere outside of our scope of awareness. The plan was for each team to make a coordinated effort to form a perimeter as they pressed forward, but as one of the links in the chain broke, the undead flooded through, collapsing the line they had formed. They were being slowly devoured from the sides.

*Zzz, zzzzzz…*

Several pairs of bloodshot eyes stared at the Magic Tool sitting in the hallway.

No one said a word. Their minds numb, they could hardly move.

The unending screams continuously echoed in their minds.

“No… Noooooo!!!”

“They’re flanking us! Where’s our rear guard?!”

“Men, we need to cast together at once!”

“Ah! The priests are being shot at! Protect them!”

*Zzz, zzzzzz!*

Their high-pitched screams pleaded for headquarters to help.

Just one floor beyond was a world of death. The men sitting here thought about how the monsters would flood up and take down these headquarters as well. Their sense of justice and will to help the dying seemed to shrivel away at the sound of the gruesome screams.

They had pushed forward with massive forces through utilizing their high morale, but all they ended up doing was delivering a feast for the undead. As the casualties racked up on an unprecedented scale, some trembled in fear while others glanced between the Magic Tool and their commander. But Hakam and Aja sat in their chairs without moving an inch.

Then, the hooded old man spoke.

“Looks like our little guests finally made their move.”

“Yes, they’ve taken down the center team. Judging by their position, it must have been the household of Ajaars, Gledlin, or Bakk. I will see how the king feels about beating some answers out of the Gledlin household to start.” Despite them being renowned houses, each of them had been facing financial difficulties. Hakam seemed to be rather confident about the culprits being from the Gledlin household. The wizard merely nodded without objection.

“To think, the royal family has brought this nightmare upon us with their greed. Perhaps we are mere puppets in all this as well. Just playing our part in weeding out the rebels…” With that, the old man pressed his staff against the map of the labyrinth floating in the air. Then, like ink dropped into water, color flowed from the tip of the staff onto the map.

“It seems they’ve gotten overconfident now that they have more forces. Hmph, it’s no use destroying the Magic Tool. I’ve mixed some of my blood in the water I had them drink beforehand. Oho, I can see them clear as day now.” The ink spread slowly, revealing red dots in the three-dimensional map. They were the aforementioned

“rebels.” Among those who were desperately fighting for their lives, the marked groups were acting completely different from the others.

There were about three teams’ worth of them. For some reason, the monsters didn’t go after them. It was hard to believe, but this detail made them far more formidable than they would have been otherwise.

However, commander Hakam’s eyes gleamed with a feral light as he laughed like an animal.

“Monsters. Then I guess it’s time to bring out the Magic Stones. They should feel honored to be the first test subjects.” They would swallow the plans and desires of the rebels whole.

Or perhaps it would be the ancient labyrinth itself that would devour them. Deep below the chairs they sat upon, the unending screams echoed on.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 6: The Elf and the Dragon's Japanese Garden Date

When I came to, it was a morning like any other. I drew in a breath and noticed the air was chillier than usual. My body was still numb from having just woken up, so I took another deep breath and let it out slowly.

It was still raining, though the water droplets were so small I could hardly hear the raindrops coming down over Koto Ward. As I looked up at the faint glow of sunlight, I noticed someone stretching behind me. Her skin was pale, and she had more of a mature allure than Mariabelle.

*Now, whose arm could this be…?*

The arm wrapped around me as I stared absentmindedly, a sweet scent floating into my nostrils.

*Oh, that's right, Wridra's here with us today.*

Troublingly, Wridra had a personal policy of wearing nothing when she went to bed. And just like she did when she was in the form of a cat, she shuddered as she did her routine stretch. She yawned into my ear, but the effect was very different from when she did so as a cat. I tried my hardest not to focus on the sensation of the soft objects pressing against my back.

The elf girl also squirmed around a bit as she woke from her sleepy haze. She rose under the blanket, her long white hair spilling down from her head. She blinked the sleep out of her purple eyes several times, then spoke.

"Oh, that's right. Keep your eyes closed." She placed her hand over my eyes, preventing me from enjoying her cuteness any further. This was to block my view from seeing the woman behind me. I doubted Wridra herself would care, though.

Wridra finally awakened, and she once again stretched out her

limbs.

"Nnn, it has been a while since I have come to Japan in the flesh. It seems the weather has not changed, but... I do feel like getting a taste of the fresh air."

"Come on, put some clothes on. We need to get ready to start the day," Marie insisted. Wridra agreed in an uninterested tone, and I was finally able to see again.

She had decided to wear a pair of black hot pants and a skin-tight long-sleeved shirt today. Creating such an outfit was an easy task for the great Arkdragon. As Wridra walked around barefoot, the white-haired girl walked up to me, blocking my view once again. She ran her hand through her hair and tucked it behind one of her long ears as she parted her soft lips.

"You need to stop being a sleepyhead and get up, mister. You don't want to be late for work, do you?" She booped my nose with a finger, and so I finally decided to get up. I wanted to argue that I was already up and alert, but I probably wouldn't have been very convincing.

The black-haired beauty was looking up at the window next to the bed. The sky was full of grey, gloomy rain clouds as it always had been lately. Marie came up and sat next to her.

"Rainy season in Japan really is something, isn't it?"

"Hmm, the sky is full of clouds, but I do have a feeling it will clear up by this weekend." Curious, I turned to face her.

She may have said it was just a feeling, but coming from the Arkdragon, there was a good chance that may very well have happened. So, I decided to put in an appointment for the amusement park's restaurant just in case. They could have potentially been less busy with all the rain recently.

I walked into the kitchen as I contemplated our plans for the weekend. The rice in the rice cooker was done, so I took some

ingredients out of the fridge as I called out, “What are your plans for today, you two?”

“I wouldn’t mind just reading, but I think Wridra wants to go outside. I was thinking maybe we could go for a walk.”

“Yes, I would like to take a leisurely walk, despite the gloomy weather. Kitase, do you know of any good places?” I mixed the rice around with a rice scoop as I mulled over the question. That reminded me, Kaoruko had told me of some walking routes nearby.

“There’s a place called Kiyosumi Garden nearby. I think you’ll like the Japanese-style scenery there.” I figured it would’ve been easier to show them on my smartphone than it would have been to explain in words. I beckoned for them to come over, and they crowded around my phone at the table.

“Ooh, a green pond! That pine tree looks so nice in the background. The greenery in Japan is so vivid and refreshing.”

“Ah, how elegant. I have always tended to be drawn by flashier sights, but I have recently come to appreciate the beauty of tranquility. This does indeed look super cool.”

*Oof, she ruined it with her last comment.*

They cheerfully played with the smartphone as I prepared the breakfast table, and they continued on as we ate. It was generally bad etiquette to do this while eating, but it was fun and lively for them to peer at the screen with chopsticks in hand.

“Would you like some natto today, Marie?”

“No, thank you. I think I like having just the eggs. I’m going to put some soy sauce and furikake on them, too.”

“I will have the same thing. I cannot get enough of that salty-sweet flavor. Hm? The clothes in this picture are called ‘ki-mo-no,’ are they not? I have seen it on the television before.”

Wridra pointed at a colorful, cherry blossom-print kimono. Since I

wanted her to enjoy her time in Japan to the fullest, I just had to suggest that she wear one herself.

"Oh, that looks nice. Can you make it with your powers, Wridra?"

"Oh, yes, of course I can. I shall make some for you after the meal as well." Marie blinked. It seemed she didn't expect that she would get to wear one, too. She had always had a keen interest in clothing. Her cheeks became a deeper shade of pink before our eyes, and it made me smile to see the excitement blossoming inside her. I was grateful to the Arkdragon for providing such entertainment now that she wasn't in her cat form.

"So, your date plans are decided, then? It would be quite a fantastical sight to see a draconian and elf taking a walk in a Japanese garden in their kimono."

"Yes, yes, yes! Let's go together, Wridra!" Marie said to Wridra, who narrowed her eyes in a smile and meowed in response. Wridra seemed to be finding joy in Marie's reaction, too, and the two happily giggled together. I felt like a guardian to them in this scenario, but seeing cute girls look happy just filled my heart with joy. Though, in reality, I was the youngest one here.

The door slid open, and the two women stepped out of the dressing room.

Marie gripped the sleeve of her kimono self-consciously as she looked up toward me and displayed her outfit. It was a white kimono with a purple print and a deeper shade of purple on the decorated collar. The colors were designed to accentuate the color of her eyes.



“Oh, Wridra, stop pushing! I don’t look strange, do I? I feel like I stand out in a bad way.”

“You are the one who said to hurry with the morning preparations. Such a fussy elf you are. Now, I will do your hair as well. Stop moving.”

Wridra held on to Marie’s shoulders from behind, then began tying it back. A sizzle could be heard from Wridra’s fingertips as she made a ponytail, and she created a hair ornament shaped like a hydrangea to hide the girl’s long elven ears.

*Hmm… She may be better than a professional hair stylist.*

I glanced at the clock to find I still had a bit more time before work. To be honest, I wanted to take this time to get a good look at Marie’s full kimono outfit. And so, I waited for them to finish getting ready as I prepared to leave.

Marie eventually looked into a hand mirror, and her expression immediately brightened.

“Ah, ah! So cute! This is great, Wridra!”

“Hmhm, it was nothing. Kitase, applause.”

I started clapping. Before me was a fairy that had taken in the essence of Japan, a refreshing sight that I didn’t expect to see on such a gloomy day. I had to give it to Wridra—she had chosen a perfectly tasteful kimono to highlight Marie’s refined air.

“Oh, your outfit is great, too, Wridra. It goes nicely with your black hair and eyes.”

“…Hah, such an unenthusiastic compliment. So sloppy that I can hardly bring myself to be angered. Now, I shall try wearing the same hairstyle as Marie.”

*Huh, I thought that was a perfectly fine compliment…*

Wridra shooed me away with her hand as if I was in her way.

“We took too long with the preparations. We should hurry,” Marie said and urged me forward from behind after I had locked the front door. She usually saw me off when I left for work, but we were heading in the same direction this morning anyway, so we decided to walk to the station together.

The girls chattered excitedly, unaffected by the crowd of salarymen around them on the bus. I was a bit worried about just how packed the bus was, but everyone seemed to assume Marie and Wridra were foreigners who had come to visit. They naturally gave the girls some room, and Marie only nonchalantly noted that it was pretty crowded. Even strangers were being considerate so that the two of them could make the most of their time in Japan.

When we arrived at the station I transferred through to get to work, we were only two stations away from Kiyosumi Garden on the Hanzomon Line. I pointed at the route map overhead, and the two looked up and gaped.

“We get off at the Kiyosumishirakawa Station to get to the garden. Don’t forget that name, okay?”

“The kanji is a bit complex, but I just memorized the characters for Kiyosumi. Although, you know, it is a shame that you won’t be joining us today,” Marie said. The platform at Kinshichou Station was full of people heading to work. As the two beautiful girls in kimono appeared there, they naturally drew a lot of attention. Marie looked regretful as she fidgeted uncomfortably, and I smiled at her.

“I’ll be happy as long as you have fun. Tell me all about your adventures when I get home tonight, okay?”

“Yes, of course. Go work hard, and be careful not to trip!” It felt a bit strange to be waving goodbye to them at the ticket gate. I had to admit, I was envious of them, going to a park on a weekday. I hadn’t been using my paid time off, much like a typical Japanese worker, but I hoped that someday, I would be able to earn a boatload of hours off. As I stood lost in thought, I found myself stepping into

the train full of people as usual.

I later found out that they had spent some time at a cafe, as per my advice, then safely arrived at Kiyosumi Garden while avoiding the morning rush.

I was nervous about them going out on their own, but Marie was remarkably responsible, and Wridra was there, too, so they probably wouldn't have gotten into much trouble. That didn't stop me from worrying, though. And so, I clocked in for another day of work.

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Rain gently fell on the garden, and like most Tokyo facilities, the entry fee was rather reasonable. The affordable cost made it easy for visitors to return at any time of year to enjoy the changes brought by the four seasons.

Beads of water clung to Mariabelle's plastic umbrella as she stared at the words at the reception counter, then pointed.

"Look, the entry fee is 150 yen. It's so cheap!"

"Hmm, this makes me want to consider getting the annual pass for 600 yen..."

Even Wridra, who had no interest in managing finances in the other world, crinkled her eyebrows in thought. She did get an allowance, but this meant there was a limit to the amount of money she could spend freely.

After some deep contemplation, the two decided to check the place out before committing to an annual pass and handed over coins for their entry.

"Oh, you can speak Japanese? I have to admit, I'm a bit surprised," the white-haired, elderly receptionist said with a surprised look, and the two girls giggled. He showed them an embarrassed smile, then offered some advice as a token of apology.

“Irises should be in full bloom right now. A guide will be doing tours of the place starting at ten, so please feel free to join. It’s free!” The dragon and elf met each other’s eyes.

*“They’re not even asking for money? What if they’re some shady group…”* Such thoughts immediately subsided when they remembered this was Japan, a country where good-natured people like Kitase resided.

They both grinned, then bowed at the elderly worker.

“Thank you, we will take the tour and enjoy the garden to the fullest!”

“Wow, your Japanese is very impressive. I hope you have fun!” The smiling attendant left an impression on the two ladies. There was something about him that reminded them of the man they lived with, and he remained in their thoughts even as they walked toward the open garden area. Suddenly, a word popped into their minds at once, and they looked at each other with mouths wide open.

“Kazuhiro is just like a grandpa!” They laughed in agreement, emitting a resplendent atmosphere that seemed to repel the rainy weather.

I just so happened to sneeze at this moment, but I had no idea they were talking about me.

Marie knelt down, her eyes widening at the sight before her.

“Oh my, such a pretty purple!” She let out a squeal of joy at the flower bed of irises, and the elderly people around her smiled as if the compliment was directed at them. Although Marie seemed like a rather unusual visitor, they were glad to see her find joy in the beautiful sights of Japan and smiled as if she was their own grandchild.

“Yes, much like your eyes. Irises are just as beloved as hydrangeas in this season, but there are only about two hundred gardens that

feature them like this." The guide went on with her explanation, and the two girls listened with fascination. The woman was as elegant as the flowers she was describing, and she had a soothing voice that was pleasant to the ear. There was a certain charm to women like her who maintained their beauty through the years.

"Ayame and shobu are very beautiful this time of year. They're both types of irises, spelled with the same kanji, and they look very similar, so they have a history of being mistaken for one another." The two nodded, listening intently.

The guide explained that, despite their similar appearance and spelling, there were some differences. They both belonged in the Iridaceae family. Hanashobu, also known as Iris ensata; ayame, also known as Iris sanguinea; and kakitsubata, also known as Iris laegvigata, were very hard to tell apart by eye. Hanashobu grew near bodies of water, ayame grew on farms, and kakitsubata could be found on both, making it all the more confusing.

"Ahhh, I can't remember all of this!"

"I think we can just say they are all the same thing." The elderly group seemed to agree with Wridra's comment and burst out in laughter. It seemed they were all thinking the same thing, putting everyone in an amiable mood.

Mariabelle turned slightly pink from the sudden attention, and the guide woman laughed.

"Yes, I agree. However, there is a proverb that means they are both equally beautiful, and this applies to you two as well." Marie and Wridra were taken aback along with the rest of the group. The guide continued.

"When there are two beautiful women, one wouldn't just assume they are the same. Surely, they would each have proper names. Just as everyone would like to know your names, so do these flowers." Everyone made contemplative noises. Fantastical visitors from another world like Mariabelle and Wridra couldn't simply be

lumped into the “cute” category.

There was some applause of agreement, and even Wridra joined Marie in fidgeting with embarrassment.

Those who happened to participate in this tour around the garden ended up very satisfied. Not only did they see the beautiful flowers, but they got to watch the expressive girls’ enjoyment the entire time.

When the guide finished the tour, the participants went their separate ways to stroll through Kiyosumi Garden of their own accord.

There was something strangely attractive about wet stones.

The stones floating in the green-colored lakes had a distinct hue to them, and as the guide had mentioned, the colors were all the more vivid in the rain.

“I always thought flower-watching was something reserved for nobles.”

“Originally, it was. It seems it has since been opened to the public. This just goes to show the differences in each country’s caliber.” Everyone had a desire to keep treasure for themselves. Especially when it came to such a garden that took significant money and time to cultivate. But unlike material riches, the beauty of gardens never wavered no matter how many people came to visit. At least, the people who managed this place seemed to welcome Marie and Wridra, who just so happened to wander in.

Marie shielded herself from the raindrops as she peered at the colorful hydrangeas. She had noticed this before, but there was a mysterious allure to these flowers, and Marie couldn’t help but stare at them.

“They say these only bloom during the rainy season.”

“Hm, that does make them seem more valuable. Knowing they can only be seen like this in the rain does make me appreciate this

gloomy weather more." They nodded in unison.

Beyond the hydrangeas was a green lake where rain came down in fine droplets. The symphony of countless raindrops hitting the ground was pleasant to the ear.

According to what the guide had said earlier, enjoying sounds produced by nature was part of Japanese culture. The girls didn't know whether that was true or not, but the Japanese-style buildings standing upon the pond, the pine trees curled atop each other, and the endless view of greenery and flowers felt like they were cleansing the soul.

The sound of water splashing could be heard. When the two turned, they noticed something emerging from the pond.

"Oh, what is that creature?" Marie inquired.

"Perhaps a monster that lives near bodies of water. It certainly does have a smug-looking face." Wridra seemed a bit more relaxed than usual as she spoke. The turtle clinging onto the stone looked at the dragon and elf, its nose moving as it exhaled. The girls giggled at the sight of its lovable face. Marie was enjoying herself to the fullest, her sandals clinking as she walked around.

"Ah, this place is so peaceful. I feel refreshed, like I just got done taking a bath. This place has such a unique atmosphere."

"These Japanese gardens are not to be underestimated. If we stay too long, our faces may end up looking permanently sleepy like Kitase's." Marie was about to respond that it was unlikely but paused. Everyone from the guide to the other visitors had a relaxed air about them, so she couldn't bring herself to deny it outright. The turtle seemed to have had enough and plopped back into the pond, then swam away.

Marie and Wridra took their time and cautiously stepped over the slippery rocks as they made their way around the green pond. By the time they finished a full lap around, the raindrops were even finer than before.

“Mhm, I’m glad to hear you guys seemed to have fun. Huh? Your face is going to look sleepy? What do you mean?” I listened to Marie speak over the phone about her day at the garden. I was worried the whole time, but it sounded like she and Wridra got home safely after having a great time. I let out a sigh of relief and made her an offer.

“Let’s go together next time. I won’t be wearing a kimono, though.” She then gave me a lecture, telling me that I should’ve been celebrating my own culture. I’d never thought Ms. Elf would be scolding me about how to be Japanese...

I put my phone back into my pocket after our conversation and looked up to see the rain had calmed down quite a bit. I hoped it would stop raining by the weekend, then stretched and went back to work.

*Japan would be heaven if I didn’t have to work...*

Although I complained mentally, my steps were lighter than usual.

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I loosened my neck tie as I contemplated. It was only natural for me to feel envious about the girls’ day of fun.

Come to think of it, spending time in Japan was like a dream from their point of view. Their reality was the fantasy world on the other side, so they were able to totally let loose and enjoy themselves here. Even though I had been spending my time working, the lonely thoughts were surely going to be wiped away by the prospect of fun times ahead.

“Hm... I’m starting to sound bitter. I can’t deny that I’m envious, though.” I complained to myself as I got off of the train, and Koto Ward’s night sky awaited me past the ticket gate. The air here wasn’t too different from that of the center of Tokyo, but I was relieved to be back.

I was sure the girls would run up to me and tell me all about their day at Kiyosumi Garden as soon as I got home. I was genuinely looking forward to it, and it wasn't like I was serious about being jealous earlier. In fact, I was always worried about Marie spending time alone while I was at work. In that sense, Wridra was reassuring to have around in both the ancient labyrinth and in Japan.

Many students and employees getting off of work were lined up at the bus terminal right outside of the station. I recognized someone's figure from behind and decided to call out to him.

"Good evening, Toru."

"Oh, hello." The overweight man turned around, looking surprised to see me. He was Kaoruko's husband, a neighbor at my condo... I believed she mentioned that he had a government office job.

"We go home on the same route, but this is the first time we've bumped into each other."

"Probably because I have a lot of overtime. Oh, and thank you for the meal the other night. I enjoyed a few drinks with the delicious unagi you gave us." Toru then seemed to notice something and made a drinking gesture with his hand.

"Speaking of which, how would you like to join me for some drinks? You can drink, right?"

"I'm sorry, but Marie is waiting for dinner at home. And I'm sure Kaoruko is waiting for you, too."

"Ah, you're good at turning down offers. You did it without making me feel bad, and you're so collected. I'm sure you get along with everyone at your workplace, too." I humbly denied it, but come to think of it, I did seem to coast by pretty well. I avoided any major drama, and I got my work done properly. I always made sure to remember things I'd been taught, and I was careful not to cause issues for my superiors... but that was all just to avoid working overtime, so it wasn't that noble of a cause, either.

“Oh well, then I guess I’ll just ask you on the way home. Ah, and there’s the bus.”

“Hm? Ask me what?”

“The reason for Mariabelle’s stay, of course. But that’s just out of curiosity. It has nothing to do with my line of work.”

I felt a sudden pang of panic at the unexpected words, but I smiled and replied “Sure, of course.” Being prudent really helped for times like these.

The elevator slowly made its way up.

I blankly watched each floor go by, then a sound notified us that we had arrived at the destination. Toru stepped out of the elevator, then turned to me with a calm smile.

“Well, let’s go for a drink sometime. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“Yes, me, too. Good night.” He waved his hand goodbye, and the automatic door closed between us. The elevator began to move again, and I finally let out a long sigh. In truth, I was pretty shaken up that he’d asked me about Marie’s reason for her stay.

“The homestay excuse isn’t going to work if he has a government office job…” I muttered to myself. Besides, homestay programs were usually done by people who were eighteen or older, and Marie didn’t appear to be any older than a middle or high schooler. And I heard those only last for a month or so. She had been staying with me since around April, and the fact that she hadn’t even been going to school would naturally rouse suspicions.

I’d told Toru that Marie was the child of a distant relative, and I was helping her with her academics, but something told me he saw through my lie. He’d been smiling as he listened, but it struck me as odd that he didn’t dig any deeper on the important points.

There was a possibility that significant changes would occur regarding our life together… but he did appear amicable, so maybe he was just letting it slide. He did mention that the matter was just

for his curiosity and was unrelated to his job, after all.

I cracked my neck and stepped out of the elevator. The view of the night sky from the walkway was covered in thick clouds, the stars obscured by their veil.

*Szzz…* The oil sizzled.

I had my arms around Marie, but we weren't doing anything that would provoke the Arkdragon's ire. Clad in an apron, Marie glared at the sizzling oil with a serious expression as we cooked together.

But whenever she looked up at me with her round eyes and face like a young lady of noble birth… I couldn't help but think about how cute she was.

"Well, what do I do next? Are you okay? You seem distracted."

"Sorry, sorry. Maybe I'm a bit tired from work. Umm, you should be able to use your chopsticks to check if it's done."

"This crispy feeling, you mean? Hm, it's pretty easy to tell like this." She held in her chopsticks a golden piece of deep-fried chicken. It was karaage, a staple food in any Japanese household. Her nose twitched as she took in the fragrant scent. She glanced at the fridge, maybe because she wanted to have some wine with her tasting. However, when it came to frying lots of karaage, time was of the essence.

"Let's fry up the next batch. I'll prepare the salad in the meantime."

"All right. Let's get this table ready in a jiffy with our well-coordinated teamwork!" Marie seemed to be in a good mood after getting the hang of it. She looked really cute as she cheerily leaned her head to the left and right. I wanted to just watch her for a while, but having salad with karaage was mandatory, so it was time to get to work.

When I glanced at the table, Wridra was quietly sitting in her chair for once and looking up at the night sky. The air was cold after

the long rain, but it didn't seem to faze her as she sat in her hotpants. She looked rather picturesque with her slender limbs and long hair as she sat there, hugging one knee.

I was caught by surprise when her obsidian eyes suddenly turned toward me.

"Are you okay, Wridra? You're awfully quiet today."

"Hm... I am not yet quite accustomed to this world, but..." She said in an uncharacteristically hesitant tone, then beckoned me over with a pale finger. I sat down next to her as requested and waited for her to continue. Then, Wridra whispered to me as if telling me a secret.

"It seems you two do not keep secrets between one another, but it must be difficult to tell her now. I do not intend to interject about that." I cocked my head in confusion, but then realized what she was talking about right away. She was talking about my conversation with Toru from earlier.

"Eavesdropping? That's a violation of privacy, Wridra."

"Fool. You are the one who failed to turn off your comm link. When have I ever violated your... Ahem. Back to the topic..." Yup, she just remembered the time she eavesdropped on us in the dream world. But she only chimed in out of concern for us, so I decided to just drop it.

I glanced over at Marie, who was still happily working on her dish. That sight was like a treasure to my eyes.

"Do not worry. Things will turn out fine. Though, this is merely my intuition, like with my weather forecast." She slapped me on the shoulder. It felt like she was trying to encourage me and cheer me up. I stared at her without thinking, and she flashed a gallant smile.

"What I am trying to say is, fret not. In Japan, they say sickness and health start with the mind, do they not? What you should focus on now is entertaining Marie as usual and by extension, me as well."

I felt the tension leave my shoulders. It was true that there wasn't much I could do. Cooking, traveling, and reading her books were pretty much it. I just had to figure out how these two could live in Japan in the meantime.

"This has been fun for me, too, you know. By the way, have you had karaage before, Wridra?"

"Of course not. The smell alone has me restless with excitement. If you wish to hear of our day at Kiyosumi Garden, you had better make haste and prepare a feast." It was amazing how easily she wiped away the worries eating at my mind. But just then, Marie finally noticed us sitting there.

"Are you slacking off on your salad-making duty? If you're going to make me do all the work, you won't be getting any of this chicken, mister," she said reproachfully and turned back around, and I stood up in a hurry.

"Oops, sorry! I'll get to it." It seemed like the women were the ones in charge here. When I stood next to Marie, she was standing with her cheeks puffed out, a pile of karaage gathered next to her on a mesh tray. Her mood quickly improved as we had a conversation while I prepared the salad next to her.

The girls picked up the freshly cooked karaage with their chopsticks.

A delicious scent wafted into the air, and we couldn't help but gulp at the appetizing golden color. They took their first bite without any condiments, juices erupting from the meat as they sank their teeth in.

"Mmmmmm!" We had put some ginger on the skin to add some depth of flavor, which added a crispy texture after it had been deep-fried. Fat dripped down as they easily bit through the plump meat, the savory flavor threatening to overwhelm their taste buds.

"Mmmmmmmmm!!!" Marie seemed rather busy, rapidly tapping her feet on the flooring and chewing her food at the same time. She

glanced back and forth between the pile of karaage and my face, then started slapping my shoulder for some reason. Then came a delayed stomp on my foot, but this act of violence came from Wridra instead. That hurt.

I gave her a disapproving look, but she looked back at me with a face full of smiles, completely uncaring.

"Deliciooous! It smells incredible, too!"

"Mmf, nnf! I can't believe it! You've been keeping this dish a secret from us this whole time, haven't you?"

I told her that wasn't the case as I poured the two of them some beer. It was said that white wine paired well with chicken, but this was my personal preference. Neither option would disappoint, though.

"Anyway, let's find out which sauce goes best with karaage. We've got a green onion sauce, salt and pepper, mayo, ketchup, a mixture of the two, lemon, and also..." I brought out a bunch of small plates, and the girls looked at them, wide-eyed.

"Now wait just a minute, why are there so many condiments? It is delicious enough as-is," Wridra protested.

"Yes, my karaage are perfectly fine. There's no need to obscure the flavor with a bunch of sauces," Marie agreed.

*Huh...? Why are they fighting it?*

They didn't know that trying different sauces and debating over which one tasted the best was part of eating fried chicken. Low-cost, filling, and packed with protein, this was an excellent and highly conventional dish. That was what made the sauce debates all the more deeply rooted.

Eventually, I convinced them to just give it a try. Wridra reluctantly dipped a piece of chicken into the green onion sauce, and Marie chose mayonnaise. When they took a bite, their dissatisfied expressions vanished immediately.

“Nn! The sauce has soaked into the coating and… Mmh, impossible! It pairs so perfectly with the chicken and changes the flavor completely!” Wridra cried out.

“Oh, wow! So rich and fragrant! Mmm, so good!” Marie took some gulps of the ice-cold beer, then let out a satisfied sigh. This was a dish loved by adults and children alike, but I was glad to see it suited the palates of residents of the fantasy world, too.

“Ahhh, this chicken and beer are a match made in heaven! We would flip the other world upside down if we could bring these over there. I always thought chicken ended up dry and flavorless by nature.”

“Maybe chicken in Japan tastes like this because of selective breeding and safety management. I’ve never seen fat that’s so clean and odorless like this.” Washing down the tasty chicken fat with some beer was a moment of pure bliss. The dinner table naturally grew more lively as we ate, the pile of karaage diminishing over time.

I decided to try a bite, too, and… Mmm, fried to perfection. Marie was getting a lot better at cooking here. As I thought about this, I noticed Marie and Wridra had started the debate.

“As I said, I think the mayo ketchup goes best with the karaage. It compliments the flavor well while adding just the right amount of richness.”

“No, no, the green onion sauce is simply perfect. The sauce is soaked into the batter, giving it an exquisite flavor! And above all, it pairs perfectly with the alcohol.”

*Huh, I thought they were getting along just a minute ago.*

Sparks flew between the elf and dragon as they glared at each other, and they turned toward me for some reason. They each shoved their favorite sauce toward me and wordlessly demanded that I choose.

“Um, well, this is all about preference. There is no best one.”

“That noncommittal response is so Japanese of you. That won’t do. You need to admit my mayo ketchup is the best one. If you don’t, I’m not going to read you a bedtime story tonight.”

“If you truly are a man, you will admit the green onion sauce is the best one. Now, open your mouth.”

I opened my mouth to protest, and two pieces of karaage were shoved into my mouth at once. *How am I supposed to judge this? It just tastes like mayo ketchup-green onion sauce now.*

*Oh, but it’s not bad… Yeah, I think I like this one.*

I told them so, and my lukewarm response sparked their tension again. Girls were scary when it came to food…

By the time I had sobered up from my buzz, the room was lit only by the downlight.

Marie fluffed the pillow and adjusted its position, her small bottom pointed toward me. She undid her hair that had been tied up, and it cascaded down like lustrous strands of silk. Perhaps it was the dim lighting, but when she turned around with her hair having been undone, she seemed more mature than usual. My eyes were naturally drawn to her full lips.

“Come, I’ll read you to sleep.” She had told me all about her day at the garden, and now it was time for a story. We had spent some time drinking and chatting earlier, but now it was time for quiet.

She went under the blanket, and when I crawled in next to her, her face was right next to mine, her pretty eyes staring into my own. Then, she got a little closer and placed her thighs on top of mine. The sweet smell that seemed to be specific to girls wafted up, and she laid her head on my arm like usual.

Then, I heard the sound of fabric rustling from behind. The Arkdragon couldn’t sleep while wearing clothes, so she seemed to have once again stripped down to her birthday suit, her shadow

waving its tail under the downlight.

"My green onion sauce hasn't lost yet."

"Haha, are you still going on about that? I like them both, personally." The bed creaked behind me as the black-haired beauty climbed in. She wrapped her arms around me so we could fall asleep at any time, and then she pressed her hips against me. I could feel her nose against the back of my neck, and she let out a satisfied sigh.

Then, a book was opened before me, and Marie began to read, her pretty voice a perfect match for the quiet night.

"One morning, the young man headed to the fields…" She continued to read as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

It made me feel like this moment, as she read a story to help us sleep, was more precious than anything. Something seemed to have come over me, and I drew her slender hip in closer.

"Oh, don't be bad. Stay quiet and listen to my voice so you can fall asleep, okay?" She whispered ever so sweetly.

Before I knew it, I had come to look forward to the night so I could fall asleep in this girl's arms. The sound of her drawing in a breath between pauses as she read, the quiet patter of the rain on the window…

My heart was filled with peace, sinking and melting into the night.

I thought I felt something warm press against my forehead at the end, but I couldn't tell what it was through the darkness.

*Good night, Ms. Elf.*

*Your voice sounds all the more beautiful at night.*

Maybe I'd said it out loud. I felt something soft press against me as my memory grew hazy.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 7: Operation Hall Wipeout I woke up.

Or, to be more precise, I blearily opened my eyes and found myself in my dreams.

Marie's fingertip was shining in the darkness, and she poked the air with it. The light grew brighter with each repetition of this movement, revealing more and more of our surroundings. Spirit Sorceresses sure had fantastical abilities.

Marie looked at me with sleepy-looking, purple eyes.

"Fwaaah... Good morning. It's hard to tell whether it's morning or night in the labyrinth."

"I wish we could get some sunlight in here. I'd probably still be asleep if it wasn't for your light spirit." I looked up to find said light spirit gleefully dancing up near the ceiling. The scenery had changed from my condo to the dream world, and we were inside a small room built of stone. We were, of course, inside the ancient labyrinth.

I stifled a yawn and dug through my bag for the Magic Tool.

"We're supposed to regroup on the second floor today. I'll let Zera and the others know that we're up. Don't go back to sleep, Wridra."

"Hm, you do not need to tell me. You were kinder to me when I was a cat," she muttered to herself as she slowly rose from under the blanket.

I placed the cylindrical Magic Tool on the table and pressed the switch on its side. After playing some white noise, a deep voice said, "This is Team Bloodstone. Nice morning, isn't it?"

"Yes, we just woke up now. I'm sorry we're always late."

"Don't worry about it. You have a small team, and we already knew you tend to rest longer. Anyway, I'm a bit worried about the

team that headed down the center path."

*Hm? What does that mean?* I activated the Magic Tool to check up on the other team positions. A three-dimensional map came up, displaying the location of each team on the second floor. I immediately recognized that something was off.

"...The center team is separated to the front and back. They're clumped up on each end, so there's a gap between them, too. The original plan was to form rows so there wouldn't be any space between the teams... Could they be under attack from monsters?"

"Yeah, that's the thing. I contacted HQ, but they didn't explain much. Something's fishy." Marie, who had been listening to the conversation, perked up. She had already tied up the blanket with a rope and finished the preparations to leave.

"What were HQ's orders?" she asked.

"To stay away. Since they haven't requested backup despite being in danger, they might be in the middle of something." I tried to think over the situation with what little information we had.

Most of our forces were concentrated in the center path. Rescuing soldiers that had been cut off there should have been high priority. I knew the person who was in charge of this operation. He definitely wasn't the type to just let his precious forces die after having just gotten more troops.

"Then maybe he's planning something already...?"

"Good morning, sleepyhead. Though it looks like the cogs in your head are in full rotation already."

"Oh, Doula. Good morning." As I replied, lines started blinking on the map. This was a guide system that could be used between those who shared comm links.

"This is the route we opened up last night. Taking down the undead is my specialty, so Zera's been lagging behind on that end."

“Like hell I am. You just got overexcited and went farther than the original plan.” Doula was adept in the holy element, and I’d heard her teammates harnessed the same power, too. She must have pressed forward with her barrier ability and power to purge monsters. It must have been far different from the way we fought them off, drenched in sweat and without any holy blessings.

“No point in sitting around thinking about it. We need to do what we can. We already have orders to proceed with the mission, so that’s what we’ll do.”

“You’re right. We’ll go regroup with you now.” The comm link cut off with another buzz.

It was a good thing more troops had joined after that party, but it seemed things weren’t going to go so easily. It did make me wonder, though. Why were we in greater danger now that we had more people? As I mulled over this thought, the elf girl brushed off her robe and approached me.

“Do you have any bad feelings about this?”

“You know, maybe I do. But why do you ask?”

“Because you can be strangely sharp at times. Anyway, if we know what to do, let’s get moving.”

*Me? Sharp?* Everyone always told me I was dull and sleepy-looking at work. *Wait, I hear that at home, too.*

“Come on, we’re about to leave!”

“Oh, sorry, sorry. On my way.” I jogged up to Marie and Wridra, and the raid on the second floor had begun.

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Bugs buzzed through the air.

Their entire bodies, including their wings, were all black, aside from their red eyes. They were like enlarged versions of the mosquitos found in Japan, but their forward-leaning form

suggested that they were specialized for speed.

There were about ten of them, zooming through the air and cutting around corners as a group. They seemed to be communicating with each other, making ticking noises and maintaining a set distance between one another. It was somewhat reminiscent of a cavalry charging in formation.

Meanwhile, at the headquarters located in the hall of the first floor, ten members of a special team were on a mission. They wore a black device on their foreheads, eyes closed as if in meditation. A line extended from their device, connecting to the map that Aja had brought up.

The ability that had been controlling the flying bugs from earlier was a skill known as “Sixth Sense.” Since the user’s mind was occupied in the bugs, someone stood on either side to provide audio support. They were both trusted partners that had been hand-selected.

Commander Hakam and Aja the wizard watched them calmly.

“This will be the first magic stone being cast. If we don’t get results, it’ll be my head that rolls,” Hakam said.

“Hmph, not likely that you will be leaving the battlefield. If that ever happens, you can take care of me in retirement,” Aja scoffed. Magic stones were still full of mysteries. They contained such massive amounts of magical energy, and they could be used for such a wide range of applications. They could cause a chain reaction of explosions by setting them in strategic locations, and they could even be turned into something akin to monsters with this method. One theory claimed they were monster eggs, but this was a top secret concept that had been kept under wraps.

Suddenly, something appeared on the map.

The red dots representing the rebels crossed paths with the flying blue dots. Three red dots of the enemy vanished in an instant, and the hall was filled with victorious cheers.

“So fast! They wiped out those sneaky rats in the blink of an eye!”

“That’s the power of the Heat Blaster, huh? Look at those rebels run away in fear!”

Just as the voices had pointed out, the blinking red lights representing the rebels scattered like a mass of baby spiders. But the commander’s keen eye noticed something was off. Why were they able to respond so quickly? He wondered, if he had been leading them, would he have been able to order them into the ideal retreat path while maintaining casualties to a minimum in such a high-stress situation?

Then, another problem reared its head. One by one, the red dots vanished from the map. This meant they were using advanced magic that intercepted their information feed.

“...This will be a long battle. We might need to refuel, Aja.”

“This is rough on my old bones, you know. I’m definitely making you take care of me when I retire.” The two chuckled, then turned their sharp eyes back toward the battlefield.

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“Sorry for the wait!” The contents of my bag rattled as we walked up to the joint camp, and the others turned to face us. One of the men turned to crack a joke, then swallowed his words.

“Yes, sorry about the... Hm? What is this stench...?” Wridra asked.

“Eek, my nose...!” The raid party froze in place, awestruck by Wridra, the black-haired beauty furrowing her brow, and the breathtaking Mariabelle. Both teams had hardly any women, and they found themselves stricken with nerves at the newcomers’ gorgeous appearances. The large man who already had a woman was the exception.

“Ohh, hello, Wridra. I’ve been wondering where you went.”

“Yes, it has been some time, Zera and Doula. Though, I have been

around quite oft... I mean, I am glad you seem to be doing well." The Arkdragon showed them a rare faint smile. Marie had always said Wridra was incredibly beautiful as long as she kept her mouth shut, and it was true. Subtle expressions like this one made all the men around her go wild.

Marie gave them a sidelong glance, then whispered to me.

"What. Is. This. Smell?! My nose is going to rot!"

"Well, uh... This is the smell of your standard military rations."

"Whaaaaaat?!" She cried out in surprise, snapping everyone around us out of their reveries.

But to be honest, these portable rations were perfect in their own way. They kept well, provided balanced nutrition, contained high amounts of energy, and digested easily. As long as one was able to disregard the horrible taste, there was nothing better. Though, there was one more negative point to those, which was the fact that they contained a slightly dubious ingredient that supposedly allowed you to keep working for twenty hours a day.

"I'm never joining the army. No way!" Marie shook her head violently, and Zera walked over with a cheerful expression. His devious smile told me he just wanted to come over to pick on the elf.

"Oh, it's not so bad. Here, I'll give you the best part. It's this little piece here, has a nice texture to it. It's delicious. Open wide!"

"No, no, noooooo!" A shiver went down her spine as she watched the questionable substance ooze down from Zera's spoon. But he seemed to be enjoying her reaction and continued chasing her with his spoon. What a horrible adult he was.

"Nyoooooo!!!"

"Ah, wha?" Marie pulled me in by the shoulder, and the traditional military meal was shoved into my open mouth.

It was just as I remembered. That smell of clay that crept up out of

nowhere. It dissolved without me even needing to chew, and the texture as it slid down my throat was simply awful. It was said that this was good for dieting, but that was probably because it completely killed one's appetite. At the very least, I'd never seen anyone get fat from eating these rations.

"Yup, tastes awful," I said bluntly with a sleepy-looking expression, and everyone laughed.



As we all sat talking in a circle, we came up with an idea. It was a new strategy that utilized Mariabelle's ability to keep track of enemy positions in the alliance raid.

After we went over the details, the large man sporting stubble opened his mouth with his chin still resting on his hand.

"Huh. What's the big deal, Doula?"

"You dummy. You can be really, really dense, you know that? So dense that it makes me dizzy. Everyone, don't be a dummy like Zera here."

"Oh, no need to worry about that. The only dummy in our team is our leader," one of the men replied.

"Yeah, this team couldn't function if we had any more dumb people in our team, haha!"

"...The next person who calls me dumb is joining my dad for dinner."

Silence.

Everyone glanced at each other wordlessly, and even Doula pursed her lips. Moments passed with no one making a sound, until Zera finally snapped.

"Really? You have nothing to talk about besides calling me dumb?! Fine, fine, I don't care! I just can't stand the silence, all right?!" They erupted in laughter, and Marie and I just sat there, mouths agape. We were taken aback by the lively, familiar air of the group. It was far more friendly and enjoyable than the dinner party at the castle that had taken place a few days ago had been, and I'd nearly forgotten we were inside an ancient labyrinth. Just then, Zera slapped me on the shoulder.

"As you can see, we're all just a bunch of weirdos. We've been outcast from the main forces because of this, but I hope we get along."

“We were outcast because of you, boss. Ignoring orders, acting independently, then falling unconscious and being protected by Doula overnight…”

“I’m really sorry about that. I apologize on his behalf, too. And Zera, did you just casually lump me in as a ‘weirdo’?”

*They sure are fun to be around.* Marie and I seemed to be thinking the same thing as our eyes met, and we both smiled. We were a bunch of weirdos ourselves, after all. It made me feel like we would have no problems getting along.

“Anyway, do you think the floor master hasn’t made its move yet?” Doula asked, and Zera and I shook our heads. Our operation was moving along at an unprecedented scale, and it was highly likely that we would detect it through the Magic Tool if there was any movement.

According to them, the floor master had appeared pretty frequently before we joined. There was even a team that ran into it twice in one day, so they had assumed it was only a matter of time before we would come across it, too. But as soon as our operation began, it stopped showing up completely.

What could have been different from last time?

One obvious fact was that we had much more people compared to before. There was also the fact that we had joined in, but that was unrelated… Or was it?

I glanced at Wridra, and she looked at me with her black eyes while hugging her knees.

The legendary Arkdragon was a part of the raid this time. The floor master on the first floor had been avoiding her. Was it possible that this was the case here, too? I wanted to ask Wridra later if it was possible for her to conceal her presence to others.

“All right, let’s get back to business. Who wants to lead the way? I do! So, everyone else, gather up.” Doula kicked Zera in the back, and

his Team Bloodstone rose to their feet.

I decided to just study how things unfolded for now. If the floor master wasn't going to appear, there were other things we could do, like map out the floor with the Magic Tool. Marie, Wridra, and I seemed to understand each other, and we nodded in a silent agreement to all watch how things would play out.

This was Team Amethyst's first time participating in an alliance raid.

Three teams would be advancing in rows, and with our team being the smallest, we were in the back row, where it was relatively safe. The team in the lead, Bloodstone, relayed a signal with finger gestures.

A Giant Zombie shook the ground as it approached, but as soon as it turned the corner, it immediately began to melt. Specks of holy light glimmered in the air, purifying any evil it came into contact with.

*Groaaar…!* The creature instinctively covered its head before realizing its own mistake. Zera released the energy he had accumulated in his body with a single swipe of his blade, slicing halfway through the zombie's right leg. One more cut shattered its bone, causing it to fall flat on its butt.

Doula supported Zera from behind, watching the map and calling out orders with a calm voice.

"Four Wights are climbing up the stairs at your flank. Thirty seconds until contact."

"Ohh, it's helpful to know when the enemy is approaching. All right, boys, cut down those limbs while you can!" The giants thrashed about violently, but Zera's team continued chopping at their limbs with their hand axes. Eventually, the cuts were deep enough that the giants' own weight broke their weakened bones, causing them to crumple. I was impressed as I watched their well-practiced movements, and Marie glanced at me from my side.

“He’s very strong. Looks like he’s not just all talk.”

“This is what they mean by ‘there’s power in numbers.’”

Zera had strength buffs and holy enchantment on his weapon, and there were some debuffs cast on the enemy. He was likely around level 60 or so, but he should have effectively been as strong as level 70. Zera and another man stood at the vanguard, while the others stood in the backline with shields held at the ready. The tanks held their massive shields up high to protect the spellcasters from danger. There was another line of troops behind the tanks: Team Andalusite, led by Doula, providing support via their purification powers. It was a pretty solid formation. I explained as such to Marie, and her purple eyes widened slightly.

“...I have a hard time believing you’re really just an average salaryman.”

“Huh? I’m not sure what you mean. Well, I haven’t mentioned this before, but I’m actually very wealthy, and I own several islands.”

“Oho, that is quite intriguing. You should be able to take us on cruises without any issues, then.” Wridra popped out from nowhere and stared into my eyes, making me a bit flustered. I mean, I had spent nearly twenty years playing in this world. I may not have been the sharpest tool in the shed, but anyone could’ve learned simple troop formations like those with time.

This situation did make me appreciate how useful it was for the three of us to be able to speak in Japanese in this world. We could talk about anything we wanted without anyone being able to understand us, and it seemed that Marie’s ability to detect enemies was already coming in handy. Her Prison Keeper skill’s enemy detection range increased as time went on. We were able to take our time while watching the others take out the monsters with relative ease.

“Gather up, everyone!” The area had been wiped clean of enemies before we knew it, and Zera was calling for everyone to gather

before a large stone door. They began making their way toward the spot next to the dissolving Giant Zombie's corpse. The door that Zera had gestured toward had an inexplicably imposing air to it, and I found myself staring up at it.

"...There's probably something waiting for us in there." Zera stroked his chin and nodded.

Labyrinths tended to follow a sort of pattern. We'd encountered relatively few monsters on our way here... but the further we progressed without any serious issues, the more I began to wonder if we'd fallen into a trap designed to lead us here. Doula, who had been watching the terrain through her Magic Tool, turned her sharp gaze toward us.

"I can't get vision in there even with the map. Mariabelle, can you extend your enemy detection range?"

"I can try." The elf girl tapped the stone floor with her staff. She had activated her Prison Keeper skill like before, causing a log-shaped object to emerge from below the pavement and gradually increase in height.

Its detection range improved as it extended higher and higher, like a growing watchtower. It had grown one level higher after thirty seconds or so, so I figured it would be a few minutes before it would reveal the entire hall.

Points of light began showing up on the map outside of the Magic Tool's usual detection range, indicating the locations of hostile beings. Everyone watched in amazement as the location, monster type, and estimated level of each enemy became revealed before their eyes.

"That is one impressive little lady. This is the second time I was surprised since entering this labyrinth, ya know," Zera said.

"Don't tell me the first time was when I accepted your feelings for me." Doula shot Zera a sharp look, and he denied it awkwardly. The exchange almost felt aggressive at first glance, but they seemed so

right for each other. My eyes met with Marie's, and we both smiled at once.

Now that we knew the positions of our enemies, everyone became involved in the planning phase of our next move. We began mapping out the expected enemy movements and using markers to represent troop placement.

"So, should we assume Mariabelle will be able to create obstacles like she did before?" Doula was referring to our rescue mission from some time ago. When we had fought the demon, Marie created a significant advantage for us with her stone walls. It seemed that had left an impression on Doula, and it was surely a large part of why we were invited to this alliance raid.

"Yes, that shouldn't be a problem. But it will take some time to set up, so I'll need the enemies to be held at bay in the meantime."

"Hmm, so we'll need to expand our area of control. I could assign some of my men to protect Mariabelle, if needed," Doula suggested. Wridra scoffed at the idea with a cool expression. She hadn't once shown them what she was capable of yet, but her confident and powerful poise seemed to convince them of her abilities. I couldn't think of a better tank than Wridra, either.

Doula clapped her hands together, drawing everyone's attention.

"It's decided, then. Zera will take the lead, and we will spread out in a fan formation. We'll provide support from the backline and stop the enemies. In the meantime, we will establish our territory on this side and secure an advantage."

We could have opted to rush in and wipe out all the hostiles, but this approach was also likely meant to get us accustomed to working together as one. In that case, we had to show them just what we were capable of.

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*Buzzz…*

It was hard to discern whether the faint sound of buzzing wings was coming from nearby, or if it was a reverberation echoing in their minds. The group had been attacked by the winged black bugs earlier, the fear of nearly being slaughtered still deeply ingrained in them as they quietly pressed forward.

They had extinguished all nearby light sources, leaving them in complete darkness. Yet, this wasn't a concern for them. They were still able to maintain their visibility by reflecting what little light there was with their eyes.

Corpses were strewn about the floor, some of which occasionally moved on their own. The second floor was full of undead souls, and corpses were prime fodder for them. The souls entered the bodies of the dead there, taking their time to transform them into their own. And so, another one of their former allies rose, disappearing into the depths of the ruins to bring another into their ranks.

One of the men watched and gritted his teeth.

"Damn it, damn it... What the hell are those bugs? No one told us about those bastards..."

"Switch to Mind Link Chat. They'll find us otherwise." It was too dark to see who had spoken, but the voice belonged to the leader of the reinforcement team. A noise in their minds indicated that a Mind Link Chat connection had been established.

"So, what are those things? Some sort of new weapon?"

"They must have figured out the essence of Magic Stones. I admit I'd underestimated Arilai's magic, but they seem to have brought a powerful ally on board."

"I hear they're harboring a Neko Tribe survivor. We need to do something quickly..." They had successfully regrouped with the team that had taken the lead. They'd even inflicted enough damage to their target to significantly slow down their progress. However, an unexpected issue had their team leader feeling troubled.

“Good job leading those things right to us… Oops, sorry. I’m still not used to this Mind Link Chat thing,” said a member of the team that had gone in first to obstruct the enemy’s activities.

“It’s your team’s fault for not getting rid of that Neko!”

“Says the ones who became bandits just to make some chump change!” Several pairs of eyes glinted in the darkness as their anger began to boil over. But even with their murderous gazes upon him, the leader of the bandits grinned with an unconcerned air.

“Our mission is to release the seal and activate this place. Am I wrong? He has the key that we need. And you wanted us to kill him? Hah, this is why you’re nothing but empty-headed animals.”

Indeed, the ancient labyrinth had awakened. Its functions that had been frozen for so long were now becoming active again. The group knew this, so they had no retort to the man who had been called a bandit.

*…Dirty, mindless beasts.*

The leader mentally spat as he activated his interference magic, then began moving without a sound.

“…First, we’ll check on whoever arrived at the west side. We attack only when I say we’re ready. Follow.” A group of souls passed by just beside them. They seemed unconcerned for the group, and the group remained calm in turn.

Normal people would have been attacked immediately, but this group was far from normal. The blood that had been running through their veins for thousands of years had changed them.

As they emerged from the darkness, their appearances were those of beasts.

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The heavy stone door rumbled as it slowly slid open. The dust that had accumulated over many years of dormancy rained down as the

door opened and revealed complete darkness ahead.

I turned to find Marie some distance away, appearing rather nervous. The alliance raid members had high expectations for Marie, and she seemed to be feeling the pressure. I nodded, then decided to send her a message via Mind Link Chat.

"Let's have a little chat as we get through this."

"I like that idea. I think talking will put my mind at ease a bit."

"We're going to Grimland this weekend, and there's a ghost-themed attraction there. I think you'll be surprised by how different it is compared to what we're dealing with here." Marie and Wridra blinked.

"Making a show out of ghosts? How foolish."

"What? No, no, there aren't any real ghosts in that world."

"Then how are they going to show us ghosts? You're talking about those, aren't you?" Marie pointed toward the depths of the hall. A faintly glowing skeleton rose from the ground, its bones assembling to create its form.

*Yeah, this is a bit hard to explain.* How was I supposed to tell them they didn't exist when there was one right in front of us? As I mulled over this thought, Zera's Team Bloodstone went into the darkness one by one. The orbs of light weaving between them and zipping ahead were Marie's light spirits.

They gathered up near the ceiling, illuminating the hall. This completely exposed us, too, but the undead didn't rely on their sight, so it wasn't really an issue.

"I think it would be easier to show you rather than explain. Anyway, Wridra, do you think you could mask your presence if the floor master decides not to come out because you're here?"

"Of course. I can enshroud myself in my magic to prevent detection completely." That was definitely worth testing. Defeating

monsters was important, but we couldn't move on until we took out the floor master.

We finally entered the hall after the others.

The underground labyrinth was rather chilly, which may have been due to all the undead in the area. Once we were all inside, the door slowly closed behind us.

"Oh, maybe it's gonna stay closed until we clear this place. I wonder who's managing these gimmicks?"

"Aren't you being a little too relaxed? Doula and the others are already fighting," Marie pointed out. I couldn't help but feel curious. Labyrinths were full of mystery, and I found myself wondering who had made them and for what purpose. Why were labyrinths closed off, and why did the Neko Tribe live above them? I had a feeling my questions would be answered once we cleared the entire labyrinth. And so, I gripped my sword with renewed determination.

"With the door being closed, we'll need to redeploy your Prison Keeper. Well, more importantly, we should secure the area around us like we planned."

"Oh, but we won't know our enemy's positions until we get Prison Keeper up again." I evaded a ghost that came flying down from the ceiling. I raised my hand and transferred energy into it, causing it to scatter and float around sluggishly. The training I had gone through was pretty rough, but it seemed to have been quite effective. I didn't expect that it would've allowed me to deal with ghosts with such ease.

"The tower vanishes unless we keep managing it, so there's not much we can do about that. We know the enemy positions already, and most of them are about level 50 or so, so we should be fine," I said. I wanted to focus on securing this area as planned and getting used to coordinating with the others. Summoning the tower was a matter that could come later. Marie nodded, then began calling to the stone spirits.

As for Zera's team, they seemed to be moving as planned. They fanned out in formation, with Zera's team cutting their way through the front and Doula's team purifying enemies from the rear. Their movements were efficient and precise, steadily securing our area as they pressed on.

On the other side, spear-wielding skeletons swarmed in like ants to honey. They spawned from the ground continuously with seemingly no end in sight. The ghosts flying down from the air were nullified by Doula's team, leaving them floating harmlessly in the air like jellyfish.

Now, the problem was...

In the center of the hall, there stood a rather large tomb.

The stone tomb was shaped like a cross with a name carved into it and a white haze emanating from it. That seemed pretty troublesome. If it rose, it would likely take command of the undead swarm.

"Let's make our move. Can you give me a holy enchantment?"

"Come back if you find yourself in trouble. Here, I'll apply the buff now." Marie pointed her staff at my weapon, and Astroblade warped like a mirage. It made a strange high-pitched noise, indicating that was far more stable than my previous sword.

"It's still stable... Incredible."

"The primal demons were highly compatible with magic. This sword came from one of them, so it is only natural that it works so well." We were fascinated by Wridra's explanation. The age of the beginning was also known as the Age of Demons and the Age of Night. Maybe it meant that demons had constructed the ways of the world back then.

Suddenly, the sound of hidden doors opening from the left and right snapped me back to reality. Living Armors emerged from the openings and walked out as if they were on a casual stroll.

“Oh, I’d really like to know more, but let’s get back to this later. Off I go.” Marie waved goodbye, and I was off to join the fray. My target was the creature that was trying to materialize in the center of the hall.

I instantly teleported in front of my target, then reflexively cut through the Skeleton Soldiers where I had landed. The sword of light hummed in my hand, leaving the cuts in my opponents glowing before they crumbled into piles of bones.

“It’s even sharper than before. It would’ve been a lot easier if I had this during my training.” The Skeleton Soldiers were only about level 50, and with the holy enchantment on my sword, I was able to slice through their shields and skulls like a cleaver through a cucumber.

I looked over to find that the ghost coming out of the tomb was now trying to lift its upper body out of the ground to stand on its own legs. I had no intention of waiting until it did, so I stepped forward and swung at its neck, followed swiftly by its armpit.

I heard an unpleasant ripping sound, and the white haze dispersed as if to indicate the damage done. I thought to myself that this thing could’ve been around level 70 or so as I cut down some more Skeleton Soldiers that had been coming in from behind.

The thing was rather muscular, and its undead body was transparent, revealing its bone structure. I continued hacking away at its neck, and it seemed to dislike that.

“Ah, ah, aaarghhh!!!” As it screamed, the Skeleton Soldiers around us suddenly seemed to change. They closed in on me with their shields and spears at the ready with a coordination that almost seemed as if it was innate to them. Even so, there was no point in panicking here, so I had to focus on chopping down that big fella. I may have been one to read the air at work, but I was in a dream world, after all.

I sent out some illusions to draw fire from the Skeleton Soldiers

for me. I had filled these copies of me with energy, so they kept the enemies pointlessly occupied.

"I feel sort of bad for them..." Marie commented.

"What? I'm just being efficient." I nearly burst out laughing at Marie's silly message.

By now, I had memorized a pattern to take out enemies with one blow using my Reprise skill. I had been comparing various attack pattern angles and finally narrowed it down to the most efficient one.

*Fwsh, fwsh, fwsh!* I sliced deeper into the undead leader's neck with each swing, and it let out an "Ah..." as the last blow finally separated its head from its shoulders. I guess you could say I sent it to the afterlife. Come to think of it, each blow was like landing a critical hit, so it was no wonder they'd been so effective.

"Poor thing. All it could say was 'Ah...'"

"Do not be so harsh on him. This is how he vents the stress he has accumulated from work."

*Huh, that's odd. Why am I being criticized for beating evil monsters?* Wridra was kind of right, so I couldn't really deny it, either. But the leader would have taken command of the other monsters if I had left it alone, which could have led to casualties on our side. I ignored the uneasy feeling in my gut and kicked off the ground to return to the girls.

The structure was finally ready to be built. The ground trembled as rock walls in a more complex shape than last time rose from below. Walls rose up around us, designed to grow noticeably more narrow at the entrance.

"Ohh, now isn't that something..." Zera watched in amazement from above. His reaction was only natural, considering how perfectly Marie had shaped the structure in such a short amount of time.

The only way inside was a tight passage, with stone walls on either side beyond the entrance. Any enemy making its way through would have to pass through the rows of peep holes on the walls where spears could be thrust through, with Doula's Team Andalusite raining down purifying light from above.

The enemies would have a hard time getting through this one. If they somehow managed to climb through their fallen to get to the far end, they would've had to deal with our tanks and the congestion building up in the passageway. This meant we could attack the Skeleton Soldiers while they stood waiting their turn, and the next in line would come into range for our attacks as the previous one fell.

Perhaps my experience seeing castles in Aomori had paid off here. Japanese castles were quite interesting, and were designed with narrow passageways like these where the defenders could one-sidedly attack the invaders. In comparison, western castles and castles in this world opted to build thick walls around their perimeters to keep invaders out entirely. It seemed that Marie's spells were more in line with the former rather than the latter.

"This is incredible. It's pretty much a fortress," Zera said.

"Marie did design these with fortresses and castles in mind, after all," I replied as I stepped on the stone to check its durability. It was solidly secured and seemed unlikely to break without some significant damage. This was all made possible by the technology left in Wridra's ruins. I turned around and spoke to Marie.

"This really is impressive, Marie. You've pretty much mastered this ability already."

"Hehe, this time, I tried to incorporate the concept of pillars. That was the key to making even more complex designs."

It was some time back in Aomori. Marie had been studying techniques to add years to a building's durability, which led to her learning how to add roofs and peep holes. Her diligent nature had

led her to improve her spells little by little. No, this was far more than 'little.'

As our conversation went on, Doula turned around, her red hair dancing around her head as she faced us.

"We should be able to use the terrain to our advantage to fight their numbers. Well done. Mr. Sleepy here just casually took out their boss, too. You lot are quite interesting." The usually calm woman was flush with excitement, and it seemed she now saw the effectiveness of our coordinated efforts. We also saw for ourselves that as long as we set up our structure, the others would take out the rest for us.

We each smiled with satisfaction, and then it came.

The one that wandered the labyrinths, culling the living.

He existed in the line between life and death, eyes ablaze, and the air cracked open as he suddenly appeared in the center of the hall. We all turned at once to find him crack his own neck, then exhale what seemed to be a bloody mist.

"...Reaper." By the time the word left Doula's lips, I was already teleporting.

I had a feeling I would've been in danger otherwise.

I breathed out, listening to the battle music as it began to play.

The rhythm was like my quickening heartbeat. The singing had a somewhat hysteric tone to it, telling me this was a mid-boss or some other powerful foe. *How exciting.*

Dust rose into the air as I looked up with my feet dug into the ground. A two-meter tall giant stood before me, covered in spikes and black, metallic armor. However, its upper body was bare and burned, and its lips peeled back, revealing rows of beast-like fangs. My many years of experience told me this was one powerful foe we were dealing with.

*Boy, that is one ugly creature.* The whip-like object in its hand looked like it was made out of bundles of human hair, but I wanted to believe that wasn't the case.

Just then, a message from Marie popped up in my head via Mind Link Chat.

"Are you going to be all right?! It looks very strong!"

"Hmm, I'd like to think I'll be fine. More importantly, could you activate Prison Keeper right about now?" The worst case scenario would've been if more monsters came in at this very moment. If another Reaper appeared, things would go south very quickly.

The creature cracked its neck again, then glared at me with its infernal eyes. Despite my child-like appearance, it seemed to have recognized me as a target.

"Ah, it moved!" Just as Marie shouted, I heard the stone pavement crack as its massive body shot forward.

Reaper's whip snapped forward right above my head as I ducked, ripping out some hairs as it swung by. After a slight delay, the ground behind me erupted in a circular pattern with a loud *crack!*

"Huh, it has a wider hitbox than I imagined… Whoa!" A black hand emerged from its ribs and reached for me, but I immediately teleported back to avoid it. He spat a black, bloody mist at the illusion I left behind, and black flames engulfed the surrounding area.

That must have been what they called hellfire. *Hmm… That looks pretty powerful.*

If that thing took me down, it could cause the rest of the team to collapse, too. Though, if I did die here, I could just go back to sleep to come back, and Wridra would probably protect the others… but there was no time to think about that.

The whip spread out and extended toward me, blocking my vision. I hurriedly teleported backward to escape, but it was hard to

find an opening… *Whoa!* As his ribs opened up again, he shot out what seemed to be a wooden stake. I managed to avoid it in a fluster, and it flew by right under my armpit.

*He even has long-range attacks?* I didn't like the way that projectile was glowing pink, either…

"Can you tell Zera to send some reinforcements? I think this guy might be trouble."

"I can tell. He's on a completely different level from the others." Marie was right. I raised my sword above my head as I faced the enemy.

I then teleported to Reaper's right-hand side, and my weapon swung down at the whip he was holding. The holy enchantment helped me cut through about half of the bundle of hair, but the rest of it shot toward me at once.

*So fast.* I managed to avoid danger with another illusion and teleportation, but that would have been game over for a normal person.

I stepped off of the floor and flew some distance away, and he turned to face me.

Then, I heard it.

The sound of shoes clicking against the ground.

A woman's hand holding an iron ball.

Then came the sound of a chain being dragged across the stone floor.

The woman gripped the iron ball with her hand, setting it ablaze with a pale-blue flame. It was likely hollow inside, and she had ignited a holy flame inside through the mesh-like grid.

"Wha… Doula?" I was honestly taken aback to find her approaching from behind Reaper. She often wore a calm expression, but she seemed to be in a visibly foul mood. Or maybe it was just the

lighting from the fire below her.

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'cooperation?' Do you always run off to fight enemies by yourself like this?"

"Well, honestly, I'd like you to stay back where it's safe." It was a bit strange to have a conversation with Reaper standing between us.

Doula scoffed at my words and released the iron ball. It stayed afloat as she pulled it by the chain, then began swinging it around.

*Fwoom, fwoom, fwoom…*

*What an interesting weapon.* It was a type of flail, or maybe a morning star, that bludgeoned enemies with centrifugal force. It seemed to have been customized for her usage, the flames roaring with each rotation. Suddenly, the ball and chain was flung forward, embedding itself into Reaper's back.

*Groaaarrr!!!* He spat out a mist of blood as the blow landed, and then he turned and glared at Doula, seething with hatred for her holy-powered attack. I decided to take this opportunity to move in and attack from his blind spot.

I teleported, reappearing right next to my giant opponent.

A spray of blood shot out as I scored a hit behind the knees, and I ducked under the spinning back fist aimed at my head. He felt no pain and had fast reactions, but he couldn't avoid the follow-up hit from the iron ball landing against its back again.

Doula seemed to be more skilled than I had imagined. She maintained a safe distance, constantly repositioning herself to keep the enemy between us. In addition, the holy fire on her weapon was very effective against the undead. It left wounds on the enemy's body, gradually burning away at its health.

A knee came flying directly toward me, the spike extending from it causing me to lean backward to avoid some serious damage, but this was the reaction my foe had been hoping for. He kicked off the

stone pavement and leaped backward toward Doula.

He wanted to take out the weaker one of us first.

"Look out!" I teleported to the enemy's flank, but I was dumbfounded by what I saw. Doula's iron ball had flown directly upward, then came crashing down upon the enemy's head.

She had to be only level 50 or so, but she had deftly dealt with the bloody mist and black flames using her holy barrier.

"Wow, you're good!"

"I can manage. Just know that if you assume you need to protect me because I'm a woman again, I'll rearrange your face so it'll never look sleepy from now on," she shot back calmly as she delivered a follow-up blow against Reaper.

It was said that God lent a person his strength when they used holy powers, but seeing her display made me want to learn how to harness it myself. I actually once looked up to Paladins, and I'd partially learned how to become one, but I just couldn't deal with the tedious skill leveling process... Well, that was a story for another time.

The tide of the battle turned significantly from here into a one-sided barrage of attacks from either side. An opening was made every time our opponent swung its whip at Doula, so I repeatedly cut at its wounded right knee.

"Oh, I just remembered something." I had sent energy into ghosts before, but I wondered if it would be effective against an undead with a physical body. As an experiment, I touched his bloody knee and sent a burst of energy into it.

*Gyaaaaaarrrgh!!!* A black miasma spewed out as he roared in pain.

*Looks like it's working.* Maybe I was starting to get the hang of busting the undead.

"Interesting move. Like this? Or this?"

*Wham! Bam! Bam!* The iron ball mercilessly slammed into the writhing creature, pounding its back over and over again. I already knew this, but Doula seemed to have a bit of a sadistic side, and I saw a faint smile on her lips as she beat the monster down.

She seemed to be getting the hang of it, too.

She had delivered massive amounts of holy power into the undead's wounds, causing blue fire to burn from the cuts. The flames erupted from its eyes, nose, mouth, and the lacerations throughout its body, finally bringing Reaper down to its knees.

Flames engulfed him, and he stared at his hands, dumbfounded. He then looked at us, and we raised our weapons in a hurry. Our eyes widened as we realized the bloodlust was gone from his face, replaced by a human expression.

His ripped-up lips parted, and he spoke with a voice that was hardly audible.

"...Captain... Doula?" Our jaws dropped.

The simple fact was, we hadn't even begun to understand the horrors of this floor.

A change in music signaled the end of the battle as Reaper burst into pieces, releasing embers into the air.

# Chapter of Slavery, Episode 8: The Undying King Reaper finally burst apart with a loud *crack!*

Specks of pale-blue fire scattered in the air, then burned away along with his soul. Doula and I stared without celebrating our victory, only standing there, motionless. It seemed the others were done wiping out the monsters on their end, too.

Doula's red hair wavered as she turned to watch them exit Marie's structure one after another. The hall was now cleared out, and we had defeated over sixty monsters without suffering a single casualty.

It was a brilliant feat, but Zera was somber as he wordlessly walked up to Doula. He then held her by the shoulders from behind, the corpse burning up in flames.

"...A warrior has fallen. I'll pray for him to reach Eden safely." Doula nodded.

It turned out that Reaper's identity was that of those who had been taken away by Shirley. Their souls were being used to create those monsters. Had we done the right thing? If there were a way to save him, what would we have said to his family? As I nearly fell into a pit of these questions without answers, a soft hand squeezed my own.

I looked to the side to find amethyst eyes looking back at me, smiling compassionately. I said nothing and quietly stared at the dying flame.

The fire was beautiful, like the remnants of a fading soul. Just like at the funeral we'd attended some time ago, we continued to pray until it finally went out.

The embers danced in the air, and then, they were gone.

A pile of books were stacked onto the table, obstructing my view. I had no interest in studying, of course. It was Marie who intended to read them, and my role was to watch over her with a blank expression on my face. Or so I thought…

"I need your help. I can't read through all of these on my own." It seemed she had a task for me.

I looked up to find Marie's white hair flowing down as she cocked her head at me. Her expression seemed to say, "You will help, right?"

"Then, let's split up the task. They'll probably put me to work anyway if I don't do something." I glanced behind me and saw them through the open door. They were hard at work setting up a new base in the hall we had just conquered.

Apparently, a young boy and girl would only get in the way of their physical labor, so they had asked us to search this small room. Maybe it was like when adults told children to go off and play in their rooms. I was actually an adult, but I gladly took them up on their offer.

Well, maybe they were doing this out of consideration. That thought occurred to me as I began reading the ancient texts.

As long as I was focusing on something, it kept my mind busy. Marie looked away hurriedly when I looked at her… so I decided to switch gears back to my usual self instead of brooding.

I let out a puff of air from my nose, then focused on the book before me. There were other things to think about. Figuring out how to clear this floor was our biggest priority.

"Now, we need to figure out how to have Wridra hide her presence. This isn't something we can talk to Zera and Doula about, either," I said to no one in particular, and then someone plopped down on the seat next to me. Wridra's dress was low enough to reveal her shoulders and collarbones, and she looked at me with her obsidian eyes.

“Indeed, it would make sense that the floor master has not appeared because of me. No one would willingly approach someone who far outranks them simply to be defeated.”

“You really are incredible, Wridra. I’ve only seen you get all excited about food until now, so it’s hard to remember that sometimes,” Marie casually said as she reached for a book in the drawer without a hint of malice. I had to agree. My impression of Wridra wasn’t that of a legendary Arkdragon, but of a very attractive and expressive woman. She understood this, and rather than getting upset, she gave us a knowing smile.

I turned the page. The text was written in an advanced ancient language and spoke of a story from long, long ago. But instead of reading the text, I only skimmed it with my eyes. For now, I wanted to organize my thoughts by keeping my brain preoccupied with unrelated things.

Would Shirley the Undying King come soon, or would it scope us out for some time? Either was possible.

If Shirley had multiple disposable bodies, I wouldn’t have been surprised if it came to test our abilities. We already knew that Shirley had been defeated once, only to revive again. As we talked about this, Marie looked up from across the table.

“That’s right. I thought something was off, but that’s a contradiction right there.”

“Hm? What do you mean?” It seemed Marie wasn’t really focusing on interpreting the books, either. She rested her head on her hand and continued to think. She reached for a teacup out of habit only to realize I hadn’t prepared one, and I naturally stood up. That wasn’t good. She must have been exhausted from the battle, but I had so much on my mind that I’d forgotten to be considerate towards her.

I produced a small pot from my bag, and Marie peered at me from above. It seemed she’d finally gathered her thoughts.

“What I meant by ‘contradiction’ earlier is how it can supposedly

come back to life but never shows itself. I'm sure you know what I mean, considering how you've been adventuring to your heart's content without any risk of dying. That must mean the floor master is afraid of something other than being directly defeated."

"Hmm. Maybe it doesn't want us to know where it's hiding? ...Same amount of sugar as usual, you two?" The ladies nodded. They seemed to be in a good mood, not because of the tea, but probably because I was starting to calm back down to my usual self.

I poured some water into the pot for the Fire Lizard to boil, then went back to thinking. *Your forehead is perfect for placing the pot on, by the way.*

Now, Marie had made quite an astute point. Shirley may have been avoiding us because it couldn't maintain its immortality if we invaded its location. As Marie had pointed out, I was similar, in a way. I could revive as many times as I wanted to in this world, but what would've happened if I'd died in Japan? I had no intention of trying to find out, but it was highly likely that Shirley was hiding a secret related to its immortality.

I placed cups in front of the girls along with some biscuits. Yeah, it was relaxing to prepare this sort of thing.

"...Huh. Maybe you wanted tea because you knew this?"

"Hehe, thank you for the tea. Oh, this is tasty. Butter biscuits are the absolute best!"

"Hmm, I must say, chocolate is quite delicious as well. It is simply bliss when it melts in the tea. I could not stand hot drinks while in the form of a cat, so I enjoy them all the more now." Their peaceful atmosphere was starting to put me at ease, too. These two did go on a garden date together, after all. They just got along so well.

In any case, my thoughts were coming into focus. The Undying King dragged away the souls of the living. As someone who couldn't die in this world, I decided to pay a visit to this secret place. Even if something happened, I just had to go back to sleep anyway.

“I’ll give it a try, then. If it’s not going to show up even when Wridra hides her presence, this is the only option we’ve got.”

“Yes, you be careful, then. I suspect this foe cannot be detected, no matter what skill you use. That includes Marie’s Primary Skill as well, of course.” I nodded.

The worst case scenario would have been if the Undying King appeared while we were in Japan. It was possible for us to come back only to find Zera and Doula’s teams completely wiped out. In that case, it was better for us to strike now.

I decided not to pry, but I got the sense that Wridra had a theory about the Undying King. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have commented earlier, implying that Shirley would appear eventually. Wridra was kind, after all, I thought as I turned another page.

There was one more issue for us to solve. That being, “How can I contact Shirley by myself?”

*Wait a second.*

“Maybe that can easily be done, too. Wridra, could I ask you for one favor?” I asked on a whim.

“You are quite impertinent to try to use me,” she replied, seemingly impressed.

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A single group moved through complete darkness without making a sound. Their movements made it clear that they were highly trained, and they surveyed their surroundings vigilantly like veteran soldiers.

There were about thirty of them, each adorned with varying equipment. The group consisted of mostly men, but their beastly eyes gave away the fact that they were decidedly different from the teams raiding the ancient labyrinth. This was the group known as the rebels, and they were even called traitors by some.

However, they resented that label. ‘Traitor’ implied that they had betrayed those they had served, but this completely contradicted their will to serve the greater good. Perhaps this was on their mind, for one of the men spoke up with irritation.

“Hey, boss, where are we meeting up with that blonde guy?” The question had come from one of the bandits, and their leader turned his head slightly.

“You can worry about that once we’ve confirmed a way to destroy the raid teams.”

The man in ragged clothing sighed deeply. Not only had they not found a way to destroy said raid teams, but they were on the brink of destruction themselves. They had been forced deeper into the labyrinth due to its structure having been reshaped by the Magic Stone’s powers.

The bandit scratched his head roughly and made an irritated expression.

“This would be so much easier if we used *that*. Hesitating to use it because you sensed something, are you?”

“That’s enough, asshole! Watch how you speak to our leader!”

The bandit furrowed his brow at the voice that was like nails on a chalkboard. Many had already been killed. Naturally, tensions were running high. They took their time thinking over how to make that woman shut up, and the eerie air about them made the others around them back away.

But just then, the rebels on the move stopped at once. They ranged from exchanging meaningful looks, looking about suspiciously, and sticking their fingers in their own ears.

“My ears just cleared up like there was a change in air pressure.”

“A large presence in the west just disappeared. What do you think is happening, boss?”

The leader stared ahead wordlessly. The being that had been applying pressure to the labyrinth seemed to have disappeared, but it could've been some sort of trick. The steel-eyed man's companions waited in silence as he blinked several times, and then the orders were relayed out loud.

"We need to make sure. Send him out."

"Boss, I know what I said earlier, but... let's not. I have a bad feeling about this. My hunches are usually right, you know." But the bandit was collectively ignored by the others. The bearded bandit saw their reaction and spat, "Fine, do as you please," with an exasperated expression. Having spent a lot of time living in other lands, he'd become hated even by his own kind.

The unfamiliar singing reverberated throughout the labyrinth. It was said that it was a song from ancient times... a long, long time ago.

A dark magic user began writing in blood on the walls and ground, gradually changing the air of the surroundings. The cursed words that were forbidden to even be spoken out loud were sung to the fallen.

The bandit watching from the darkness glanced around cautiously before opening his mouth.

"So that's one of those songs of dark magic? I've heard those words reach even the nether world. It does have an ominous feel to it."

"Yes, those defiled words are fit for defiled men."

The bandit gave the leader a dubious look in response to his nonsensical reply, but his mocking attitude only lasted until he noticed the oddity concerning the stone wall he'd been touching. His hairs stood on end as he noticed the stringy adhesive stretching from his hand when he let go of the wall.

"The hell? The second floor is starting to change shape."

The cursed song echoed throughout the labyrinth, as if to swallow

his words whole. The voice rang out with unbalanced high and low notes, an uneasy feeling filling the listeners alongside a sense that something horribly wrong was about to happen.

But the leader of the group remained motionless and continued listening to the forbidden song.

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I let out a big sigh as I stared at the ceiling.

The ceiling was built like a lattice and showed a glimpse of ancient construction technology.

A while back, I'd spent a lot of time wandering labyrinths like this by myself. I had no friends to talk to, but I was happy enough just experiencing this fantasy world.

"The silence is kind of jarring now that I'm alone again."

Things were back to the way they were before, and I thought I would've appreciated the familiar feeling in a way. Yet, the first thing I felt was loneliness, and I already missed the sound of Marie's voice. I could even picture her complaining about the cold and folding her arms in an attempt to warm herself up.

I actually found myself surprised that I used to spend my time alone in a place like this. My shoes clicked against the floor as I tried to put the loneliness out of my head. I moved the lamp in my hand to illuminate my surroundings.

It seemed the time to put away the lamp had come.

I placed it down in the walkway, then waited silently. A cold air soon came pressing in, and even the light of the lamp had a cold chill to it.

Shirley, the Undead King.

The bridge between this world and the spirit realm.

The floor master of the second floor had many names and was feared by most as the god of death. But the situation seemed to be

something else entirely from my perspective.

Adorned in a transparent veil, it slowly slipped through the cracks of the stone pavement and appeared before me. Its back was hunched over, but it was still about three meters tall, and it wore a mask with a shape reminiscent of countless sickles curved outward.

It could have been a male or female, judging from its slender limbs, and it walked in a way that gave off the impression that it could've been completely weightless. Its toenails dug into the ground, and it advanced by crawling, step by step. Shirley, the second floor master, moved toward me without making a sound.

"Hey there. You're looking like a living nightmare."

Maybe it didn't notice me until I spoke. Or maybe I appeared differently, being a resident of another world. Shirley craned its neck toward me, then released an icy breath.

The floor master may have been taken back a bit. There was no one left in the hallway, and only an empty cavern remained. And yet, the soul-seeker had found me, so that probably wasn't too big of an issue.

*Now, let's see what having my soul drained feels like.*

A half-transparent hand reached for me, its veil wavering without any wind.

"Let's go then, Shirley." With that, I reached out and grabbed his—or maybe her—finger.

Seemingly surprised by my lack of fear, Shirley cocked its head, and then my soul was sucked out right away. It was pulled out of my body from my fingertip, and the indescribable feeling gave me goosebumps. Well, I would've gotten goosebumps, if I still had any skin or a body.



I was surprised by how easily it slipped out.

The sound of something making an impact was probably my body collapsing to the ground.

But either way, this was just a dream for me. Whether it was a good or a bad one, a dream was just a dream, so I didn't feel any fear.

I let Shirley take me by the hand and sank into the ground.

*Now, let's see your secret hidden within this labyrinth's second floor.*

I smiled out of anticipation, and Shirley tilted its head again in confusion. I probably seemed pretty strange from its point of view.

My floating feet seemed so unsteady. I tried to stop walking, but it didn't change my rate of movement at all. It seemed moving my limbs didn't really have any effect. It reminded me of the way souls moved in movies. They didn't flail their legs around, instead quietly gliding along. I supposed it made sense. Though, that was just fiction.

I looked up at Shirley the Undying King as it pulled my hand along, and our eyes met. Deep behind that mask, I caught a glimpse of terribly cold eyes.

It finally dawned on me, but it seemed Shirley was a woman. Its long eyelashes reinforced my idea.

"Is it all right if I talk to you?"

She only continued to cock her head in confusion. I wasn't sure if she understood me or not, but I tried again.

"I'd like to know more about you. If you don't want to, that's fine, but I was hoping we could talk a bit."

This was purely to sate my curiosity, and I doubted she would reciprocate even if she understood what I was saying.

But then the veil went up and over my head.

Maybe this was her response. Instead of words, scenery and

emotions came flooding in from Shirley through to me.

Before me was a rich forest. There were animals scattered all around, and I watched a deer shake its head after taking a drink from a stream. Mountains lined the horizon, and a rainbow hung over a waterfall in the distance. After the deer finished taking its drink, it stood staring at that sight.

I looked up to find a sky full of vivid blue. Having gotten used to the long rainy season, the bright, sunny sky gave me a refreshing feeling.

I got the impression that this was a world where organisms thrived and would endlessly continue their cycle of life.

There, she rested.

A golden crown upon her head, and her body adorned in a beautiful grass-colored dress. Her appearance was befitting of a queen.

Perhaps she was the one who had given birth to this forest. What I thought to be patterns on her dress were actually real grass and flowers, and it was evidence that she hadn't taken a single step from her spot for a long time. They completely covered her body, but Shirley sang without moving. Her song seemed to stir the growth of life, and the world seemed to shine ever brighter.

...It happened in an instant.

Something glinted in the sky like a morning star, and then, a long white line extended down and sank into the ground.

Without a sound or tremor, flames erupted, seemingly reaching the heavens and engulfing the forest and the world along with it.

Countless organisms were swallowed up by the flames as Shirley cried out, and I saw something huge thrashing about within the blaze. It screamed an unearthly scream, and the supernatural creature crumbled in the inferno. It seemed to represent the destruction of this seemingly eternal land.

…Were they bystanders in some catastrophic event? Did they get burned up by the fire that was supposed to defeat that thing? I looked to find that Shirley was falling apart, too.

Her beautiful body had been scorched and reduced to ashes, but she held onto life in her arms, as if refusing to perish. She held animals, plants, and other forms of life against her chest, then shouted a wordless cry once more.

I could feel her intense emotions of wanting to claw at her own heart, and the question to end that had come abruptly: “Why?”

The world was swallowed by flames in an instant, and all living things perished.

I couldn’t keep my eyes open and slowly fell to my knees.

When I came to, I was standing atop the stone pavement.

Several of what seemed to be Reaper’s bodies were lined up before me. A stark contrast to the sight I had seen moments before, I was back in the cold, dark labyrinth.

*So this is how she takes souls back and makes new soldiers.*

That must have meant this would end soon. I’d lose consciousness and wake up in Japan soon. I wanted to know more about Shirley’s story, but I couldn’t do much about it now.

I turned to face her to at least thank her for guiding me here.

“Thank you for sharing that, Shirley. It must have been painful for you.” But she cocked her head again, then pulled me by the hand.

“Oh, you aren’t gonna put me in that?”

Maybe she changed her mind, because she instead took me to a room in the back. The door was already open, and I entered after Shirley as she guided me with her long, thin fingers. Inside, I saw a circular hall. It was completely dark, aside from the center area with a ceiling far overhead, and my very breath seemed to disappear into the vastness.

“Big place. Is this some sort of arena?” She shook her head.

It seemed that she did understand my words after all. Or maybe she was reading my thoughts instead. That was just how much I relied on her in my current state. It wouldn’t have been unreasonable to say that, at the moment, I belonged to her.

Shirley then showed me to the throne. It was large and made of stone, and it stood directly in the middle of the hall.

Shirley sat on it without a sound, then stared at me.

“Huh? You want me to sit next to you? Umm, then, if you wouldn’t mind…” I then sat on the small chair next to hers. She seemed to accept this and turned her face forward.

Apparently, she was going to show me more of her story. She raised both hands to lift up her veil, and then another scene appeared around us.

It was a forest much like the one she had shown me before, and I was surprised to see another deer drinking from a stream again. The view was pretty limited, but I suspected this was where she had stayed and sang a long time ago.

“Is this where you reflect back on the past? It’s a beautiful and calming place. It makes me wish I could visit it in a dream.” I may have imagined it, but she seemed to smile at my comment.

Then, I thought I heard her singing, like from the vision earlier.

It was strange to think I could find comfort in song, even when I reduced to just my soul. Even so, I wondered why she had kept intruders out of here this whole time.

“Aren’t you going to defeat me, Shirley? I’m an intruder.” She didn’t answer, but stared off into the distance instead.

I wondered what went through her mind as she sat here, and for how many millenia she’d stayed.

Without saying a word, she continued to show me the scenery of

her past.

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The hall where Shirley and the boy had disappeared.

Change was occurring in this empty place. The air distorted like a fluttering piece of transparent cloth, and then, it was cast aside.

Suddenly, more than twenty armed figures appeared from seemingly thin air. At their front stood Wridra the Arkdragon, and everyone looked around in wonder. Zera, the representative of the knight corps, stepped forward, looking like he had been bewitched by a fox.

“We really managed to get in here without Shirley spotting us. The heck is goin’ on? Hey, Doula, was that some kind of magic?”

“I-I’ve never heard of such a thing. To conceal our presence on such a scale, and so completely…”

They all looked at each other, then stared at Wridra, standing there in her armored dress. She had just used highly advanced magic, but her unconcerned attitude told them they still hadn’t seen anything close to what she was truly capable of.

Earlier, Kazuhiro had asked Wridra if it was possible for her to extend the range of her concealment ability. As a result, they were able to escape the Undying King’s notice, and only Kazuhiro’s soul was taken, just as they had planned.

“More importantly, is Kazuhiho okay? His soul got taken out, but he won’t come back as another Reaper, will he?”

“That won’t happen. I wouldn’t let it.” They turned to the confident voice to find the elf girl pressing a staff against the ground. A tower began to extend up from the ground: Prison Keeper, an original skill that belonged only to her.

But, despite her tone, the sweat on her face made it clear that her task was not an easy one.

Prison Keeper was normally a skill that extended its range of detection over time. However, in order to find Kazuhiro after he had been taken far away, Mariabelle was actively focusing to manually extend its range.

*...Oh no, they've gone far underground. I need to focus on Kazuhiro as a target and sharpen my magic and concentration, or I won't be able to find him.*

With that thought, she forced herself to concentrate even harder. Their connection was so fragile that it could sever at any moment. She knew she was only pretending to be confident. Still, she knew she had to make this work, no matter what. Mariabelle gripped her staff until her nails turned white and channeled magic up to her limit. Seeing the desperation on Mariabelle's face, Wridra whispered some words of advice to her.

"If you do not have enough, take from others. That is the nature of sorcery. Here, feel Kitase's presence. Hah, hah, do not look so strained. You have always done so before." Mariabelle blinked.

Wridra was explaining that a vast reservoir of magic was not necessary. Taking in her teacher's advice, she loosened her shoulders as she usually did. Then, instead of magic, she sought his presence.

His scent, his gentle aura, his kind voice...

What did he say when they had devised this plan? Surely, it was something along the lines of...

"I'm sure it'll be fine even if you lose me. I'll wake up again anyway, and you should have a good idea of where I went." She couldn't help but laugh at hearing something like that from such a sleepy-looking face. Mariabelle giggled, then turned her smile toward the ground like a cloud had been lifted.

"I can't believe we're counting on such a vague plan. I don't know about you, but I'm making this work no matter what."

*"Understood?"* she whispered, and she could picture his troubled face.

Just then, she unexpectedly smelled his scent. He had always been there, and it felt like he was still next to her.

"...You have found it. Do not lose it." Mariabelle's eyes widened at the Arkdragon's words.

She was surprised by how easy it was, and her shoulders were still loose from the certainty that she wouldn't lose sight of him now.

And so, Prison Keeper's hidden power was now being awakened.

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Zarish Engel.

The one who they called the future hero stood in the darkness, watching the lingering floor master from afar. His expression was one of pure exasperation with a hint of disdain.

He pulled in the beautiful woman next to him by the hair. He touched her amber skin and gave her lips a passionate kiss, then stroked the goldwork on his slender finger.

"Got itself a pet bird, did it? To think, that's the Undying King... No, queen. Though, it's hard to tell with that mummy." The woman laughed joyfully and watched the two hanging around the stream in their fantasies.

The sound of sand crunching under footsteps approached, and a dark-skinned elf appeared. Her eyes widened at her master Zarish and the sight of the Undying King in the distance.

"Is that the floor master? Lord Zarish, what in the world..." The women around him laughed derisively at the elf, Eve. Eve realized why her master Zarish hadn't told her anything about this place or what he was about to do, and her face contorted into a frown.

"Hmph, I tire of being a mere soldier. I want my own country. I will acquire all the jewels in this land before I leave, and... Hm?"

Zarish looked up. There was nothing but darkness there, but he whispered happily, as if someone was standing before him.

"So you've finally found this place, Mariabelle. Ah, you are indeed a good mare." The treasure he had just mentioned was right there. He smiled as she moved forward into the hall where the floor master was located in an attempt to get closer to that boy.

Zarish enjoyed watching women awaken to their true potential. He also enjoyed watching the look on the faces of men as he crushed their hopes and filled them with despair.

"Heheh... Do it. Slap awake that half-asleep fool known as the Undying King." The moment he said so to no one in particular, an unintelligible scream echoed from the hall far away.

*Kyaaaaaaaaa!!!*

Black veins bulged out of Shirley's body like she had been infected with poison, and the boy looked up with a look of pure shock. Only Zarish smiled gleefully, watching as the boy was about to have his soul shattered to pieces.

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I was shocked by the black veins suddenly protruding from Shirley's body and her scream like glass scraping against itself. The fantasy around us lost its luster, and all I could do was watch dumbfoundedly at the Undying Queen twitching on the ground at the center.

*What... is happening? She seems to be desperately trying to resist something and wanting to kill me at the same time.* Though, it wasn't like I minded if she did kill me. More importantly, it seemed like this dramatic change was due to the appearance of a third party, the real mastermind behind all this.

The transparent veil turned black before my eyes and touched me. I could hear some white noise, and then, an image came into my mind for a split second. In my mind's eye, I saw the scene of a

suspicious group of people casting a curse and the sight of Shirley's unsettled mind stacking atop each other, and my vision distorted.

"Oh, right... Since I'm in soul form, her thoughts are mixing with my own..." Actually, my consciousness was in danger from her thoughts intermingling with mine so much... I needed to watch her for a little longer. And so, I shook my head and lifted my face.

Just then, something soft and warm gripped my hand. Being in soul form, it was more like something 'stacked' with my hand rather than gripped it... But in any case, a girl with amethyst eyes was staring at me with a curious expression, leaving me awfully confused.

"Huh? Wha? Why are you here, Marie?"

"I... don't know. I was in the hall just a moment ago. Um, but I guess this is a hall, too." This was all too sudden, and Shirley was behind her, screaming her head off. Hmm, this was all too much for me to process.

Then, I realized Marie's body was transparent, too. One thing that was different from usual was that she was kind of sun-colored overall, and there were little embers floating around her outline.

*So, uh... What?*

"Hey, isn't that Shirley? Hmm, was she always all black like that?"

"I'm more curious about you, Marie. Oh, could it be that this is Prison Keeper's hidden ability?"

Marie cocked her head and thought about it, but just replied with "I'm not sure."

*Oh, now's not the time for this.*

"Anyway, it's dangerous here, so get back..."

"Ah."

My body was sliced through the torso, easily splitting in half.

I turned around as I floated into the air to find a pale-blue, icy scythe. Just as the thought that it was a fitting weapon for the Undying Queen crossed my mind, my consciousness vanished.

I rose from my bed.

*This is bad. The night is starting to get brighter.* I looked up at the clock to find it was past four in the morning, and there was no time to lose.

But I couldn't just leave things as they were.

Judging by the fact that Marie was there, everyone must have found out about the floor master's location. And this was just conjecture on my part, but the secret behind Shirley's immortality was probably somewhere in that hall. That meant she had no reason to stay on the defensive now. I had a feeling I couldn't just come back to this tomorrow.

"Was she mad that we intruded on her hall? No, it didn't seem like it. But that image I saw earlier… Maybe whoever is controlling Shirley was hiding somewhere in there?" I asked out loud, but I was the only one there.

…

*Wow, I'm lonely! What is this?!* I didn't expect to feel such a pang of loneliness from waking up in my room alone.

"This is no good. Hmm… Those two are too important to me now."

No one there to hear my complaints.

No one there to hear me sigh.

And so, I decided to get back into bed and return to the world where the girls were. Worst case scenario, I would've used some of the vacation hours I'd accrued if it ended up taking a while. That really was a last resort, though. I didn't like taking days off without being sick, and it felt like a waste to use my time off unless it was for an actual vacation. For instance, using them before or after a

weekend to get three days off in a row. Or, I could take a half day at work and go somewhere right after I got out. Marie ended up liking that garden so much that she'd been wanting an annual pass, too.

As such thoughts floated about in my mind, I fell right back into the dream world without any tossing or turning. I'd always been good at falling asleep.

*Oh, but where will I wake up this time?* I'd never come back to life after being reduced to my soul, so that question came to mind as I rose from sleep.

And I found myself… in a small, ordinary room. I turned to find Marie and Wridra, speaking passionately in front of me as I stared at them blankly.

"So, is that what they call Astral Body? I'd read about it before, but I always assumed it was just a bunch of nonsense."

"It appears so. I had been watching as well, but the main body was left as nothing but an empty husk." Marie's white-haired head wavered as she went deep into thought.

I'd heard of Astral Body myself, though it was a bit different from just being in the form of a soul. It nullified everything except for mental damage, and it was said that some could even cast magic while in that form.

"Wow, that's amazing. I'd like to see it again. I was too taken aback to get a good look earlier."

"Oh, I don't min—ah? Whaaa! He's back already!" Surprisingly, even Wridra sat straight up with a shiver running down her spine, and a dragon tail grew out of her lower back and hit the ground with a thud. That was probably an involuntary reaction, and I wondered if it was okay.

"Ohooo! Do not appear so suddenly! I thought you were some sort of ghost!"

"Huh? I'm being scolded for that? Anyway, good morning, you

two. But it's almost time to go to work, so I can't stay too long." Wait a minute, was Wridra afraid of ghosts? That was going to make our weekend at Grimland very interesting. There are all sorts of...

"Oops, I can't be taking my time here. I need to warn Zera that Shirley is in a dangerous state right now." When we got back to the hall, Zera and Doula blinked at me several times, then slowly tilted their heads. Well, I did just casually appear from the next room over after being taken away by Shirley.

"Umm, Marie retrieved my soul for me, so I'm back."

"No way... You guys must have some godly teamwork. You found the floor master so easily."

"Oh, good, we were just talking about what to do if you came back as a Reaper."

Huh. It might have been fun to become a Reaper while remaining conscious. With all those attacks at my disposal, I probably would've lost track of time playing... Err... I cleared my throat before opening my mouth to speak.

"Zera, Doula, we should split our teams into two." They looked at me with that wide-eyed expression again.

We usually took our time exploring and taking detours in labyrinths, but today we ran straight down the stairs leading underground. Well, "running" didn't quite describe it. The moment I teleported to one spot, I activated it again to reappear at the next corner. I turned around to find Wridra carrying Marie in a princess carry behind me at a pace that wouldn't be taxing on her.

We were headed for Shirley's grave, of course, and I suspected we were going at a speed that was by far the fastest of any team. That wasn't a surprise, really. No one really based their skill build around movement skills, and it was rare to find Arkdragons that could keep up with my pace.

"But to think the reason we need to hurry is because I might be

late for work…" It went without saying, but we ignored every monster we encountered along the way. Honestly, I wanted to take our time going through the labyrinth. I wanted to take in the new enemy types and marvel at the construction. Even so, I couldn't just ignore Shirley in her current, dangerous state. And with us getting closer to her gravesite…

As we descended the spiral staircase, I caught a glimpse of something out of one of the many peep holes. A wavering veil and an icy blue scythe swinging toward me…

"Whoa." I ducked instinctively, and something passed through from the other side of the stone wall. Seeing how there wasn't a scratch on the wall itself, I figured it had to be Shirley's scythe.

"Wow, how did you dodge that?!"

"Umm, instinct, I guess. You know that ominous feeling before a big attack comes?" She looked at me like she had no idea what I was talking about. *Hmm.* That was odd, we were playing the same game… I mean, seeing the same dream, so I thought she'd get it.

Anyway, since the secret to Shirley's immortality seemed to be at her gravesite, she'd come to try and stop us. That meant Zera's team, which was on its own mission, would be relatively safe.

There were two issues now.

Would their team have been able to complete their objective safely? And if we did find the secret to Shirley's immortality, would I have been able to break it?

I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to accomplish the latter. Despite her terrifying appearance, Shirley was too kind to truly be considered an enemy.

Hmm, I liked this feeling of being up against a wall. I enjoyed the unique tenseness that couldn't have been experienced in Japan as we continued to sprint toward Shirley's gravesite.

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The boy died, and only the elf girl with the rare talent remained.

To Zarish, who was also known as a slave trainer, the stage had finally been set. He had slowed down the raid on the labyrinth, and his objective in this land would be complete as soon as he reaped the beautifully ripe fruit.

Zarish stroked his own golden hair as he reflected on the moonlit night with that girl.

*…I want her to squirm. I want her to resist to her very limit, and once she's exhausted and full of despair, I want her to glare back at me with everything she has. I want to discipline her with coldness, and show her the occasional kindness to make her gradually depend on me until she can't live without me.*

"Oh, Lord Zarish, you've got that look in your eye." Seeing that expression on his face, the women around him cooed, "Poor girl," without a shred of genuine concern. Perhaps they already knew. This girl would end up as a mere slave, but she would still take up one of the limited seats next to him. If things went poorly, it was possible that they would end up being cast away like Eve had been.

Within the hall, Shirley the floor master could be seen within the darkness.

She spread out her veil, her large body floating into the air. The time to slay the foolish knights that had stepped into the ancient labyrinth had come.

"It's time. I will seize the fruit and…"

"What is that…?" Just as he was about to make his declaration, someone had entered the hall. The women looked at each other blankly, and Zarish gaped with shock.

"Huh…?" The boy whose soul had been shattered by the floor master earlier was standing there. Zarish rubbed his eyes, but nothing changed. He furrowed his brow as if he was staring at a ghost, then spoke.

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Ah, Lord Zarish! This is some sort of mistake! That elf appeared at the end, so she must have rescued his soul at the last minute!” One of the women tried to explain, but Zarish was indignant with a wrench being thrown into his plans. Things would turn out badly if the fact that they were working with the rebels came to light. The boy had a Magic Tool on him, and it could have potentially become difficult to leave the country if he alerted the headquarters.

The women around Zarish hurriedly tried to stop him, but none of them could stop a man with an estimated level of 140.

Yet, he did stop. He had seen the two women who showed up after the boy. Mariabelle the half-elf and…

“Ah! Wridra!” A few of the women turned pale at his elated voice. They had surmised that Zarish wanted the draconian woman as part of his collection.

After hearing that Wridra had left to join the boy’s party, Zarish had spent some time hardly able to eat from shock.

“Show me your power, Wridra and Mariabelle. If your luster is true, I will prepare a seat for each of you.” He chuckled, and the final battle with the second floor master had begun.

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When we finished descending the spiral staircase, a world of night awaited us. There was complete silence, and Marie and I reacted in amazement as we looked up at a ceiling that seemed to stretch on forever.

But this place didn’t bring peace like the night did, for Shirley descended slowly from above, an air of death emanating from her.

*Gyaaaaaargh!*

A curse seemed to have turned her whole body darker, and countless blades stuck out from her mask as she screamed. We

stood where we were, the sound of stones grinding against each other coming from behind us. Monsters had chased us down as we descended the spiral staircase, and I had Marie place a stone wall behind us.

The only exit slammed shut with a heavy thud, and silence filled the place once more.

Shirley's veil soundlessly descended upon the ground, followed by the creature with its limbs splayed out while exhaling an icy breath.

Music began to play after a short delay—one of the most horrifying tunes I'd ever heard. It made the listener's heart beat faster, and the fanatic voices heralded the beginning of a hopeless battle.

"Ah! The battle music is scaring me! I've never heard anything like this!"

"I'm not surprised. You don't get a lot of chances to face off with an enemy that's over level 100."

"O-Over 100?!" She started to protest that as impossible but cut herself off mid-sentence. Right next to her was an Arkdragon that had an estimated level of over 170... Not to mention, this was merely a piece of her main body that was using one of seven Dragon Cores.

Yet, that didn't change the fact that Shirley was a beast in a class of her own. At the very least, this was an entity that the most elite of knights, Team Ruby, had barely managed to defeat. Looking at her now, I had a feeling she was only using a portion of her power to scope out her opponents back then.

The sight of her gripping the stone pavement with her claws to crawl around as if she was completely weightless sent cold sweats down my back.

"Good evening, Shirley. We meet again." I tried talking to her without any expectations in particular, but it seemed to be no use.

My words never reached her ears, and her giant scythe swayed as if to slice right through them.

She held her icy-blue scythe at her hips from far away, and then it came speeding toward us in an arc. The swing gapped the distance easily with her incredible reach, and as I tried to hit the ground with Marie in my arms, the scythe was knocked directly upward and away from us.

I turned to find Wridra raising one arm in the air.

“Hmm, it seems I can finally take on my role as a tank.”

“Thanks, Wridra. All right, I’m gonna go check her out.”

“Be careful,” Marie warned. “You won’t have time to go back to sleep this time.”

That was true… This was still a weekday, so I wouldn’t have been able to sleep in as much as I wanted. If this would take a while, I had no choice. I would get out of here with Marie using my long distance transportation skill and call in to my office to take the day off.

With that safety net in mind, I wasn’t too nervous about facing this incredibly powerful enemy. I teleported directly next to the floor master without putting much thought into it.

I felt a shiver go down my spine. Countless swords suddenly appeared in mid-air and began slicing through the entire area surrounding me. I stepped on the ground to pass through them in the next instant. I felt a chill when I turned around to witness the sight. If I had attacked, I probably would have died immediately.

“Whoa, that was close! Was that Dancing Weapons?” I asked aloud, and the Arkdragon responded through Mind Link Chat.

“A blood curse that defends a set area. It seems the Undying Queen has a massive amount of souls at her disposal.”

“Whether you’re attacking or not, I should apply a holy enchantment on you. Your sword seems to be very tough, so I’ll try

an advanced version this time," Marie said.

*Ohh, an advanced enchantment.* This wasn't something you saw every day.

I let go of Astroblade, allowing it to float into the air, and a ring of light enveloped the blade. The ring emitted a pure, bright light as it was absorbed into the sword. The light increased in brightness as the phosphorescence stacked upon the weapon in layers. Then, a high-pitched sound rang out at the end. That sound had affirmed that this power could exist in this world.

"Nn! Level 60 is as high as it will go!" Marie exclaimed.

"Wow, that's incredible. You surpassed your old record by leaps and bounds, Marie."

"I think that sword can endure more. I'm sorry to say, but my magic can't keep up. This enchantment should be very powerful, though, so be careful." The effect was pretty intense. Specks of light were leaking out from the sword, and the weapon made a *vwoom* sound as I gave it a practice swing. It even left a really cool afterimage in its wake.

"You aren't thinking anything stupid like, 'This looks really cool,' are you?"

"O-Of course not! Oh, looks like we've got company." Shirley raised one hand into the air, then swiped her claws down toward the ground. Blades of darkness sank into the ground, then several more appeared around it in a cluster after a short delay. They had to be about fifty meters wide in total.

When I realized what was about to happen, my hairs stood on end.

"Craaap!" The blades of darkness tore through the ground as they came rushing toward me at once, and I repeatedly teleported to the side to evade them. I managed to get away with just some nicks on my boots, but this was bad. She knew I would teleport away and set up an attack with very little space inbetween.

*Could she know all my skills because our thoughts merged earlier?* The thought crossed my mind as I rolled across the ground.

"That one was more of a physical attack. Let's think of a plan, Kazuhiro."

"Right. Marie, do you remember the formation you used when you roasted those Koopahs?"

"Of course," she said confidently.

Even if we put up a defensive structure, Shirley would likely use a non-physical attack like that giant scythe from earlier. So instead of opting for defense, I wanted her to set up a stone cage that was used for taking out enemies. Given the right circumstances, we could've been able to use it to attack the floor master.

"But Shirley is in soul form. We won't be able to trap her."

"True. That's why I want you to set up as wide of a range as possible," I said back to Marie through Mind Link Chat as I sprinted forward. Shirley was obviously specialized in ranged attacks, and we wouldn't be able to seize victory without getting up close and personal.

But just then, countless black spheres appeared around the floor master, as if to mock our efforts. The things writhing around inside of them reminded me of, well... tadpoles as they were about to be born from frog eggs. This was like that, except sped up multiple times.

"Whoa, I can't even count them all. I wonder what's about to come out?"

"They are residents of the shadow realm. Hmhm, this will be quite the ordeal, as they follow the laws of their own world rather than our own. It will be interesting to see just how much resistance you can offer."

*Why does Wridra look so amused?* But whining about it wasn't going to change anything, so I decided to start attacking where I

could. I drew my sword and swung with all my might, but my eyes widened to find the blade was stuck about halfway through the target, despite the powerful holy enchantment bestowed upon the blade.

"Guess I'll just have to cut twice." I sliced through with two swings, and black fluids erupted from the sphere. *Eww, looks rotten.*

I cut down two, then three more spheres but realized the next one was undergoing a change. A golden eye opened, staring directly at me.

"Whoa, they're waking up already. How's your progress over there?"

"I'm not even halfway ready. If you can hold up, I'd like to make another row. What do you think?"

"Don't mind me," I replied. I decided to put my Reprise to use to buy her some time to experiment.

The neck area of these creatures seemed to be very thin, so I set a swing that would cut through the bone into the memory slot. When I tried using it to attack one of the creatures, its eye lost its luster before melting onto the ground.

I didn't want to think about how many were left.

The sphere creatures seemed to spawn at the same rate as I cut them down, and it really registered just how mild the demon on the first floor had been compared to what we were facing now. Well, we couldn't let these things roam free.

*Splat.*

I looked around, breathing heavily, to see the residents of the shadow realm spawning one after another. I looked up to find Shirley's mask and her black veil extending around her.

Then, she held her giant scythe in an offensive stance, and I shrugged.

“Looks like I won’t be reaching you yet. Or are you going easy on me?” I smiled, then teleported backwards.

My skill, Over the Road, was by no means perfect. I needed to step on the ground with both feet and have my destination within sight. Not to mention, if my view was blocked, I couldn’t just jump over to the other side of whatever obstacle was ahead of me.

In other words, I would’ve been in big trouble even if I got surrounded by weak mobs.

“Not sure if they’d be considered weak mobs, though…” As I finished my teleportation, the residents of darkness were already coming for me at full speed. Black drool splattered about as they came at me with their hands pointed like swords, which was quite an intimidating sight.

I also caught a glimpse of something large emerging from the back of the hall. They tore the door open by force, and their large bodies came into view as they leaped forward… Seven Reapers. They advanced with inhuman jumping power, closing the distance in mere moments.

*Hmm, this is a bit much.* I was almost grateful to experience such a tense thrill that couldn’t be found in video games. Though, to be honest, that was just me trying to be positive.

Two residents of darkness turned their golden, fish-like eyes toward me.

Their bodies were black and viscous like lumps of tar, and their gnarled teeth made them look like mermen. They swung their bladed arms toward me in an impressive swipe.

The blades crossed from both sides, but I had already teleported behind them.

“Well, I’m not your average opponent, either.” I used the optimal attack pattern I’d recorded with Reprise to cut through their necks from behind. They sprayed black blood into the air, and I moved on

to the next target without watching them fall.

They came toward me in a massive wave, like a black wall surging in to crush me. I told myself to stay calm to prevent losing my composure.

“They may be strong, but I wanna enjoy this fight. It won’t be fun for them with me running around, though.” I was nearly engulfed by the swarm, but I teleported out of the way and took out a few enemies in the process. I went through the motions with a detached air like a veteran soldier, but the process was automated with my Reprise ability, allowing me to focus on figuring out an escape route.

I then found myself being caught between two Reapers, so I unleashed Acceleration in that instant. I pierced one of their legs with a holy-powered attack, causing a black mist to erupt from the wound.

As I turned to face the other one, Shirley’s bladed mask glowed, and then countless blades came raining down from above. I teleported to avoid them as they flew into both the ground and the residents of darkness alike. A chill went down my spine as they even sliced the other Reaper in two in the blink of an eye.

This was a level 100 I was dealing with, after all. I was thoroughly impressed by its power.

Then, the voice I had been waiting for reverberated in my mind.

“It’s done,” Marie said through Mind Link Chat.

“I’d be grateful if you’d activate it now.” I didn’t even have the time to compliment her on a job well done. The moment after this exchange, stone walls rose up from the ground. I stood atop the sturdy wall and watched my enemies grow farther below.

“Welcome to your prison, everyone… Whoa!” Two Reapers broke down the rock wall I stood upon as they landed on either side of me, and I quickly teleported to another rock wall on the other side. I had

acted on a split-second impulse, but it was a close call.

This square enclosure was meant to trap and destroy the enemies. And so, the floor and walls began to grow with a bright light. The setup was wide enough to catch the entire mob as well as the leaping Reapers in a vertical blast of holy light.

“You must have used Double Incantation to set up such a powerful attack. I’m amazed that you did all this in such a short amount of time.”

As a Spirit Sorceress, Marie had the ability to bestow her magic to her spirits. Magic was stored within each of the countless stone spirits that comprised these walls, and by activating them all at once, the effect was amplified in this enclosed space, obliterating the enemies trapped inside.

This was the work of a spellcaster who was level 40-something? It was incredible seeing how far she had come through ever-evolving innovation. Such thoughts crossed my mind as I landed on the ground and looked up at the monsters getting blown into the wind like ashes in an incinerator.

I then wiped the sweat from my forehead and sent a message to Wridra.

“You weren’t able to find that group that’s been sneaking around, were you?”

“Hah, hah, just who do you think I am? I have found them with ease, of course.” That was the Lady Arkdragon for you.

The Magic Tool that had been hanging from my waist started blinking, so I activated it to bring up the three-dimensional map. A blinking light indicated their location in the corner of this second floor.

I pressed the button for the comm link and spoke into the Magic Tool.

“Zera, they’re here. They probably have a curse user among them...

Can you take them?”

*Bzz, bzzz!*

Shirley stared directly at me through the white noise. I didn’t know what she was thinking, but I knew one thing for sure. She’d been struggling just as I had.

A voice replied to me through the Magic Tool.

“Of course I can. Nothing’s better at group battles than the Thousand secret arts!”

“This is Andalusite. We’ve regrouped with Aja the Great’s special unit. Preparations for the bloodbath on those rebel scum are now complete.”

*Oh, that’s good… Though, that phrase was a bit more disturbing coming from her.* I returned the Magic Tool back to my belt.

When I had touched Shirley’s veil and our minds merged, I learned of the existence of a third entity. This was partially conjecture on my part, but I suspected someone was using the power of a curse to control the floor master. That was why we decided to split our raid alliance into two and have Wridra track down the culprit.

“Shirley, can I talk to you again?”

“…”

The floor master enshrouded in black watched me, her veil rippling around her. She didn’t talk much, so I took her silence as acceptance.

“Even I can tell the secret to your immortality is in that garden after you showed me your story. That place is special to you, isn’t it?”

“…” She looked down a bit, which likely meant I had struck the nail on the head. Despite her terrifying appearance, she seemed like a student being scolded as she hung her head like that.

“That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about. I want to release you from your duty in this labyrinth. I was hoping I could get your approval.”

*Otherwise, I just might cry.* I would probably get ripped to shreds if I touched her at this point, but I’d already done everything I could. If words weren’t enough, my only remaining option *was* to touch her.

I sheathed my sword and exhaled before I began walking toward her. I’d never approached an enemy unarmed like this before, but I wasn’t afraid. Either way, I’d already depleted all my energy.

Her black veil wavered, as if to represent the turmoil in her heart.

I doubted any human had ever walked up to her like this before. Or maybe she was more surprised by herself and the fact that she hadn’t attacked me yet.

“I think it would be nice if some stories ended like this. The god of death that was feared by everyone finally gives in to fun and lives happily ever after.” I walked right up to her attack range and looked up toward her.

I felt her staring right back at me from behind her mask.

“You may have noticed already, but that woman over there is a dragon. She’s a foodie who loves food and song.”

*…Did she giggle just now?* Feeling encouraged, I reached out and touched Shirley’s partially transparent hand. I felt an icy chill, and the darkness on her surface began to peel away.

*Oh, looks like they completed their mission, too.*

The timing may have been a coincidence, but they sure knew how to make the story exciting. The moment a curse was lifted always signified hope.

“That half-fairy elf over there loves flowers and animals. She made friends with a cat during a walk some time ago, and she’s been

frequenting that route ever since." Shirley seemed to have caught on to the change, too. The darkness that had taken over her body had completely vanished, leaving her body as white as snow. She exhaled a chilly breath, then cocked her head at me in confusion.

"So, I think it'd be nice if immortals like us became friends once in a while. Then we could have fun together for a long time, don't you think?" She stirred, which I took as her answer.

There was one more thing I wanted to tell her. I gave her my best smile, then said, "Come to think of it, you split me in two earlier, didn't you? I'll forgive you if you show me your face right now."

Slowly, she reached for her mask with both hands and removed it.

She may have been feeling shy, because she moved it just enough to reveal her eyes, then looked at me uncomfortably. I'd thought her eyes were cold earlier, but seeing her like this now, I couldn't help but find her attractive.

It did, however, make me wonder why I always ended up getting killed by the women I met. But it did usually end up all right, so maybe my deaths weren't for nothing.

I flashed her a satisfied smile, and her eyes softened.

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Zarish couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Shirley the floor master had walked into the stone walls willingly to be bathed in the purifying light.

Despite the level difference, she would take direct damage unless she put up resistance. Shirley's presence grew faint, and she even gave them some loot. And that wasn't all...

"What is that idiot doing?! She's letting herself be sealed into the source of immortality?!"

"L-Lord Zarish! They will notice you!" As the woman came running toward Zarish, his knee landed directly into her stomach.

She bent over hard and crumpled to the ground. Zarish regained his composure as he saw her writhing on the floor… then stepped on her back. Her yelp of pain was of no concern; his attention was turned toward the hall once again.

“At least I got to witness the draconian and the half-elf’s potential. Yes, they will make worthy additions to my collection. Now, about that creepy kid…” He stopped his train of thought and smiled at the women lined up before him. There was an intensity to his expression that made them all tense up at once.

“You all love me, don’t you?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Good, good. Then you must love doing my bidding.” They all nodded vigorously, and Zarish grinned with satisfaction.

+ + + + + + + + + +

The familiar scent of greenery filled my nostrils as I parted the grass.

Living in the city meant living farther away from the smell of dirt, grass, and nature in general. I wasn’t happy about it, but some things just couldn’t be helped.

The elf girl was beside me, my hand in hers as we walked together. But her purple eyes were looking at something above my head, and it seemed like there was something she wanted to say.

Her lips parted and she said, “Such a shame. I never thought I would end up accepting this hobby of yours.”

“Oh, don’t say that,” I replied. “As far as hobbies go, I think it’s nice. It doesn’t even cost money.” The fishing rod I carried on my shoulder was made with flexible wood. I did try inviting her to join me, but she had made an unreasonable request to catch some unagi.

As we walked through the path surrounded by trees, we arrived at a clear stream.

Sunlight peeked through the shade of the trees onto the riverbed, shaped in a curve that seemed to have worn down the large rock on the other side. The sound of rustling leaves put my heart at ease.

The river was shallow and narrow enough that we could walk across it, but the curved part was deep enough that we had to be cautious when swimming across. Though, I wasn't expecting us to swim while fishing, and Marie wasn't in her bathing suit, anyway.

I looked to the side to find Shirley in her dress, leaning against a large tree and reading a book. She was semi-transparent as usual, and she had changed the shape of her dress in accordance to Marie and Wridra's advice.

A matching navy headdress was worn atop her long hair. When she stood up, she revealed a shortened front and knee socks, with boots of the same color.

"...Are you two into gothic lolita?"

"Hmm, I suppose I did get somewhat carried away while trying to recreate this so-called 'gothic maid' look I had seen in a magazine before," Wridra said nonchalantly while laying beside me.

There was something strange about a ghost wearing an outfit that was a mix of modern and medieval styles. Shirley looked up at me shyly, hiding her mouth with the book in her hand.

"I was just troubled by how much that outfit suits you. You know, it's a shame there aren't very many attractive ghosts." Everyone pictured it in their minds. On the second floor, we'd encountered skeletons, souls, the Reapers, and Living Armors.

*Yeah, I don't think any of them would look as good in that outfit.*

"Anyway, I'm glad everything turned out okay. Did you ever find out why you were able to create a forest that's so full of life?"

Shirley blinked at my question, then leaned over to Wridra and whispered something in her ear. I couldn't hear a word of what was being said, but the draconian nodded along.

“Hm. It is because Shirley presides over life. Now that Marie and I have purified her and released her of the evil soul within, she will be fine from now on.”

“In other words, souls can be cycled into either evil beings or forms of nature,” Marie added, and I made a face that made it clear I didn’t quite understand. In any case, the fact of the matter was that the central section of the second floor had been transformed into a verdant forest. It was some distance away from the third floor and the treasure room, so it was unlikely that the others would come here.

I still had a lot of questions. Where was the river flowing from? What was with the thing overhead that looked like a sun?

I put my fishing rod on the ground, took a seat, and listened to their conversation. There was a peaceful atmosphere among the girls, and they seemed to be enjoying that more than the fishing.

“Japan has such wonderful gardens. The harmony between the architecture and nature is absolutely beautiful.”

Shirley’s sky blue eyes widened as she listened to the elf’s explanation. She listened with great enthusiasm… This must have been how they got her into that gothic lolita outfit. It seemed she was the curious type who wanted to learn things by experiencing them herself.

Just then, a question crossed my mind. Why did she create a forest here, then? Where was that beautiful forest that I’d seen in that glimpse of her past?

*Wait a second…*

What if that forest was located here in the first place?

Arilai was full of infernal desert lands… but what if that impact that evaporated everything on the horizon in a flash was what changed this landscape to what it was now? The story of the past that no one else was aware of played through my mind, and I

shuddered. Maybe the desert would be gone one day. Now that Shirley was back to her old self, she may have been the one destined to change this world.

I was very glad we didn't end up taking her down. Though, I probably wouldn't have been able to beat her head-on even if I'd tried. I laid down on the ground like Wridra, finally appreciating the refreshing air and comfortable shade to their fullest. It was nice to enjoy nature like this once in a while.

I listened to the grass rustling in the wind, and a thought crossed my mind. It came to me: what happened to that super creature that had perished along with Shirley so long ago? If this was that same location, was that creature sleeping somewhere here, too? I looked up at the swaying tree as I mulled it over.

And so, we'd successfully completed our alliance raid on the second floor. It took a whole month or so, but I heard the loot and Magic Stones found in the treasure room were more bountiful than expected. As for me, I cared more about the fact that we'd revived this place that was full of nature.

I closed my eyes slowly.

A large, stone throne sat at a corner of the spacious hall.

It was bound with many layers of chains to keep Shirley the floor master's powers mostly sealed.

But with the plants having bloomed all around it, the air surrounding it had become much more pleasant.

Those who visited this place probably wouldn't have even realized that an epic battle had once unfolded here.

And those fortunate ones would hear the beautiful singing echoing throughout this forest.

But no matter how hard they searched, they wouldn't have gotten to witness the queen of the forest.



# Chapter of Slavery, Final Episode

It seemed that those sunny periods amid the rainy season happened in Arilai, too.

After the rain had passed, sparse signs of budding greenery could be seen throughout the desert.

It might not have been a lot when taking the bigger picture into consideration, but it was enough to bring forth a cool air that wasn't present before. I watched the scenery out of the small window, then turned my attention back in front of me. There, the others were laying out multi-tiered food boxes onto a table and getting excited about their colorful appearance.

"Look, we made these together. We put some sugar in these rolled omelets, so they're sweet and tasty," Marie proudly explained to Mewi. Eggs weren't often used as a food ingredient around here, but drool ran down the Neko tribesman's mouth as he looked at the food hungrily.

Our guest, Shirley, laid out the forks and plates. Mewi was frightened by her incorporeal form at first, but he was gradually getting used to her gentle demeanor. I offered to help set the table as well, but she politely refused.

"Sorry to visit you so suddenly. I know you're busy with your Magic Stone work."

"Not at all, I am grateful for your visit. I have been hearing of your great accomplishments as of late."

*Were they really all that great?* I just ended up getting saved by Shirley's kindness in the end, so it was more like we came to an understanding than anything on my part.

The thought made me feel a bit awkward, but then a cup was placed before me and shortly filled with tea. I looked up to see

Shirley in her headdress, smiling kindly at me. There was a classiness to her smile that reminded me of lilies growing in clusters.

Her eyes softened in a smile when I thanked her, and I found myself captivated by her long eyelashes.

Shirley wasn't our servant—in fact, she was a guest today, but maybe she just liked taking care of others like I did. She took a tray and passed out tea for everyone, smiling happily as they each thanked her.

*Wait, how is a ghost holding those cups?* Looking closely, there seemed to be a space between her hand and the cups. The word poltergeist came to mind, but I decided not to think about it.

"Now, let's celebrate our safe return, leveling up, and the gift from Shirley. By the way, Marie and I each made half of the meal we're having today."

"At long last! Ah, this will be worth all the time I have endured waiting for good food!" Wridra licked her lips, hardly able to wait for the meal to begin.

The food containers were full of vivid colors fit for the celebratory event. Laid out before us were the highly requested inari-zushi, simmered carrots shaped like flowers, rolled omelets, ohitashi, kamaboko, chicken karaage, and rice balls.

"And now, let's begin our humble little banquet... Cheers!"

"Yaaaaaay!"

The girls sure were lively. We clinked our cups together, and everyone dug their forks and chopsticks into the food. So much joy and excitement. Though, the party Marie and I attended a little while ago was a bit much, and I wasn't too big on such events on a large scale. Well, with the floor master being one of the attendees here, this wasn't exactly your ordinary get-together.

"Mm, this is delicious! It is deep-fried, but it has such a satisfying

texture…"

"That's fried lotus root with meat in between. Tasty, isn't it?" An elf girl bragging about deep-fried lotus root… That wasn't something you saw every day. Mewi was fully focused on his meal, and I was glad the food seemed to be a hit.

The sour-sweet inari-zushi, crispy lotus root, and ohitashi quickly disappeared from the food containers. Watching them eat with such vigor reminded me of something.

"That's right, Commander Hakam sent us a gift. He said it's wine from his secret collection. Does anyone want some?"

"Wine, you say? Yes, yes! There are not many grape fields around here, so that is a rare item, indeed!" Marie also raised her hand excitedly, so we decided to enjoy the quality drink together… or so I thought. Why did Shirley hand out glasses to everyone but me?

"Wait, is this an age restriction thing? But… I'm actually an adult, and I've been drinking for some time now." Shirley shook her head, her mouth curling into a frown. Marie filled her glass to the brim, then came over to tease me.

"Oh my, maybe it's a bit too early for you to drink this, little Kazuhiho. You'll have to wait until you're older to enjoy a glass."

"Ah, this drink is excellent! It would be wasted on you—ahem. I mean, we adults will dispose of this. Don't you worry, Kazuhiho." The black-haired beauty ruffled my hair, and I almost felt like crying. How odd. I usually treated them to drinks, so why did they look so happy drinking fancy alcohol right now?

*Haha… I'll remember this, Wridra. There will be fun attractions waiting for you at Grimland.* My lips curled into a dark smile.

"So, how many levels did you gain, Marie?"

"Hmm… Oh, so close! I would have been level 50 if I gained one more!" *Whoa, that means she gained seven levels.*

Being a Spirit Sorceress, Marie leveled up rather slowly in exchange for her power. Even with her skill that increased her experience gain, her leveling pace was far slower than that of a regular class.

"You didn't fight all that often, but rounding up a bunch of mobs and wiping them out at once seemed to have been effective. I saw a Reaper get blown away, too."

"As for you... Oh, you're 77 now, so you gained three levels. I think that's a lucky number, too." She was right. Somehow, I had gained three whole levels. Normally, I shouldn't have leveled quite this much. Although I did defeat many enemies, the main reason seemed to be related to Shirley.

I looked at the semi-transparent girl, and she smiled at me gently. Seeing her expression, I came up with a theory.

I figured that making an enemy admit defeat was enough to gain experience. She had accepted my suggestion back then and undid all of her defenses. She released her massive amount of power, allowing her to return to this form of a normal woman. *That must be it.*

"Well, I'll gladly take those levels. Oh, and we got that loot, too. I haven't had a chance to take a good look yet, so we should look at it together." Wridra, who was stuffing her face with chicken karaage, pointed at me with her chopsticks with no regard for manners.

"Nn, yes, I still have that. I have finished inspecting it, so I will return it to you." With that, she placed something wrapped in cloth onto the table.

Marie quickly undid the cloth to find a teardrop-shaped precious stone, and Mewi's eyes widened at the sight.

There was some green mixed in with the crystal-clear sky blue, and its complex cut refracted light across its surroundings.

People of ancient times believed precious stones had effects akin

to magic.

As for this one, in fact, it was true. It did contain magic.

The Tear of Thanatos.

The beautiful stone named after the god of death was said to have the ability to temporarily store magic, available to be released at will later on. We weren't sure if there was a limit to the power of the magic that could be contained, but considering Shirley herself was once over level 100, this was likely a priceless item.

"Wooow... The color is as pretty as the sky!"

"We still haven't used our reward, huh? Maybe Zera can introduce us to a craftsman who can turn this into an accessory for you."

"What?!" Marie asked in surprise, her purple eyes widening. Having studied magic so diligently, she was well aware of the value of such stones. That certainly explained her surprise, but still, an item like this would be wasted on a guy like me. Besides, I couldn't even use magic.

"Well, we should be thanking Shirley. What do you think, Shirley? I think the stone would be happier to be worn by a woman like Marie." Shirley had lost most of her power as the floor master, dropping this item as a result. A part of her very being was likely sealed within this precious stone. That was why I'd asked for her opinion, and she nodded with a faint smile.

"B-But... what if I lose it or something?"

"We can get it crafted so you wouldn't. Maybe into a ring or a necklace. Considering its size, it might be better to put it around your neck."

The reality of the situation seemed to have set in, and Marie's ears turned pink as she stared dreamily at the Tear of Thanatos. The light glimmered off of her amethyst eyes, and I found her to be even more beautiful than the stone. Of course, I didn't dare say something like that out loud.

“Th-Thank you. I’ll take good care of it.” I’d spent a long time in this world, but it was uncommon to see both the person who’d dropped the loot and the recipient looking so happy like this. This was the way it should have always been, if you asked me. I thought as such as I took a sip of my tea… which I desperately wished was wine.

“In any case, we’ve successfully cleared the second floor. And tomorrow, we depart for Grimland!”

“Yaaay!”

“Ahhh, the day has finally come!” Marie and Wridra joyfully raised their hands and high-fived each other. Recently, it seemed like they’d been enjoying the events in Japan more than the labyrinth. Unfortunately, events in the real world required money to attend, so we couldn’t just go out every week. If I could have been granted one wish, I would have wished for my money in this world to be converted into currency in the other world. Though, to be honest, I did enjoy living in the lower middle class together with Marie.

The sky was turning to a shade of madder red. I looked up as we prepared to leave Mewi’s workshop, and I remembered something. I dug through my bag, then produced an oversized Magic Stone. I removed the cloth to reveal a turquoise color reminiscent of the southern sea, a powerful glow hidden beneath the surface.

“Oh, is that the one you received from Zera?” Marie asked.

“Yeah, the one they found in the treasure room of the first floor. I completely forgot about it, being cooped up underground all this time.” Mewi stared at the rare stone with great interest. I had seen many Magic Stones before, but never one that was this big.

“Would you mind taking a look at this when you have time?”

“Not at all. I have been getting busier as of late, but I will make any request from you a top priority, sir.” I insisted that it wasn’t urgent as I handed the Magic Stone to Mewi. He took it reverently and bowed his head.

We waved at each other and finally parted ways.

I wanted to ask to stay for the night, but I couldn't help but think of that Zarish guy. If he came by while we were away, it could be trouble.

That man seemed dangerous. My first impression hadn't changed, and I'd always been cautious of him. That was why I planned on staying at Zera's mansion again for the night. And I would find out my impression was correct soon after.

"What's wrong, Wridra?" I asked as she looked around in silence.

I followed suit and scanned the area, but all I saw was the secluded lot down the river we stood in. The workshop dirtied the water, so it was located apart from the residential areas. Of course, there was no one around.

"...Hm. Do not worry about it. It will be better that way."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

Wridra didn't answer, but called Shirley over instead. Her semi-transparent appearance seemed out of place while it was bright out, but being an entity that presided over life, she was different in nature from a ghost.

"I will see Shirley off to the second floor. You two head to Zera's house in the meantime." With that, Wridra stepped into a black rift and disappeared.

I wondered what she meant by that, but now that I was left alone with Marie, I decided to ask about it later.

We just had to walk up the gentle slope from our location downriver to get to the residential area. Marie and I began walking slowly.

"We may need to stay at Zera's place for a while."

"Oh, but now that we cleared the second floor, Zera and Doula's marriage should be approved. I'm sure they'll welcome us with open

arms," Marie replied as she stroked the stone in her pocket. She seemed pretty happy about the gift.

Though, thinking about it, I did have my reservations about staying at someone's place and eating their food and offering them nothing in return. As I thought about it, Marie peered at me with the sun at her back. Her silky hair was dyed orange by the sun, and I found myself staring at her beauty.

"They captured a few of those people they call rebels, so they must be questioning them right now. We won't be able to go to the labyrinth while they work that out, but that works for us, since we're going to Grimland soon." She showed me a pretty smile and began walking forward again. I wished I had a camera to take a picture of that smile, I foolishly thought to myself, then walked after her.

While we had been fighting Shirley, Zera and the others were busy with their own battle. They had taken nearly half of the rebel group out of commission, but the rest managed to escape. Zera's group couldn't catch up to the rebels who knew the labyrinth like the back of their hand, and they'd gone back into hiding.

And so, until we could figure out what their plans were, the labyrinth was to be temporarily closed off. We were in such a rush to raid it not too long ago, but as of now, we walked along the river at a leisurely pace. The usually noisy Wridra wasn't with us now. The Arkdragon could use advanced movement magic without any effort at all, and I was honestly jealous that she could travel wherever she wanted in a short time span.

"It's way more convenient than my long-range movement skill, considering she can go wherever she wants."

"Yours is a skill, while Wridra's is magic. Yours has the advantage of being able to activate instantly without any advanced spellcasting. I wouldn't say it's inferior at all," Marie said comfortingly as we climbed the slope.

The sky was starting to get darker, and night would soon be upon us. Though, it was pretty uncommon for us to be alone together in this world. We both realized this at the same time, and our eyes met.

*Is this bad? I think so.*

Ever since I'd kissed her in Aomori, she had gotten me back several times. I'd been holding back ever since Wridra blew up at us, but our hearts beat with the realization that this would be a prime opportunity.

"No one's… here, right…?" Marie looked around, then mumbled, "Umm," as she stepped a little closer. Her cheeks were pink in the sunset, and she held on to my top as she looked up at me.

She then held my arm, her body pressing against mine in her thin robe.

"Ah, I feel a bit anxious with you being so small. It's like I'm doing something I'm not supposed to…"

"Urgh, now you're making *me* nervous…" I stroked her smooth cheek, then touched her ears that had also turned pink. I could feel her warmth through her fingertips, along with her beating heart through her chest pressed against me.

As our faces grew closer, Marie narrowed her eyes, her lips slightly parted in anticipation. Marie didn't close her eyes all the way, even while kissing. She tended to watch me through partially open eyes even when our lips met.

Once we were a finger's distance away, her exhalation tickled my face. I felt her breathing in shallow breaths, her scent growing a little closer.

*Bam!*

Someone had collided right between us, making Marie fall backward onto her butt. I pulled her up, dumbfounded, and stared at the violent newcomer's back. The stranger continued to run off

without so much as an apology…

*Why did that person run into us on such a wide road?*

"Ah! The stone!" Marie cried out, feeling around her chest with both hands. It was the stone that was dropped by Shirley and gifted to Marie not too long ago.

"…Go back to Mewi's workshop. I'll get it back."

"Ah, wait, Kazuhiro!"

I couldn't wait. If we lost the thief now, Marie would never let it go. Just picturing her saddened face was unbearable, so I decided to teleport after the culprit.

*Vwoom, vwoom.* The culprit had been a distant speck moments ago, but I closed in on the target with each teleportation. Whoever it was, the thief had powerful legs that allowed them to move with beastly speed.

*This may not be an ordinary thief. I shouldn't let my guard down.*

We passed through the rear gate and onto the main street. Just as we entered a dark footpath, I tackled the target's back without holding back.

They let out a yelp, and my eyes widened as golden, wavy hair spilled out of their hood. The woman breathed heavily as she turned around, revealing her face…

"You're… the one from that party?!"

"Ahaha, well done! Now you're just as screwed as I am!" She cackled as if she had lost her mind, and I found myself at a loss for words. I caught the jewelry bag as she tossed it at me, then turned my head slowly…

"Marie…?" I whispered, then began running at full speed. That woman had called herself Eve. She was a subordinate of the hero candidate Zarish, and I remembered her trying to get in my way back at that party, too.

My heart thumped with unease as I repeatedly teleported toward where I had left Marie.

+ + + + + + + + + + +

"This is about to be a wonderful night. Why do you stand out here all alone, Mariabelle?" Marie's shoulder trembled at the voice coming from behind.

She hadn't sensed anyone around, but when she turned around, the man stood directly in front of her. Despite his pleasant smile, there was no emotion behind his blue eyes.

The dry sand crunched under Zarish's feet as he stepped toward Marie.

Last time, she had headbutted him and defiantly refused him. But tonight, Mariabelle could hardly keep her composure. Neither Kazuhiro nor the black cat were around, and she felt an unfamiliar loneliness this night now that she was completely alone.

She tried to take a step back, but she couldn't move a muscle.

Marie then realized the man was reaching toward her with his pinky slightly extended. A chill went down her spine as she realized he was using some sort of skill on her.

"Have you heard of the story about a man who blew a whistle, taking away people who would walk alone at night? Now, how did that story end...?" He continued stepping closer, but Mariabelle couldn't move a finger. She slowly raised her eyes, her breathing quick and shallow. Before she knew it, several people had surrounded her. She figured they were the man's subordinates.

"The man was betrayed. He was supposed to drown rats in the river to get a reward in return. But the cheap townspeople decided to kick him out instead. So if he decided to snatch some children instead of his reward... Well, there's nothing wrong with that." He smiled, as if he had just thought of a brilliant idea.

The incoherent conversation was just a method to overwhelm her.

Marie realized this, but all she could do was think. She was completely under his spell.

"So, about that ending. Did he lead the children into the river where he drowned the rats? Or maybe…" Zarish yanked Marie by the shoulder, but she couldn't even scream. Her heart beat violently, sweat running down her back as she grew more anxious.

Just then, the pressure on her shoulder was released. Mariabelle could still move her eyes, so she witnessed a woman clutch the man's arm with a dragon's grip and met Wridra's eyes, which were as calm as the night.

Zarish swallowed his breath, but then his expression turned to that of foolish joy.

"Ah, Lady Wridra! I did not expect to have the pleasure of seeing you tonight."

"…Was that intended to be courtship? Or attempted kidnapping?" Wridra asked with an intensity behind her faint smile, but Zarish smiled back without fear. He no longer feared anyone. He was just that confident of his powers.

"Haha, courtship? Such an odd way to phrase it. In my case, I am merely looking for partners to fight alongside me. You and Mariabelle, that is."

"Hmph, you are as greedy as you appear. To think you would even presume to invite me." Wridra's calm voice from nearby filled Mariabelle with relief. But the words that came after increased her anxiety once more.

"So, is that what the ring is for? I would not mind accepting it, but that would be a discussion for after you defeat our leader."

"Me? Defeat that boy? Haha, so you are that discontent with him as your leader. I suspected as much."

Zarish was internally taken aback by the fact that she knew about the ring. But he hid his unsettled state well and turned his blue eyes

to the side. There stood a young boy, slightly out of breath. Realizing the conversation was about him, he placed his hand on the pommel of his sword and looked at the two with a dubious expression.

"...What are you planning, Wridra?"

"Oh, do not be like that. I wish to see you save me from the clutches of evil." The draconian grinned, and the sound of swords being drawn rang out simultaneously. Zarish wielded an ornate sword in his hand.

"Clutches of evil? You wound me. But if that's all it takes to have you, I will gladly dirty my hands." He returned his sword from the sheath with a *clink*, and countless slashes came flying toward the boy from all directions. But sparks flew all around him as he displayed inhuman defenses. Although his clothes were tattered, the boy managed to avoid taking any fatal damage.

Zarish's eyes widened at the sight.

"Impressive! I won't call you a weakling anymore now that you've survived that one. I was quite impressed by the way you fought the floor master, too... Oh, but it seems you haven't even noticed the hole in your heart."

Kitase looked down with a confused expression, and a long sword sank into his chest. His health points dropped at a rapid rate as the boy could only watch on in disbelief. Zarish spread both hands in a self-satisfied gesture as he turned around, the boy falling to both knees behind him. His expression showed he was overjoyed that the moment had finally come.

"Now, for the ring... Eve." Eve, who had come rushing back, twitched as her name was called.

She knew what he was about to say. He would take the ring and obtain a new precious stone. But this would mean the relationship between Eve and her master would be severed.

She instinctively gripped her ring, but this only incurred the wrath of her master, Zarish.

A flash of light appeared in the air, and Eve's eyes bulged as something sank into her heart. Wridra quickly covered Mariabelle's eyes, but the women around them witnessed the shocking sight. Fear filled their faces as they were faced with a clear message: this will happen to you once you've exhausted your usefulness.

"Goodbye, Eve. I thank you for your long service. Here, you brat. You can have this in return!" Zarish pulled off the golden ring from Eve's finger and kicked her back, making her roll onto the ground next to the dying boy. The women around them stifled their screams. Zarish smiled with satisfaction and walked back to the two women with confidence.

"Now, I have come to receive you as promised." He extended his hand like a gentleman but was met with an unexpected response.

The draconian chuckled mockingly, and even the elf girl let out a sigh of relief.

Normally, he had no need to kill Eve here. He had deliberately shown how cruel he could be, since he would be training them into subservience. But seeing their expressions without an ounce of fear in them, Zarish found himself faltering.

The draconian continued to laugh condescendingly.

"Hah, hah, you think this is over? No, not by a long shot. You should have simply watched admiringly from afar. But now you have meddled with the Phantom."

"...What?"

The black-haired beauty, Wridra, gestured behind Zarish with her chin. He quickly turned around and found himself disbelieving his own eyes. The boy's corpse was gone. Even all the blood that should have been on the ground had disappeared without a trace.

"Eve?"

Only sand was left there, as if this was all a dream or perhaps a nightmare. The hero candidate found himself at a loss for words, and he didn't even stop the two women as they walked away.

Wridra and Marie sank into the pool of darkness that appeared out of nowhere. As they left, Wridra said with a rather amused tone, "Well, enjoy, Zarish."

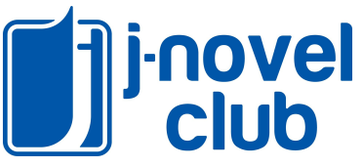
"What the hell...?"

But they vanished before he could complete his sentence, and only the silent night remained.

And from this day on, the Phantom's name would be carved into Zarish's mind forever.

-- Chapter of Slavery to be continued in the next volume --






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Welcome to Japan, Ms. Elf! Volume 4

by Makishima Suzuki

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